

Absurdity of Human Condition: A Study of Fritz Karinthy's Refund

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Abstract

Fritz Karinthy's one-act drama Refund effectively presents the absurd condition of human life through the comic yet striking idea of an adult demanding reimbursement for his schooling. This study attempts to find out the absurdist traits of the drama that are connected to the broader literary scenario of Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Albert Camus. In Refund, Karinthy makes a harsh critique of human stupidity and follies of the educational system using illogical conditions, irrational behaviours, and ironic twists. In fact, Absurdism, philosophically speaking, tries to delve into the conflict between our continuous search for meaning within meaninglessness. An absurdist approach emphasizes how literary texts explore meaninglessness, irrationality, and the breakdown of logical sequence. It talks about how characters face and react to purposeless and disordered circumstances in the text. Some main features of Absurdism can be the lack of obvious reasoning and a vain attempt to find a sense in connection to the play. Karinthy creates such a dramatic world in which logic does not function, and the educational institution presents itself in an illogical manner. The student's responses have been manipulated, and ignorance has been rewarded over knowledge in Refund. Therefore, Karinthy's Refund shows bureaucratic illogicality, revealing comic absurdity as rigid rules produce irrational outcomes in our education system.

Keywords: absurdity, comical, illogical, irrationality, meaninglessness

Introduction

Absurdism investigates the inherent meaninglessness of human existence within an irrational universe (Abrams, 2001). It is a popular philosophical and literary movement of the twentieth century. Absurdism as a branch of existentialism developed with ideas of existentialists like Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett and so on. Fritz Karinthy's play Refund, published in the 1930, gives a comic presentation of Absurdism in a dramatic way. This study deals with the notion that the characters, narrative and themes of the play have taken the

absurdist approach, and it focuses on the irrationality existing in educational institutions. According to absurdist philosophy, any literary text is analyzed by studying human efforts to find any purpose in a world that manifests as irrational and indifferent. Albert Camus, one of the initiators of the theory of the absurd, asserts that Absurdism presents the conflict between man's search for order and meaning and the world's denial to fulfil it. Eugène Ionesco, a French dramatist, described absurdist literature: "People drowning in meaninglessness can only be grotesque, their sufferings can only appear tragic by derision." Absurdist criticism attempts to explore how the major tension is dramatized in the text. Absurdism opines that we are living in a meaningless and disordered world. In literary works, absurdist texts frequently portray characters ensnared in illogical, repetitive, or meaningless circumstances (Brater et al., 1990). Some features of absurdist texts consist of satire, repetitive actions, circular arguments, and nonsensical dialogues. The principal objective is to show the unnecessary imposition of rationality over an irrational universe.

Absurdist interpretation focuses on characters who strive to discover meaning or coherence in their existence, only to encounter confusion, silence, or futility (Stoppard, 1966). These characters are often confined within repetitive patterns such as daily routines, endless duties, or recurring situations that underscore the monotony and purposelessness of life (Heller, 1961). That means to say that people have been alienated from themselves, from society, which represents the existential loneliness of every human individual. Human life has been structurally fragmented, lacking its coherence in totality. Absurdist works frequently abandon conventional narrative forms, lacking a clear plot, climax, or resolution (Beckett, 1954). In this manner, absurdist literary criticism examines how a text represents the tension between humanity's desire for meaning and the silence of the universe, investigating characters' reactions to this tension, the disintegration of language and logic, and the ways in which narrative form itself expresses absurdity (Esslin, 1960).

Absurdism, rooted in the philosophy of Albert Camus, particularly *The Myth of Sisyphus*, explores the clash between the human search for meaning and the universe's indifference to that pursuit. In fact, the terminology 'Theatre of the Absurd' was introduced by Martin Esslin. In drama, it indicates dramas that have existential humour to reveal the futility of rational order. Similarly, such absurdist plays attempt to deal with purposeless actions as well as illogical and circular dialogue.

Methods

Absurdist philosophy believes that human institutions, including logic, politics and education, are simply arbitrary constructions. Our human universe lacks any absolute meaning or structured order itself. That means to say, human language loses its precision and clarity, and communication itself becomes problematic altogether. From the absurdist perspective, humour serves to reveal the emptiness underlying existence (Hinchliffe, 1969). Such an Absurdist perspective has been applied to study Fritz Karinthy's play *Refund*. It aims at observing various absurdist tools, such as irrational situations and unconventional humour, for the analysis of *Refund*. Viewed through an absurdist lens, the situation becomes a critique of humanity's persistent attempt to impose order and meaning upon a world that often resists rationality.

An essential component of absurdist methodology is the examination of the disintegration of language and reasoning, a feature that lies at the heart of the humour in *Refund*. Absurdist methodology does not follow an obvious cause-and-effect relationship. In this, events emerge randomly and purposelessly. Dialogues might be distorted, repetitive or nonsensical, demonstrating a breakdown of communication. Absurdism talks about the meaninglessness of human existence, highlighting the idea that life has no inherent purpose or rational order at all. Similarly, absurdist methodology makes use of paradox and contradiction. Here, situations and characters frequently contradict themselves to reveal the rational nature of reality. In Fritz Karinthy's *Refund*, the main character Wasserkopf demands a refund for his education, creating an irrational and absurd condition. Teachers intentionally pass him in the re-examination even if he gives incorrect answers to the questions. Conversations between Wasserkopf and teachers manifest as ironic and unreasonable. The drama depicts the mechanical nature of our education system. The serious issues, such as education and the value of knowledge, have been presented comically.

The absurdist notion that our existence is marked by various contradictions, irrational desires and unfulfilled expectations has been highlighted by Karinthy's *Refund*. The protagonist of the play seems to be dissatisfied with life. He tries to hold the school administration accountable. Even though the world is absurd and meaningless, he tries his best to search for whether there lies any meaning or purpose in life. Absurdist philosophy generally persuades readers to search for logic within illogicality. The duty or responsibility of the institutions should be to maintain rational order. However, they ultimately indulge in comic irrationality. This absurdist study here attempts to demonstrate the meaninglessness,

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mechanical and rigid nature of educational authority through satire. Refund criticizes the education system by showing teachers' praises of wrong answers and misuse of academic provisions for the fulfilment of their vested interests. In this way, absurdist reading clarifies how social institutions turn into objects of parody in our human world. Through its exaggerated comedy, the play captures the essence of Absurdism by depicting a world in which logic disintegrates, meaning becomes unstable, and human efforts frequently culminate in contradiction.

In this study, Absurdism has helped to reveal how Karinthy exposes the irrationality of human expectations and social systems. The major character Wasserkopf's demand to get back his school fees after a long time is itself an absurd issue. Wasserkopf's peculiar demand questions logic and order. This drama demonstrates the absurd human behaviour to quest for meaning in events that are generally hollow and purposeless. In fact, the former student blaming the school for his failures indicates the very notion of absurdity. The very situation of returning to school to "undo" education shows the Absurdist idea that human attempts to impose reason often collapse into comic futility.

Results

Refund tells the story of Wasserkopf, a former student who, years after graduation, returns to his old school demanding a refund for his education. He argues that his life has been a failure and that the knowledge gained from school was useless. The principal and teachers, after initial disbelief, decide to re-examine him with the hidden goal of proving him pass-worthy and refusing the Refund. In an ironic twist, Wasserkopf cleverly gives absurd answers, which the teachers justify with their own illogic, leading to his passing with distinction. Karinthy's Refund is a short, satirical one-act play. However, it lends itself beautifully to analysis through the lens of Absurdism, especially as developed by thinkers like Albert Camus and dramatists such as Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco.

Refund by Fritz Karinthy presents Wasserkopf, a middle-aged person, as the principal character of the text. In the play, Wasserkopf thinks that he has been a complete failure in his life because the education he received from that educational institution is meaningless. One day, as he is walking along the road, he meets his former school friend Leaderer, who suggests that Wasserkopf go back to school where they had studied together and claim his Refund. The headmaster and teachers, in a bid to outwit him, agree to test his knowledge again -only to twist every one of his wrong answers into a "right" one. In the end, they declare that he has passed with distinction, and Wasserkopf's absurd quest for a refund

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collapses. The responses of the teachers acquire greater depth when viewed through an absurdist lens. The teachers do not contradict the former student. However, they humorously manipulate questions of various subjects in the so-called re-examination.

Furthermore, they grant him high marks in every subject, even if all his answers are drastically irrational and absurd. Such peculiar circumstances suggest that our educational institutions have reflected hollowness and futility on their administrative level. The climax, in which Wasserkopf inadvertently "demonstrates" his intelligence and thereby forfeits his Refund, reinforces the absurdist notion that life's outcomes are frequently arbitrary and ironic. In this way, the play employs humour, illogical dialogue, and circular reasoning to depict the absurd condition of human existence. The illogical premise itself plays a crucial role in this context. Refund is a satire on the present-day education system. Our education system does not prepare students for life. This emphasises memorisation rather than creative thinking. In this sense, the knowledge imparted by our education may not have practical relevance in one's day-to-day life. Similarly, most of the students intend to learn just for the examination rather than for knowledge. A mere certificate will not support them in their future career. A man about forty goes back to the school in which he had studied and demands a Refund of the fees he had paid eighteen years back, claiming that he had learnt nothing useful, and he is now good for nothing. This play brings out the extraordinary sense of parody and wordplay in Karinthy's literary art. The play is full of humour, which deals with an extraordinary situation. All incorrect responses of the protagonist are regarded as correct, meaning is reversed, distortion of language leads to the comic circumstances and linguistic precision is ridiculed. Language has been misused simply as a defensive instrument, but not as a medium of circulating truth and logic. The wrong answers given by Wasserkopf can be regarded as proof that the student has been taught to think and act freely. Similarly, it is proven that he has learned correctly if he succeeds in providing the right answers. Karinthy satirizes bureaucratic and institutional reasoning through his dramatic presentation. From an absurdist standpoint, logic itself turns into a kind of absurd game or a system of words that sustains itself without engaging with reality, reminiscent of Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, where language loses its communicative function. The absurdity of the characters, along with the portrayal of human systems, particularly education, as farcical, constitutes another crucial aspect in this context. Karinthy's play satirically exposes how educational institutions often prioritize self-preservation over truth. The teachers, fearing humiliation more than the loss of genuine knowledge, resort to

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validating incorrect answers in nonsensical ways. Wasserkopf himself stands as a caricature of a man governed by resentful and distorted reasoning. Wasserkopf believes that education provides him with the knowledge that certainly guarantees his success in life. When it does not happen, he starts conducting nonsensical activities. In this way, the play comically attempts to reflect serious matters such as the gap between knowledge and wisdom, the failure of human systems and the lack of order and rationality. Absurdism often reflects the existential crisis of modern man's search between the desire for meaning and a meaningless universe.

Wasserkopf's demand for a refund converts education from a commercial, serious social institution into a transaction. In fact, any educational institution is believed to have been established to provide a notion of order and logic to the students. However, in the play *Refund*, the school is accepting the humorous idea of refunding the former student. The language used over here is to prove the wrong answers given by Wasserkopf right suggests purposelessness, meaninglessness and futility existing in our education system. In this condition, the absurdist interpretation asserts that human institutions persist through self-deception. They justify their existence even when their purpose is hollow. Existential irony and the absurd hero emerge as one of the significant elements in this context. Wasserkopf's pursuit itself is absurd. He wants a refund for his education because he's "unfit for life," but to obtain the Refund, he must prove he learned nothing, requiring intelligence to fail intelligently. He represents the figure of the absurd hero, comparable to Albert Camus' Sisyphus: conscious of life's futility, yet persistently acting within that very condition. His resistance though humorous expresses a deep human dissatisfaction with meaningless social frameworks. From an absurdist perspective, Wasserkopf challenges an irrational world through an equally irrational action. Like Sisyphus in Camus' philosophy, his defiance does not result in freedom but instead intensifies the underlying irony. The reversal of purpose and roles also emerges as a significant factor in this context. The teachers who are expected to preserve truth distort it without hesitation, while the student who is supposed to learn insists on having his ignorance acknowledged. The outcome is a striking inversion of logic, roles, and moral order. Absurdism claims that we cannot find a real meaning or authority in the world. However, we always try to search for any purpose or meaning within it that ultimately proves to be completely irrational and absurd. In fact, as absurdist philosophy asserts, all human roles, including hierarchies and societal ranks, come to be simply mere performances. Human beings are always engaged in a continuous act of role-playing, which is, in fact, a

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mere illusion. Likewise, humour in the play plays a significant role in revealing the voices of the existential crisis of human nature. The play's farcical tone doesn't conceal but reveals emptiness. The laughter is uneasy-it's the laughter of recognition at the absurdity of human institutions. The audience realizes that everyone-teachers, students, and the system-is trapped in a self-deceiving cycle. Absurdist humour can be found here as laughter becomes a response to existential despair, echoing Lonesco's or Beckett's comic absurdity.

Discussions

Meaninglessness of rational systems has been found to be a significant concern in this absurdist study of *Refund*. Education becomes a meaningless ritual here. Similarly, failure of communication plays another vital role in human life. Words are twisted to mean their opposite. Dehumanization in bureaucracy has been presented in an absurdist way as the school acts mechanically to defend its image. In addition to this, existential rebellion has been given a strong assertive role as Wasserkopf rebels against the absurdity in life and education. Additionally, circularity of existence has been obviously visible as the play ends where it begins: with nothing changed, only justified. Various published literature has made much academic research on different literary writings with the application of the theory of Absurdism. Bindu Sharma, in his research paper entitled "Theatre of the Absurd and King Lear: An Exploration of Artistic and Aesthetic Similitude", has tried to look and trace artistic and aesthetic similarities between the playwrights of absurdist school such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Edward Albee and Harold Pinter, and the genius of Shakespeare in his plays (Sharma, 2013). Sara Marzana, in her essay entitled "The Absurdly Meaningful Quest for Purpose in King Lear and Hamlet", claims that the concept of the grotesque and the absurd has had a significant impact on William Shakespeare's composition of King Lear and Hamlet. In these tragedies, Shakespeare emphasizes the absurdity of the human condition to portray one of the main paradoxes of existence: once thrown into this world, aware of our own capacity to act but essentially unable to understand the meaning of our actions, our attempt to confront and challenge the absolute will always fail (Marzana, 2017).

In their research article entitled "The Land and the Waste: Meaninglessness and Absurdity in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*", three writers Dr. Yasir Arafat Muhammad Qasim and Tahir Alam Awan opine that their study explores and analyses the aspects of meaninglessness and absurdity in *The Waste Land* (1930) in the light of Sartre's philosophy and contends to say that almost all the characters presented in the poem encounter meaningless chaotic lives (Arafat et al., 2022). Another researcher, Anita Neziri, in her article *Acharya, 2026. Absurdity of Human*

" Exploring the Absurdity of War: A Literary Analysis of Catch-22", is of the opinion that her study aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the absurdities inherent in combat events as depicted in Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22*. This study tries to portray the use of various literary techniques such as surrealism, black humour, and sarcasm, intending to clarify the contradictions, irrationality and entire nature of war (Heller, 1961). Furthermore, this study plans to reveal the underlying implications in society, such as moral degradation and dehumanization. Next researcher, Nadiyah Khushboo, in his article entitled "A Study of Absurdity in Samuel Beckett 's *Waiting for Godot*" claims that his exploration paper features the existential way of thinking in Samuel Beckett's work "*Waiting for Godot 1954*". It explains absurdity in Beckett's work with the assistance of literary confirmations from "*Waiting for Godot* " to demonstrate how the essayist actively opened ways for conversation about human corruption (Khushboo, 2021). Literary studies on various literary works with the application of the Absurdist approach have dealt with different themes and issues such as the meaninglessness of human existence, irrationality and illogical behaviour, alienation and isolation, existential anxiety, and uncertainty. Similarly, many common themes and elements typically found while studying much research-related works cited above through the Absurdist theory include absurdity of social systems, dark humour and satire, futility of human effort and so on. These elements have been found as common aspects and themes in this study of Frits Karinthy's play '*Refund* ' with the application of the Absurdist approach.

Conclusions

Though wrapped in humour and farce, *Refund* is a powerful commentary on the absurdities of modern life. Fritz Karinthy may not be labelled a central figure in absurdist literature, but his play brilliantly captures its essence. *Refund* talks about the schooling of a former Hungarian student as a light-hearted farce. This play satirizes humans' continuous task to impose logical order upon an illogical and irrational universe forcefully. In the past, people used to consider education as a rational understanding, but it is regarded as a hollow bureaucratic effort in modern times. Similarly, language, instead of justifying and elaborating, plays the role of a distorting tool. Generally, humans search for meaning, as compared with Wasserkopf's claim for his tuition fees back, which has been proved to be quite comic, absurd, circular, and futile in the play. Therefore, Fritz Karinthy's *Refund* touches the features of the Theatre of the Absurd as it uses humour, paradox, and irony to depict both tragic and comic circumstances in the existence of human beings. We always attempt to search for purpose and meaning in our lives. However, Wasserkopf, like every

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individual, is ultimately destined to face mere absurdity, irrationality, and meaninglessness in totality.

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