

Fritz Karinthy

**Before Reading****Answer these questions.**

- Will you demand your tuition fees back from the school if you don't get any job in the future?
- What do you want to be after getting education?
- Does one's certificate show the talent of that person?

**Fritz Karinthy** (1887-1938) was a Hungarian satirical writer. He excelled as a novelist, short story writer, poet, essayist and playwright. Deeply interested in natural sciences, he studied to be a teacher, but became a journalist and joined the literary periodical *Nyugat*. Strongly philosophical and humanistic in his outlook, he raised his powerful voice against the barbarism and horrors of World War I. His works such as *That's How You Write* (1912), *Journey around My Skull* (1939), *Please Sir* (1916) and *Professor* won him a lot of recognition.



The play *Refund* written in 1938 is about a man about forty who 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 at school and he is now good-for-nothing. This play was adopted by the American playwright Percival Wilde for a general audience. *Refund* brings out the extraordinary sense of parody, word play in Karinthy's literary art. The play is full of humour which deals with an extraordinarily absurd situation.

**Reading****Now read the following hilarious literary play.****Casting Characters**

THE PRINCIPAL

THE SERVANT  
WASSERKOPF  
THE MATHEMATICS MASTER  
THE PHYSICS MASTER  
THE STAFF  
THE GEOGRAPHY MASTER  
**THE HISTORY MASTER**

*(The Principal is seated at his flat-tapped desk in his office in a high school. Enter a servant.)*

**THE PRINCIPAL:** Well, what is it?

**THE SERVANT:** A man, sir. Outside. He wants to see you.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** *(leaning back and stretching)* I receive parents only during office hours. The particular office hours are posted in the notice-board. Tell him that.

**THE SERVANT:** Yes, sir. Yes, sir. But it isn't a parent, sir.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** A pupil?

**THE SERVANT:** I don't think so. He has a beard.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** *(disquieted)* Not a parent and not a pupil. Then what is he?

**THE SERVANT:** He told me I should just say 'Wasserkopf.'

**THE PRINCIPAL:** *(much disquieted)* What does he look like? Stupid? Intelligent?

**THE SERVANT:** Fairly intelligent, I'd say, sir.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** *(reassured)* Good! Then he's not a school inspector. Show him in.

**THE SERVANT:** Yes, sir. *(He goes off. An instant later the door reopens to admit a bearded man, carelessly dressed, somewhat under forty. He is energetic and decided)*

**WASSERKOPF:** How do you do? *(He remains standing)*

**THE PRINCIPAL:** *(rising)* What can I do for you?

**WASSERKOPF:** I'm Wasserkopf. *(He pauses)* Don't you remember me?

**THE PRINCIPAL:** *(shaking his head)* No.

**WASSERKOPF:** It's possible I've changed. What the hell...! Your class records will show I've got a right to come here.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** The class records? How so?

**WASSERKOPF:** Mr. Principal, if you please, I'm Wasserkopf.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** Doubtless, doubtless – but what has that to do with it?

**WASSERKOPF:** You mean to say you don't even remember my name? [*He thinks it over*] No, I imagine you wouldn't. You were probably glad to forget me. Well, Mr. Principal, I was a student in this school eighteen years ago.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** (*without enthusiasm*) Oh, were you? Well, what do you want now? A certificate?

**WASSERKOPF:** (*doubtfully*) Since I'm bringing back the leaving certificate you gave me I suppose I can get along without another one. No, that isn't why I came here.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** Well?

**WASSERKOPF:** (*clearing his throat firmly*) As a former pupil of this school I want you to refund the tuition fees, which were paid you for my education eighteen years ago.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** (*incredulously*) You want me to refund your tuition fees?

**WASSERKOPF:** Exactly; the tuition fees. If I were a rich man I'd tell you to keep them, so far as I'm concerned. What the hell...! But I'm not a rich man, and I need the money.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** I'm not sure I understand.

**WASSERKOPF:** Dammit, I want my tuition fees back! Is that plain enough?

**THE PRINCIPAL:** Why do you want it back?

**WASSERKOPF:** Because I didn't get my money's worth, that's why! This certificate here says I got an education. Well, I didn't. I didn't learn anything and I want my money back.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** But, look here, look here! I don't understand it at all! I've never heard of anything like it. What an absurd idea!

**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.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** Gave it to you?

**WASSERKOPF:** (*nodding violently*) Like that. Here I was walking along the street, fired from my last job, and wondering how I could get hold of some cash, because I was quite broke. I met Leaderer. I said, ‘How goes it, Leaderer?’ ‘Fine!’ he says. ‘I’ve got to hurry to the broker’s to collect the money I made speculating in foreign exchange.’ ‘What’s foreign exchange?’ I said. He says ‘I haven’t got the time to tell you now, but, according to the paper, Hungarian money is down seventy points, and I’ve made the difference. Don’t you understand?’ Well, I didn’t understand. I said, ‘How do you make money if money goes down?’ and he says, ‘Wasserkopf, if you don’t know that, you don’t know a damn thing. Go to the school and get your tuition fees back.’ Then he hurried away and left me standing there, and I said to myself, ‘Why shouldn’t I do that?’ He’s right, now that I’ve thought it over. So I came here as fast as I could, and I’ll be much obliged if you give me back my tuition fees, because they amount to a lot of money, and I didn’t get anything for them.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** (*at a loss for words*) Really... But now... See here, we’ve never had a request like yours before. Leaderer told you –

**WASSERKOPF:** He’s a good friend, Leaderer. He told me, and when I get my money back I’m going to buy him a present.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** (*rising*) You – you are not really serious, are you?

**WASSERKOPF:** I was never more serious in my life. Treat me wrong here and I’ll go straight to the Ministry of Education and complain about you! You took my money and you taught me nothing. Now I’m no good for anything, and I can’t do the things that I should have learned in school.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** You’re mad! (*He breaks off, to continue in a more conciliatory tone*) My dear sir, Herr – er – Wasserkopf, please go away quietly. I’ll think the matter over after you’ve gone.

**WASSERKOPF:** (*sitting*) No, no! You don’t get rid of me so easy. I’ll go when everything’s been settled. I was given the instruction here in exchange for money, so that I might be able to do something; but I can’t do anything because I was taught so badly, and anybody can see I ought to have my money back.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** (*trying to gain time*) What makes you think you can’t do anything?

**WASSERKOPF:** Everybody thinks so. If I get a job I can’t keep it. Give me an examination and tell me what I ought to do. Call in the masters and let them say.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** What a distressing business! How unfortunate! You really want to take another examination?

**WASSERKOPF:** Yes. I've a right to take one.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** What an unusual case! (*He scratches his head*) I've never heard of anything like it before. Er – I shall have to consult the staff. I shall have to call a conference... Er – will you wait in the waiting room and give me a few minutes?

**WASSERKOPF:** (*rising*) Yes, be quick. I've got no time to waste (*he saunters out in a leisurely fashion.*)

**THE PRINCIPAL:** (*rings; the servant enters*) Ask the staff to come here at once. A most extraordinary conference!

**THE SERVANT:** Yes, sir. (*He goes out*)

**THE PRINCIPAL:** (*trying out his speech*) Gentlemen, I have asked you to come here on account of a most unusual state of affairs. It is unprecedented. In the thirty years that I have been a schoolmaster I have never heard of anything like it. Never, so long as I live, shall I expect to hear of anything like it again. Never! God forbid! (*The masters enter; they are characteristic figures whose eccentricities are exaggerated*) Gentlemen, I have asked you to come here on account of a most unusual state of affairs. Sit down, gentlemen. I shall open the conference. It is unprecedented, incredible and fantastic. A former pupil has come to see me – er – an individual named Wasserkopf. He brought up a question, which I've never encountered in my many years of experience. (*He explodes*) I have never heard of anything like it.

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** Tell us about it.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** He wants – he wants his tuition fees back.

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** Why?

**THE PRINCIPAL:** Because he's lost his job. Because he's broke. Because he's an ass. I should be glad to have you express your views on this unparalleled case.

**THE PHYSICS MASTER:** The case is natural. The law of conservation of energy proves that any given pupil will lose, in any given period, as much knowledge as a teacher can drill into his head in another period of like duration.

**THE HISTORY MASTER:** There is nothing like it in the history of civilization. It is said that the Bourbons learned nothing and forgot nothing. If that is true.

**THE PHYSICS MASTER:** The law of conservation of energy – *(The two argue)*

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** The question is, does he want the amount with simple or compound interest, because in the latter event –

**THE GEOGRAPHY MASTER:** Where is the fellow, anyhow?

**THE PRINCIPAL:** He's waiting outside. He wants to be re-examined. He says he learned nothing. He says a re-examination will prove it. I'd like to know what you gentlemen think about it.

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** *(chuckling)* A re-examination? Gentlemen, it is my conviction that we will lose nothing by re-examining Wasserkopf. If he fails, he will place us in an awkward position; therefore he must not fail. He has – shall I say? – pursued advanced studies in the school of life. We will not make our questions too difficult – agreed, gentlemen? We are dealing with a sly, crafty individual, who will try to get the better of us – and his money back – by hook or crook. We must checkmate him.

**THE PHYSICS MASTER:** How?

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** By sticking together. The object is to prevent him from failing, because if he fails he succeeds. That we must stop. If he fails, tomorrow there will be two more former pupils, and the next day a dozen. We must back each other up, gentlemen, so that this painful affair does not become a pedagogical scandal. We will ask him questions. Whatever his answers, we agree beforehand that they are correct.

**THE PHYSICS MASTER:** Who will decide?

**THE MATHEMATICS TEACHER:** I, if you will permit me. Mr. Principal, let us proceed with the examination. We will show the former pupil that we too can be shrewd!

**THE PRINCIPAL:** *(ringing; uneasily)* Isn't there a chance of something going wrong? Suppose it gets into the newspapers –

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** Leave it to us.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** *(to the servant who has reappeared)* Show in Herr Wasserkopf. *(He enters, without waiting to be shown in. He is most truculent. His hat is over one ear; he keeps his hands thrust into his pockets and stares insolently)*

**THE STAFF:** *(bowing, heartily)* How do you do?

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

**THE PRINCIPAL:** How dare you –

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** *(interrupting)* Please! *(He turns to the others.)* Sit down, you loafers! *(They sit, greatly astonished. He turns to Wasserkopf.)* My dear sir, the greeting you have just given us shows that you understand the patriarchal manners, which we impress upon everybody in this institution. Exactly as in the days of the medieval humanists, teachers and pupils here are on a footing of perfect equality. You have shown us, in a most tactful way, that you approve of our customs. 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 the examination in that subject, and mark him ‘Excellent.’

**THE PRINCIPAL:** *(understanding at once)* Quite right! Quite right! *(He writes)* ‘Manners: Excellent.’

**THE STAFF:** Agreed! Agreed!

**WASSERKOPF:** *(puzzled, then shrugging his shoulders)* All right, if you say so. What the hell...! I don’t give a damn for the lot of you. My being gentlemanly isn’t going to pass the examination. Let me fail as quickly as possible, and give me my money. Everything else is just nonsense.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** *(flattering)* Speaking for the staff, we agree with you. Your exquisite courtesy will not affect us one way or the other. We will examine you, and be guided entirely by your replies to our questions. Take notice of that.

**WASSERKOPF:** All right, carry on! Let’s hear the questions. I need money. *(He takes off his coat and hitches up his sleeve bands.)* Go to it! Ask me questions, professors – I mean, long-eared asses! I’d like to see you get a single correct answer out of me.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** The examination will begin. History. Herr Schwefler?

**THE HISTORY MASTER:** *(moving to the centre of the table and indicates a chair facing of 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. I ask the Principal, who teaches that subject, to concur.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** Quite Right. (*He writes*) ‘Physical Culture: Excellent’

**THE STAFF:** Agreed! Agreed!

**WASSERKOPF:** (*energetically*) No! (*He sits; he grins.*) You caught me once, didn’t you? Well, you won’t do it again. From now I’ll have my ears open.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** ‘Alertness: Very Good’

**THE HISTORY MASTER:** ‘Perseverance: Unusual.’

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** ‘Logic: Excellent.’

**WASSERKOPF:** Get on with your questions!

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** (*to the Principal*) ‘Ambition: Boundless.’ (*The Principal nods and writes*)

**THE HISTORY MASTER:** (*scratching his head*) Yes, yes, just a minute. (*The other masters look at him with concern.*)

**WASSERKOPF:** What’s the matter, Schwefler? Aren’t you prepared?

**THE HISTORY MASTER:** A moment!

**WASSERKOPF:** Oh, you can’t think of a question that’s easy enough? You were always a numskull.

**THE HISTORY MASTER** (the idea arrives; triumphantly): Candidate, answer this question: How long did the Thirty Years’ War last?

**WASSERKOPF:** Thirt – (*He interrupts himself.*) I mean to say, I don’t know.

**THE HISTORY MASTER:** Please answer my questions! I am sure you know! Give me the answer! (*Wasserkopf thinks with his eyebrows drawn together. The Physics Master tiptoes to him and whispers loudly, ‘Thirty years.’ The Geography Master winks at him and holds up ten fingers three times.*) Well, well?

**WASSERKOPF:** Mr. Principal, this is no way to run an examination. (*He indicates the Physics Master*) That fellow is trying to make me cheat.

**THE PRINCIPAL:** I shall deal with this decisively. *(To the Physics Master)* Go away!  
*(The Physics Master slinks back to his place)*

**WASSERKOPF** (after much thought): How long did the Thirty Years' War last? Was that the question?

**THE HISTORY MASTER:** Yes, yes!

**WASSERKOPF:** *(grinning)* I know! Exactly seven meters! *(They are paralyzed. He looks about in triumph.)* Ha, ha! Seven meters! I know it lasted that long. It's possible I'm wrong, and if I am I fail. Seven meters! Ha, ha! Seven meters long! Seven meters! Please give me back my tuition fees. *(The Masters look at each other; at their wits' ends)*

**THE HISTORY MASTER:** *(decisively)* Seven meters? Right! Your answer is excellent.

**WASSERKOPF:** *(incredulously)* What. What did you say?

**THE HISTORY MASTER:** *(swallowing manfully and watching the Principal out of the corner of his eye)* The answer is correct, as a matter of fact. The candidate has shown us that his thought processes are not merely superficial, and that he has investigated the subject in accordance with moderns researches based on – based on – based on –

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** Relativity, of course. The quantum theory. Planck. Einstein. It's all very simple. *(To the THE HISTORY MASTER)* Don't say another word. We understand perfectly. Einstein has taught us that time is as real as space and matter. It consists of atoms, and may be synthesized into a unified whole, and may be measured like anything else. Reduce the mass-system to a unit and a year may be represented by a meter, or seven years by seven meters. We may even assert that the Thirty Years' War lasted seven years only because – because – because –

**THE HISTORY MASTER:** Because the actual warfare took place only during half of each day – that is to say, twelve hours out of 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 we deduct from this the hours given up to noon-day siestas, to peaceful diversions, to non-warlike activities – *(He wipes his brow)*

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** To social distractions, we are left only with time which the candidate has represented by the Einsteinian equivalent of seven meters. Correct! I take it upon myself, gentlemen, to propose a grading of 'Very Good' in

History. Oof!

**THE STAFF:** Bravo! Excellent! He has passed! (*They congratulate Wasserkopf*)

**WASSERKOPF:** (*objecting*) But I don't see –

**THE PRINCIPAL:** That ends the examination in History. (*Writing*) 'History: Very Good.' (*The staff surround THE HISTORY MASTER and congratulate him.*) Now the examination in physics.

**WASSERKOPF:** Now we'll see something, you tricksters!

**THE PHYSICS MASTER** (*energetically*): Come, come!

**WASSERKOPF:** (*defiantly*) Well, what's going to happen? Ask your questions, or don't. I haven't got any more time to waste. (*He stares at the Physics Master*) Oh, now I remember you. Do you know what we used to call you behind your back? (*The Physics Master smiles in agony*) We called you cannibal, because you were always chewing your thumbs, just as you're doing now! (*The master removes his thumb hastily. The rest of the staff smile.*) That's what we called you! Oh, by the way, do you remember the day you tripped and fell flat in the aisle? Do you know who tied a string across from desk to desk, so you'd do that? I did it!

**THE PHYSICS MASTER** (*furiously*): You?

**WASSERKOPF:** Don't get excited, little man. Ask me a hard question instead. Plough me.

**THE PHYSICS MASTER** (*controls himself, well aware that Wasserkopf is trying to irritate him. Very sweetly*): Kind of you – very kind of you. And now, tell me, Herr Wasserkopf, do clocks in church steeples really become smaller as you walk away from them, or do they merely appear to become smaller because of an optical illusion?

**WASSERKOPF:** What an absolute rot? How should I know? Whenever I walk away from clocks they get larger! Invariably! If I want them to get smaller I turn round and walk straight up to them, and they're not small at all.

**THE PHYSICS MASTER:** In a word, therefore, in a word –

**WASSERKOPF:** In a word, therefore, you give me a pain in the neck. You're an ass! That's my answer.

**THE PHYSICS MASTER:** (*furiously*) Is that your answer? (*He controls himself*) Good! It is correct. (*Turning to the staff*) A difficult answer but a most brilliant one.

I'll explain – that is to say, I'll explain. (*With a sigh, he gets on with it*) When we talk of an ass we always notice – we always notice –

**THE STAFF:** (*anxiously*) Yes? Yes?

**THE PHYSICS MASTER:** that his look is sad. Therefore – (*He thinks. Suddenly triumphant*) I've got it!

**WASSERKOPF:** (*worried*) What have you got, you whiskered baboon?

**THE PHYSICS MASTER:** I've got it, and the answer is right. Why is the look of the ass so sad? Because we are all the victims of illusion. But what illusions can affect the extremely primitive apperceptive powers of an ass? Obviously, the illusions of the senses, for the ass lacks imagination; and these must be none other than optical illusions, since the ass, like us, observes that objects appear to become smaller as he moves away from them. The candidate has given us a most excellent answer in calling our attention to an animal whose whole expressions 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'

**THE STAFF:** Bravo! (*They surround the Physics Master, slapping him on the back and shaking his hands, while he sinks into his chair, completely exhausted*)

**WASSERKOPF:** I protest!

**THE PRINCIPAL:** (*silencing him with a gesture*) The examination in Geography. (*The Geography Master takes the place facing Wasserkopf*)

**WASSERKOPF:** Just look at him! The old hypocrite! How are you, anyhow, nitwit?

**THE GEOGRAPHY MASTER:** I beg your pardon?

**WASSERKOPF:** My name used to be in our class-book, didn't it? You old reprobate! You just wait! I'll fix you all right!

**THE GEOGRAPHY MASTER:** Tell me, candidate –

**WASSERKOPF:** I'll tell you! I'll tell you! Oh, how I used to hate you eighteen years ago!

**THE GEOGRAPHY MASTER:** (*imperturbably*) Please tell me what city of the same name is the capital of the German province of Brunswick?

**WASSERKOPF:** What a dumb question! The answer's part of the question.

**THE GEOGRAPHY MASTER:** *(pleased)* Isn't it? And the answer – what is it?

**WASSERKOPF:** 'Same' of course. That's the answer. If the name of the city is same, then the name of the city is 'Same.' Right? If it isn't I fail, and you refund my tuition fees.

**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 Brunswick. There is a legend that once, as the Emperor Barbarossa was riding in to 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's 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, winks solemnly at his colleagues.)* The answer is excellent. The candidate is entitled to a grade of 'Excellent' in Geography. *(He returns to his place to be showered with congratulations)*

**THE PRINCIPAL:** *(writing)* 'Geography: Excellent.' Thus far the candidate has come through with flying colours. Only the examination in mathematics is left. Should he pass that he will have passed the entire examination.

**WASSERKOPF:** *(nervously)* I'm going to be more careful now. *(The Mathematics Master takes his place facing Wasserkopf. The Other Masters are worried but the Mathematics Master assures them with a gesture that they may depend on him.)* So here you are, old-stick-in-the-mud! Do you know we used to call you 'old-stick-in-the-mud' behind your back? You'd better brush up your wits if you think you're going to put one over me. I'll start off by telling you a few things about mathematics: two times two is five, and I make up my own multiplication tables as I go along. And if you add eight apples and two pears the answer is twenty-seven apricots. That's my system, and you'll see me use it. To hell with mathematics! 'Answer excellent'? 'Answer very good' 'Answer correct'? Not this time. It will be simpler if you say you aren't prepared, and let me fail.

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** *(forcibly)* You must not joke about a serious examination. I'm going to ask you two questions. One of them is easy; the other is hard.

**WASSERKOPF** *(imitating him):* One of them is easy; the other is hard. The same

old-stick-in-the-mud that you always were! I remember the pictures of you we used to draw on the board –

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** (*interrupting*) If this were an examination in art you would be marked excellent. (*He pauses, and Wasserkopf is suddenly silent.*) But we are dealing with mathematics. The easy question: If we represent the speed of light by  $x$ , and the distance of the star Sirius from the sun by  $y$ , what is the circumference of a one-hundred-and-nine-sided regular polyhedron whose surface coincides with that of the hip-pocket of a State railway employee whose wife has been deceiving him for two years and eleven months with a regimental sergeant-major of hussars?

**THE STAFF:** (*much upset*) But look here, Professor! Professor!

**THE PRINCIPAL:** Professor!

**WASSERKOPF:** Don't interfere with him! (*To the Mathematics Master*) Will you repeat the question?

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** No. Either you paid attention or you did not. Either you know the answer, or you don't. Tell me the answer, because if you don't know it –

**WASSERKOPF:** Of course I know it! Naturally I know it! I'll tell you: two thousand six hundred and twenty nine litres. Exact. No fractions. And did I give you the correct answer? (*He chuckles*) I've given you an answer which is too good!

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** No. The answer is wrong. The correct answer is two thousand six hundred and twenty-eight litres, and not twenty nine. (*He turns to The Principal*) I refuse to pass the candidate. Mark him 'Failure.'

**WASSERKOPF:** (*bounding*) I told you so! I told you so!

**THE PRINCIPAL:** (*thunderstruck*) Professor! Professor!

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** I'm sorry. It is true that his error amounted to less than a tenth of a percent, in the total, but it was an error. He fails.

**WASSERKOPF:** My tuition fees! My tuition fees!

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** In my opinion the candidate's request is reasonable. Now that I have satisfied myself he cannot pass our examination it is his right to recover the money which was paid us.

**WASSERKOPF:** That's so! That's right! Give me the money. (*The staff stare as if the heaven had fallen*)

**THE PRINCIPAL:** (*furiously, to the Mathematics Master*) Is that what you think?

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** Absolutely. This is a good school. It is our duty to see that nothing ever injures its reputation. How much do we owe you, Herr Wasserkopf?

**WASSERKOPF:** (*greedily, forgetting everything else*) I'll tell you exactly. I attended this school for six years in all. During the first three years the fee was 150 crowns quarterly. Total for three years 1, 800. During the second three years the fee was 400 crowns semi-annually. Total: 2, 400 and 1, 800 is 4, 200. Examination fees, 250 crowns 95 heller. Certificates, documents, books, stamp taxes, 1, 241 crowns 43 heller. Total: 5, 682 crowns 38 heller. Incidentals, stationery, notebooks, 786 crowns 12 heller. Grand total: 6, 450 crowns 50 heller. Knock of the heller and call it crowns.

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** (*checking with his paper and pencil as Wasserkopf calls out the amount*) Exactly!

**WASSERKOPF:** Exactly! You can rely on it.

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** It's right. There's no question of it. It's right to the smallest detail. (*He offers Wasserkopf his hand*) I congratulate you! That was my difficult question!

**WASSERKOPF:** (*not understanding*) What?

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** (*to the Principal*) I certify that the candidate passes in Mathematics. His answer to the easy question was a very little out of the way; but his answer to the difficult question – how much the refund should be – was exactly correct. Herr Wasserkopf is a mathematical genius.

**WASSERKOPF:** (*striking his forehead*) So you did put one over me!

**THE PRINCIPAL:** (*rising*) I present the results of the examination. Herr Wasserkopf has passed with distinction in every subject, and has again shown that he is entitled to the certificate we awarded him on his graduation. Herr Wasserkopf, we offer our congratulations – accepting a large share of them for ourselves for having taught you so excellently. And now that we have verified your knowledge and your abilities – (*he makes an eloquent gesture*) get out before I have you thrown out! (*He rings for the servant. The following speeches are nearly spoken simultaneously.*)

**THE HISTORY MASTER:** So I'm a numskull, am I? Say it again and I'll show you what is what!

**THE PHYSICS MASTER:** I'm a cannibal? What? And you were the one who tied a string across the aisle –

**THE GEOGRAPHY MASTER:** Hypocrite? Nitwit? Ass? Me?

**THE MATHEMATICS MASTER:** Old stick-in-the-mud?

**THE SERVANT:** (*entering*) Yes, sir?

**THE PRINCIPAL:** (*indicating Wasserkopf*) Remove that object! (*The servant seizes Wasserkopf by the collar and the seat of his trousers and rushes him off. The Principal turns to the staff and beams.*) Thank you, gentlemen, for your magnificent co-operation. In the future it will be our proudest boast that in this school a pupil simply cannot fail!

## CURTAIN

### NOTES

**Bourbons:** members of the French royal family that ruled France, Spain and Naples at various times

**Quantum theory:** a theory in physics based on Planck's radiation law concerned with the emission and absorption of energy by finite quanta

**Planck:** Max Planck (1858-1947), a German theoretical physicist whose discovery of energy quanta won him the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1918

**Einstein:** Albert Einstein (1879-1955), a German-born theoretical physicist who developed the Theory of Relativity. He was awarded a Nobel Prize in 1921.

**Brunswick:** the historical English name for the German city of Braunschweig

**Barbarossa:** Friedrich Barbarossa (1122-1190), also known as Frederick I, was the Holy Roman Emperor as well as the King of Germany during the 12th century. The word Barbarossa literally means 'Red beard' in Italian. Barbarossa reigned as Holy Roman Emperor from 1155 to 1190.

### Glossary

**apperceptive (adj.):** having or showing conscious perception with full awareness

**ascribe (v.):** to attribute a cause or characteristic to something

**by hook or crook (idm.):** by any method possible

**cannibal (n.):** a person who eats the flesh of other human being

**concur (v.):** be of the same opinion; agree

**disquieted (adj.):** anxious or worried

**eloquent (adj.):** well spoken; expressive; effective

**heller (n.):** a Hungarian coin of small value

**herr:** German term of address for a man

**hussar (n.):** (in the 15th century) a Hungarian light horseman

**hypocrite (n.):** a person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs

**incessant (adj.):** continuing without pause or interruption

**melancholy (adj.):** having a feeling of sadness without obvious cause

**nitwit (n.):** a silly or foolish person

**numskull (n):** a very stupid or silly person

**old-stick-in-the-mud (idm.):** a person who avoids new, fun, or exciting activities or ideas

**rot (n):** a process of becoming worse; a decline in standards

### ***Understanding the text***

**Answer the following questions.**

- a. Why does Wasserkopf demand a refund of his tuition fees from the school?
- b. Why does Wasserkopf consider himself good for nothing?
- c. What did the teachers decide to do when Wasserkopf asked for a refund?
- d. Why did Wasserkopf give ridiculous answers? Why did the teachers accept these answers?
- e. How does the Mathematics Master describe Wasserkopf's character?
- f. How did the teachers outwit Wasserkopf?
- g. What is the final judgment on Wasserkopf's demand of refund?

### ***Reference to the context***

- a. Read the extract from the play given below and answer the questions that follow:  
"It's possible I've changed. What the hell...! Your class records will show I've got a right to come here."
  - i. Who is the speaker? Who is he speaking to?
  - ii. Why is the speaker say these words?
  - iii. Where is the speaker at this moment?
- b. Read the extract dialogue given below and answer the questions that follow:

**“THE STAFF:** (bowing, heartily) How do you do?

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

**THE PRINCIPAL:** How dare you –”

- i. What is to be the response to ‘How do you do?’
  - ii. Is Wasserkopf’s response polite enough to the staff?
  - iii. How does Wasserkopf rebuke the staff?
  - iv. What does the principal mean by ‘How dare you -’?
- c. Explain the following line of the play:  
“Because I didn’t get my money’s worth, that’s why!”
- d. What is the theme of the play?
- e. Sketch the character of Wasserkopf.

### ***Reference beyond the text***

- a. The play is a satire on the present day education system. Do you think that our education system does not prepare students for life? Discuss.
- b. Our education system focuses on memorisation rather than creative thinking. Do you think the knowledge imparted by education may not have practical relevance in one’s day-to-day life? Who do you blame for this?
- c. Most of the students want to learn just for examination rather than knowledge. Do you think that certificate will help them in their future career?