



Ben Jonson : A Short Study

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Life of Ben Jonson

- Full Name : Benjamin Jonson
- Date of Birth : 11th June 1572
- Birth Place : London, England
- Father : A Protestant Clergyman
- Wife : Anne Lewis
- Death : 6th August , 1637.
- Place of Death : London , England.

Main Points of Ben Jonson Life

- He was the posthumous son of a London clergyman.
- After the death of his father, mother was forced to remarry beneath her station in to a master brick layer.
- He went to St. Martin's school and Westminster School, he came under the influence of the classical scholar William Camdn.
- He served in the military at Flandres, before working as an actor.
- In 1594 , Ben Jonson was married with Anne Lewis .
- To support his young family and could not endure his life as a parasite any longer , he shifted to London in order to earn his livelihood by becoming an actor and then playwright for the theatres in London.

Works of Ben Jonson


- A Tale of a Tub – 1596
- The Isle of Dogs – 1597
- The Case is Altered – 1597
- Everyman is His Humour – 1598
- Everyman out of His Humour – 1598
- Cynthia's Revel – 1600
- The Poetaster – 1601
- Sejanus, His Fall – 1603
- Eastward Ho – 1605
- Volpone – 1605
- Epicoene or The Silent Woman – 1609
- Alchemist – 1610
- Catiline His Conspiracy – 1611
- Bartholomew Fair – 1614
- The Devil is an Ass – 1616
- The Staple of News – 1626
- The New Inn or The Light Heart
- The Magnetic Lady
- The Sad Shepherd
- Mortimer, His Fall

Ben Jonson and Shakespeare : A Comparison

Ben Jonson and Shakespeare were two celebrated dramatists of the Elizabethan period but they sharply differ from each other. Ben Jonson was a great dramatist but his fame and popularity had been eclipsed in the shadow of Shakespeare, the greatest dramatist of English Literature. Many critics have compared both playwrights.

Comparing Shakespeare and Ben Jonson Legouis writes : “Shakespeare was a great entertainer of the public and submitted himself to its taste and ideas where as Jonson was a great revolutionary and reformer of the stage and through it of his public. ... He wanted to mould the tastes and ideas of the public of his time and show the correct path to the leading playwrights who had gone astray in their compositions.”

W.J.Long writes : Alone he (Jonson) fought against the romantic tendency of the age and to restore the classic standards. The whole action of his drama usually covers only a few hours or a single day i.e he always observes the unity of time. Shakespeare takes liberties with historical facts but Jonson is always accurate and sincere about them to the smallest details.”

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- Smith writes about the comparison that the greatest difference between Shakespeare and Jonson lies in the marked contrast found in their method of characterization. Shakespeare starts with a story and develops his characters in context of that story to their full stature and gives them their own individuality. Jonson on the other hand , starts with his characters and devise a plot to suit and exhibit them.

Comedy of Humours

- Ben Jonson was the first dramatist who conceived and popularized this dramatic genre in the late sixteenth century. The term humour is derived from the latin word 'humor' which means 'liquid'.
- It is based on the ancient psychological theory of four fluids found in human body. These four fluids are – Blood , Phlegm , Choler (Yellow Bile) and Melancholy.
- A normal man has these four fluids in a balanced proportion. But this excess of anyone of any one of these fluids makes him abnormal and develops some kind of an oddity in the temperament and behaviour and hence such a person becomes an object of fun and ridicule. Excess of different fluids have different effects on the human –
 - The humour of Blood makes a man excessively optimistic even without the slightest chance of hope or success .
 - Phlegm makes one excessively calm and docile.
 - Choler makes a man highly ill-tempered.
 - Black Bile makes one excessively melancholy.

- His first successful play ‘Every Man in His Humour’ had inaugurated the so called Comedy of humour, which ridicules the eccentricities or passion of the characters (thought to be caused by physiological imbalance). He capitalized on this success with the comedies ‘Volpone’, ‘Epicene’ , ‘The Alchemist’ and ‘Bartholomew Fair’. Jonson preserved the detached , satiric perspective of an outsider.

Volpone

- Volpone is today Ben Jonson's most performed play and its savage portrayal of human greed, self interest , selfishness , and lust is as biting as it was in 1606.
- It was first performed at the Globe theatre by King's men in 1606. It was printed in 1607 and prefaced by poems praising its excellence by poets including John Donne.
- Set in Venice, the play is both a city comedy and a type of best fable, in which Volpone dupes a range of foolish venetians and foreigners with the help of clever servant Mosca (fly or parasite).
- Volpone pretends to be a wealthy old man who is bed ridden and close to death, and courts the attention of three eager gold digger the merchant Carvino (Crow), the lawyer Voltore (Vulture) and the greedy Corbaccio (raven). Who believe that they have a shot at being made heir to his immense fortune. He extracts extravagant gifts from Carvino and Voltore and persuades Corbaccio to disinherit his own son, Bonario, in favour of Volpone.

- The characters in Volpone are stereotypes. They represent a character type rather than a flesh and blood. Volpone is an imbalanced character. At the beginning of the play, he worships gold as his god. Volpone's worshipping of gold shows that he is utterly consumed by greed, he moves on to blasphemy calling his gold a saint. He also earns his wealth by duping his legacy hunters and wants to have sex with Celia.
- Mosca is the parasite of Volpone. He flatters his master and persuades the legacy hunters to please him. At the end of the play he comes in his original colour when he tries to cheat his master. Thus he is also mentally imbalanced.
- Corbaccio disinherits his own son. Corvine forces his innocent wife to sleep with Volpone and also calls her a whore.
- Thus, all the characters in Volpone are stereotypes. They are imbalanced as well so they act in a comical way. Thus Volpone is a comedy of humours.



- **Thanks**