

**P.G SEM-I
CC-3
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF VOLPONE BY BEN JONSON**

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P.G DEPT. OF ENGLISH
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TEXT LINK: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4039/4039-h/4039-h.htm>

LINK FOR ONLINE STUDY: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQj6G-rCIHM>

DRAMA : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K mz7AzFghEk>

BACKGROUND

Volpone takes place in seventeenth-century Venice, over the course of one day. The play opens at the house of Volpone, a Venetian nobleman. He and his "parasite" Mosca—part slave, part servant, part lackey—enter the shrine where Volpone keeps his gold. Volpone has amassed his fortune, we learn, through dishonest means: he is a con artist. And we also learn that he likes to use his money extravagantly.

Soon, we see Volpone's latest con in action. For the last three years, he has been attracting the interest of three legacy hunters: Voltore, a lawyer; Corbaccio, an old gentleman; and Corvino, a merchant—individuals interested in inheriting his estate after he dies. Volpone is known to be rich, and he is also known to be childless, have no natural heirs. Furthermore, he is believed to very ill, so each of the legacy hunters lavishes gifts on him, in the hope that Volpone, out of gratitude, will make him his heir. The legacy hunters do not know that Volpone is actually in excellent health and merely faking illness for the purpose of collecting all those impressive "get-well" gifts.

SOCIAL CRITICISM

Benjamin Jonson *is* the third most important name in English drama after William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. Although he did not achieve much success with his tragedies, Ben Jonson became very well-known for his comedies. “*Volpone*”, which is part of his mature comedies, or second period, is his most significant and most-performed play. Ben Jonson parodies the material

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“age of gold” referring to the Golden age from Greek mythology. Human vices are the main reason for people’s moral degradation and the perversion of the Golden Age. He accentuates on people’s tendency to deceive others out of greed, vanity, sloth, lust and hedonism.

STYLE

Jonson’s style, as might be expected, is disciplined, formal, balanced, classically simple, and unembellished—a style that foreshadows the Cavalier School (who called themselves the sons of Ben). His dramatic verse is highly stylized, vibrant, and fast-moving; readers are hardly aware they are reading poetry. Rarely does Jonson allow himself the lyrical excursions of Shakespeare or the rhetorical complexity of Christopher Marlowe, although he was capable of both. There is a solidity, firmness, and straightforward clarity in his comedies equaled only by the classical French comic theater of Molière. In *Volpone* Jonson follows the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action. The action of the play takes only one day (the unity of time); it occurs entirely in Venice (place); and, with the exception of some of the exchanges between Peregrine and Sir Politic Would-Be, the action is unified structurally, all centered on the machinations of Volpone, his follower, and the greedy dupes

THEME

The theme of the play is greed, the vice that dominates the actions of all the characters. Family bonds, marriage, and legal justice are not merely disregarded by Corbaccio, Corvino, and Voltore; they are also made the means by which the characters’ inhuman avarice destroys them. Jonson implies that their greed is all

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too human; these characters may be exaggerations but they are not aberrations. It is ironic that the Politic Would-Bes, though they, too, want Volpone's money, seem less offensive and morally corrupt simply because they do not sell their souls for a hope of lucre. They are idiotic but they are not vicious. The passages in which they appear are a kind of relief. Although *Volpone* is a comedy, it is so serious that it is almost equally tragic; as a satire, it accomplishes the difficult feat of being funny and morally incisive at the same time. *Volpone* may be a comedy insofar as it deals with particular figures in a particular situation, but its social moral is earnest. Jonson succeeds brilliantly in combining the stereotyped characters of Latin comedy, the Renaissance characters of humors (which he himself used in his first comedy, *Every Man in His Humour*, 1598), the popular tradition of beast fables (from which he derived the names of his characters), and astute psychological insight to make them all come alive onstage. Although the plot of *Volpone* is original, it is based on a common Roman fortune-hunting theme dealt with by Horace, Juvenal, Pliny, Lucian, and Petronius. Jonson turns his fortune hunters loose in contemporary Venice—chosen, no doubt, because the English of the time...

PLOT

“Volpone” has a main plot and a subplot, which was very typical for plays of that time. The main plot reveals the characters obsessed with greed, and the subplot “attacks” another vice – that of vanity. It bears the typical characteristics of Jonson's drama. The action takes place over the course of one day (in seventeenth century Venice). Jonson was an Italophile, though back then, Venice was considered to be the centre of sin and corruption. Characters

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are historically bound to their place and time and each one of them represents a human trait or eccentricity.

Volpone, whose name means fox, is a rich man who makes “good” use of his leisure time. He is not married and childless which makes him a perfect target for legacy hunters. He pretends to be sick and on the verge of dying, so as to delude people and make them wish for becoming his heirs. Volpone is the epitome of greed and hedonism – he enjoys pleasure in all of its manifestations and indulges in the way he deceives three gullible men, all of them bearing the names of predatory birds – Voltore (from Italian – meaning vulture), Corbaccio (raven) and Corvino (crow). Thus greed is presented as “a characteristic of the society as a whole”. But the difference between Volpone and his would-be heirs is that Volpone is greedy not only for wealth, but for “gaining more power over his victims”. The protagonist is very much contented that he receives gifts, but what gives him real satisfaction is the fact that his plans for manipulating people into giving him presents work very well:

Yet I glory

More in the cunning purchase of my wealth,

Than in the glad possession

“Volpone” is reminiscent of Thomas Kyd’s Spanish tragedy as it is another “play within the play”. In Jonson’s play the protagonist and his “parasite” – Mosca, are the main actors and the rest are just puppets in their hands.

In the rest of Volpone’s speech, Jonson indirectly makes an allusion to another cardinal sin – sloth:

.... since I gain

No common way; I use no trade, no venture;

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I wound no earth with plough-shares; fat no beasts,
To feed the shambles; have no mills for iron,
Oil, corn, or men, to grind them into powder:
I blow no subtle glass; expose no ships
To threat'nings of the furrow-faced sea;

With the use of irony, the author indirectly accuses the audience of being idle because many people preferred using tricks instead of working as a way to get money. It was a common practice among upper classes to find an heirless “magnifico” who is expected to die soon. Then one starts ingratiating with him in hope of becoming their heir. But in “Volpone” the author presents the idea of “the thief who becomes the victim of thieving” – each of the three men tries to get Volpone’s riches, but is actually robbed of their own. Since the three competitors for Volpone’s inheritance are so desperately trying to earn his favour, the protagonist is certainly no worse than them. He is just taking advantage of their gullibility and is wrapping them around his finger with Mosca’s help.

Volpone “exults” that he has “no wife, no parent, child, ally”. Nano (the dwarf), Castrone (the eunuch) and Androgyno (the hermaphrodite) are his servants and their function in the play is “thematic and rhythmic”. They speak in heroic couplets as compared to the central characters. They constitute Volpone’s household which is “a parody of a family”: the three grotesque characters are his children-freaks and Mosca is his mistress. Such “travesties” have always indicated a “social or spiritual decadence”. Jonson hints that the concept of a family has been perverted in the society because blood bones do not have that much importance as they used to. Volpone boasts that he does not

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have any blood relatives, Corbaccio disinherits his son and Celia is betrayed by her own husband. The latter is not an example of betraying a blood relative, but it is a good illustration of how corrupt the society has become, since Celia's husband compels her to sleep with another man in order to get hold of his riches.

Hypocrisy is yet another vice that has spread like a disease in the Venice society of that time. It is a potent tool for achieving one's goals and it goes hand in hand with the unlimited greed of some of the characters. Everybody starts lying as soon as they realize that they can take advantage of their lies. The three men's desire to get their hands on Volpone's money make them pretend that they are concerned about Volpone's health. And they are, indeed, though it is not improvement, but deterioration of his health that will relieve their anxiety. The dialogue between Volpone and Voltore is a perfect example of the "trickster tricked" idea:

The next victim is Corbaccio who is older than Volpone and is certainly nearer to death than him. His attempts to become heir to "soon-to-die" Volpone suggest that people do not change over time. Either greed does not know age, or Corbaccio is just another person who does not accept the fact that he is getting old and will not be able to take his possessions with him when he dies. The raven's gift is worthless compared to the other two competitors' presents. He offers a medicine that is supposed to improve Volpone's condition, but, of course, the chances of the given drug to be actually a poison are very high. Corvino is the third person who is tricked by Volpone and Mosca. Each of the would-be heirs is told that he is the one who will receive Volpone's inheritance. As soon as the last competitor goes out of the house, Volpone and Mosca start

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mocking at their gullibility. The fact that their actions are less dishonest compared to the actions of the three legacy-hunters is the reason Ben Jonson still does not punish them for their lying.

Lady Politic Would-be “serves as Sir Politic Would-be’s female counterpart in her vanity”.

Besides the fact that she is vain about her looks, she also pretends to be very literate and tries to prove it by talking too much. Thus Ben Jonson satirizes the loquacious woman who indulges too much in being the centre of attention.

Important Quotations explained

1. *Volpone*: Hail to the world's soul, and mine. More glad than is The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun Peep through the horns of the celestial ram, Am I, to view they splendour, darkening his: That lying here, amongst my other hoards, Show'st like a flame by night; or like the day Struck out of chaos, when all darkness fled Unto the centre. Oh, thou son of Sol (But brighter than thy father) let me kiss, With adoration, thee, and every relic Of sacred treasure in this blessed room.

These lines are spoken at the beginning of the play (I.i.3–13). It is early morning, Volpone stands in front of his shrine, which he has collected through confidence tricks like the one he now plays with Corbaccio, Corvino and Voltore. Volpone praises the treasure in ecstatic religious terms, calling it "sacred", and "blessed", and exclaiming with hyperbole that his gold is brighter than the sun. This establishes two of Volpone's key character traits: his intense energy, and his worship of money (which we will soon see extends to all other means of self-gratification).

2. *Mosca*: I am so limber. Oh! Your parasite Is a most precious thing, dropped from above, Not bred 'mongst clods and clot-poles, here on earth. I muse, the mystery was not made a science, It is so liberally professed! Almost All the wise world is little else, in nature, But parasites, or sub-parasites.

Mosca speaks these lines in soliloquy in Act III, scene i, lines 7–13. Mosca is Volpone's "parasite", a lackey or servant almost completely dependent on Volpone for his livelihood. But in these lines, he professes that what defines him as a parasite—the fact that he must live off the wealth of another, instead of

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working hard to produce his own-is in fact characteristic of most "wise" (or intelligent) people in the world. The play will prove him right in claiming that parasitism is widespread, at least in Venetian society; Volpone, Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino all are "parasites" to some extent. But the play's moral satire will attempt to refute his claim that this parasitism is, in fact, wise.

3. *Celia*: Oh, God and his good angels! Whither, whither Is shame fled human breasts? That with such ease, Men dare put off your honours and their own? Is that, whichever was a cause of life, Now placed beneath the basest circumstance? And modesty an exile made, for money?

These lines are spoken in Act III, scene vii, just before Volpone's attempted seduction and then attempted rape of Celia. Celia's husband has effectively prostituted to Volpone, so that he might inherit Volpone's fortune. Celia here effectively Jonson's mouthpiece, citing what might be considered the thesis of the play. Namely, that even love and sex, the most intimate acts in human life, that create life, are now held to be less valuable than money; and that this inverted value-system has made men dishonorable and shameless in their pursuit of money.

4. *Volpone*.: See, here, a rope of pearl; and each, more orient Than the brave Egyptian queen caroused: Dissolve, and drink 'em. See, a carbuncle, May put out both the eyes of our St. Mark; A diamond would have bought Lollia Paulina, When she came in, like star-light, hid with jewels That were the spoils of provinces; take these, And wear, and lose 'em: yet remains an ear-ring To purchase them again, and this whole state.

These lines, again spoken in Act III, scene vii, might be considered Volpone's apotheosis. This is high point the play, and the fullest expression of his system

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of values. He offers Celia a life full of constant, yet expendable, pleasures; pearls one can drink, jewels one can lose, without a thought; unbridled hedonism without any care for the future. But when he runs up against Celia's steadfast Christian virtue, Volpone reacts with angry violence. But Bonario rescues Celia; Volpone panics, knowing he has been discovered, and begs Mosca to help him. It is the beginning of his downfall, for the increasingly dominant Mosca will eventually come to challenge Volpone for his estate.

5. *Ist Avo*: And these are all your judgments.

All.: Honoured fathers.

Ist Avo: Which may not be revoked. Now you begin, When crimes are done and past, and to be punished, To think what your crimes are: away with them. Let all that see these vices thus rewarded Take heart, and love to study 'em. Mischiefs feed Like beasts. Till they be fat, and then they bleed.

These are the final lines in the play, spoken in Act V, scene xii. They neatly summarize the play's didactic purpose. Volpone, and the legacy hunters, have all been made examples of through their punishment at the hands of the Venetian court. The judge advises all those present at the hearing in the Scrutineo (including those in the audience) that they should take care to learn the lesson well, that vice is inevitably punished, no matter how much it may enjoy itself beforehand.