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## ***Volpone by Ben Jonson***

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### **Introduction: An overview of Ben Jonson**

Ben Jonson (1572-1637) was an English playwright, poet, and literary critic who is considered one of the most important figures in English Renaissance literature. He is known for his satirical wit, intellectual depth, and mastery of various dramatic forms. Here's an overview of Ben Jonson's life and work:

**Early Life and Education:** Benjamin Jonson was born in London, England, in 1572. His father, a clergyman, died shortly before his birth, leaving his mother in poverty. Jonson received a classical education at Westminster School, where he studied Latin and the classics. However, financial constraints prevented him from attending university, and he began working as a bricklayer to support himself.

**Career as a Playwright:** Jonson's literary talent soon caught the attention of influential patrons, and he began writing plays for the theatrical company **Lord Admiral's Men**. His early works, such as **The Isle of Dogs** (1597), gained him some recognition, but they also brought him trouble with the authorities, leading to a brief imprisonment for his involvement in a seditious play.

Jonson's breakthrough as a playwright came with the comedy **Every Man in His Humour** (1598), which was staged by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the company that included William Shakespeare. This play introduced Jonson's distinctive style, characterized by vivid characters, moral themes, and a focus on the follies and vices of contemporary society.

He continued to write successful plays, including **Volpone** (1605), a biting satire on greed and hypocrisy, and **The Alchemist** (1610), a comedy that explores the world of con artists and deception. Jonson's plays combined elements of classical drama with contemporary social commentary, and they often featured intricate plots, sharp dialogue, and rich language.

In addition to comedies, Jonson also wrote tragedies, such as **Sejanus His Fall** (1603) and **Catiline His Conspiracy** (1611), which were less popular than his comedies but showcased his versatility as a playwright.

**Poetry and Literary Criticism:** Besides his work as a playwright, Jonson was also a prolific poet. He wrote numerous poems, including lyric verses, epigrams, and elegies. His poetry demonstrated his skill in manipulating language and his ability to tackle a wide range of subjects, from love and friendship to politics and art.

Jonson's critical writings were influential in shaping the literary landscape of his time. His most famous work of literary criticism is "**Discoveries**," a collection of notes and observations on various aspects of literature, including drama, poetry, and language. In "**Discoveries**," Jonson expressed his ideas on the nature of poetry and drama, emphasizing the importance of artifice, craftsmanship, and classical models.

**Later Life and Legacy:** In his later years, Jonson faced personal and professional challenges. He experienced financial difficulties and suffered a stroke in 1628, which left him partially paralyzed. Despite these setbacks, he continued to write and produce plays until his death.

Ben Jonson passed away in 1637 and was buried in Westminster Abbey. His work had a significant impact on English literature and drama. He is often seen as a

transitional figure between the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, and his plays and poetry influenced later writers, including the Restoration playwrights of the 17th century.

Jonson's emphasis on moral themes, his exploration of human character, and his skillful use of language and dramatic structure continue to make his works relevant and compelling for modern audiences. His contributions to English literature have earned him a place among the greatest playwrights and poets in the English language.

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### المحاضرة الثانية

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**Act 1, Scene 1:** Volpone wakes up one morning in his house in Venice and asks his servant, Mosca, to bring him his money. He is obsessed with money and values it above all things. For three years Volpone, helped by Mosca, has been pretending that he is dying. Because he is rich and has no children, many people give him expensive presents, money and other things of value, in the hope he will name them as heirs in his will. Volpone calls this the 'dying game.' A lawyer, Voltore, arrives with a very expensive old plate for Volpone and Mosca whispers to him that the old man would die that very day and that he has persuaded Volpone to name Voltore as the only heir to the fortune. Voltore thanks him and leaves just before Corbaccio, a slow, hard of hearing man, enters. Mosca informs him that he had told the old man that Corbaccio was a true friend and he should leave his money to him, but that there was a problem. The old man had already changed his

will and named Voltore as the heir because he had given him a valuable plate. Mosca suggests the problem could be overcome if Corbaccio was to name the old man as his heir in his will. Corbaccio doesn't like the plan because it will leave his son with no money, but Mosca reassures him the old man will die very soon and then his son would inherit everything. He leaves promising to change his will. As Volpone and Mosca are laughing at the cleverness of their game, Corvino arrives with a present of a bag of money. Mosca tells Corvino that Volpone had intended to leave his money to Corbaccio before he had convinced him to leave it to Corvino. Corvino leaves, promising to reward Mosca for the favour he has done him. Volpone and Mosca start talking about Corvino's beautiful wife, Celia, and Volpone insists on meeting her.

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### المحاضرة الثالثة

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**Act 1, Scene 2:** Mosca goes to Corvino's house and tells him the old man's doctor had suggested Volpone meet a beautiful woman. Corvino likes the idea as he is sure a woman would kill the old man and proposes paying a woman of the street. Mosca interrupts him to say that the doctor has already offered the old man his beautiful young daughter, hinting that the doctor would now receive

Volpone's fortune, unless Corvino offers his wife. Corvino is disgusted by the idea, but promises to bring his wife later that afternoon and thanks Mosca for his valuable information.

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#### *المحاضرة الرابعة*

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**Act 2, Scene 1:** Mosca sees Bonario, Corbaccio's son, in the street. He tells him of his father's intention to change his will, and starts crying and pretending to be very sad for the unfortunate son. Bonario believes he is genuine and that he can trust him. Mosca suggests that Bonario comes to the house at two o'clock and hides in Volpone's bedroom so he can witness his father showing Volpone the changed will. Mosca hopes this will result in Bonario killing his father.

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#### *المحاضرة الخامسة*

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**Act 2, Scene 2:** Bonario hides behind the bed to wait for his father. Corbaccio is late and Corvino and his wife arrive before him, causing Mosca some problems. While they are waiting, Corvino and his wife have an argument. She refuses to go through with the plan but her husband orders her to do it. Celia joins the waiting Volpone in his

bedroom. She tells him she cannot go to bed with him, at which point he jumps out of bed and tries to convince her otherwise. She is surprised at his renewed health and he confesses he hadn't been dying at all. When he tries to pull her to the bed, she cries out for help and Bonario leaves his hiding place to help her. They both go to the police. Corbaccio arrives with his recently changed will and Mosca tells him his son had tried to kill Volpone and himself, and now wants to kill his father because someone had told him about the will. Mosca sees Voltore listening at the door and calls to him. He has heard everything but Mosca reassures him everything is alright except that Bonario has gone to the police. They decide they must meet at the courthouse and solve the problem.

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### *المحاضرة السادسة*

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Act 3, Scene 1: Everyone meets at the courthouse except Volpone. The lawyer for Bonario and Celia tells the judge that Corbaccio had made Volpone the sole heir to his will and Corvino had given his wife to Volpone, in an attempt to be the only heir to the old man's will. He also says that Volpone is pretending to be dying so the judge orders him to be brought to the court to verify this statement. Voltore now gives his speech. He states that Celia is a bad woman because she is having an affair with Corbaccio's son, and

that when Corbaccio discovered this he changed his will and left his money to Volpone. Bonario and Celia had gone to Volpone's house to kill him, and it was there that Celia, with no encouragement at all from the old dying man, got into bed with him. Bonario protests that it is all lies and at this point Volpone is brought in. He pretends to be frightened of Celia, and the judge cannot believe such a sick old man could have jumped on her. He orders the police to take Bonario and Celia away, and the others return home

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### المحاضرة السابعة

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Act 3, Scene 2: Volpone proposes to carry on the game but with a slight change. He is going to make Mosca his heir and hide under the table to see the faces of Voltore, Corvino and Corbaccio when they discover this devastating fact. Volpone shouts out the window that Volpone is dead and they wait for the three men. Voltore is the first to arrive followed by Corbaccio and then Corvino. Each of them in turn looks at the will and angrily leaves the room. Volpone is highly amused and tells Mosca he wants to go to court, disguised as a policeman, to hear the judge send Bonario and Celia to prison

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### المحاضرة الثامنة

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Act 3, Scene 3: Back in the courthouse, Voltore tells the judge that they had all lied and that Mosca, the fox, has inherited Volpone's money. The judge, realising the rich Mosca would be a good husband for his daughter, sends for him. Volpone, dressed as a policeman, tells Voltore that Volpone isn't really dead and that he is the heir. Voltore, in an attempt to discredit his former statement, pretends to be mad. Mosca returns and insists Volpone is dead. He tells Volpone he wants half the money to reveal the truth, which Volpone initially refuses, but then agrees to, only to be told by Mosca he now wants it all. Volpone takes off his disguise and declares that Bonario, Celia and Corbaccio had told the truth. The judge, tired of the confusion in his court, delivers his verdict. He sends Mosca and Volpone to prison (Volpone is not unhappy at this as he sees it as an opportunity for another game), tells Corbaccio and Corvino to leave Venice, Voltore to get another job, gives Corbaccio's house and money to Bonario and Corvino's possessions to his wife.

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### المحاضرة التاسعة

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#### Discussions and Themes

**Greed:** The theme of greed runs throughout the whole play. Volpone's game is the result of his greed and can

only work if the other characters are consumed by greed as well. Greed also brings about Volpone and Mosca's imprisonment because they can't agree to share the fortune.

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### المحاضرة العاشرة

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**Appearance and reality:** Although the play is an attack on a self-centred section of society, Jonson uses dramatic irony to give the play its humour. The audience knows exactly what is going on, whereas the characters are ignorant of the true nature of Volpone's trick.

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### المحاضرة الحادية عشر

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#### **Animalization:**

In Ben Jonson's play **Volpone**, animalization is a recurring motif that serves to underscore the themes of greed, deception, and corruption that are central to the play. Animalization involves representing human characters as animals or using animal imagery to describe their behavior and traits.

The main character, Volpone, is repeatedly compared to various animals throughout the play, including a fox, a wolf, a viper, and a raven. These comparisons highlight his cunning, viciousness, and greed. For example, when Volpone pretends to be on his deathbed to trick his greedy friends into offering him gifts, he is compared to a wolf

disguised as a sheep. This comparison emphasizes the predatory nature of his actions and his ability to manipulate others.

Similarly, the other characters in the play are also often compared to animals. Mosca, Volpone's servant, and accomplice, is likened to a fly that buzzes around Volpone, feeding off his riches. Corbaccio, one of Volpone's victims, is compared to a mole, digging up his own grave by disinheriting his son. Corvino, another victim, is compared to a crow, pecking at the carcass of his own marriage.

Animalization in **Volpone** serves to highlight the moral decay and corruption of the characters. By comparing them to animals, Jonson emphasizes their base instincts and lack of humanity. Additionally, the animal imagery underscores the play's critique of society, showing how the pursuit of wealth and power can reduce people to mere animals.

In conclusion, animalization is an important motif in **Volpone** that helps to emphasize the play's themes and critique of society. By representing human characters as animals, Jonson highlights their base instincts and lack of humanity, while also underscoring the moral decay and corruption at the heart of the play.

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### المحاضرة الثانية عشر

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#### **Parasitism**

"Everyone's a parasite" to paraphrase Mosca (III.i), and over the course of the play he is proved right, in the sense that everyone tries to live off of the wealth or livelihood of others, without doing any "honest toil" of their own. Corvino, Corbaccio and Voltore all try to inherit a fortune from a dying man; and Volpone himself has built his fortune on

cons such as the one he is playing now. Parasitism, thus portrayed, is not a form of laziness or desperation, but a form of superiority. The parasite lives by his wits, and feeds off of others, by skillfully manipulating their credulity and goodwill.

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### المحاضرة الثالثة عشر

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#### **Volpone Character analysis**

**Volpone:** (the fox) is the central figure of the play. He begins the action by his plots and intrigues, and it is the audience's interest in the manner of his the downfall that preserves the dramatic tension until the final curtain. Volpone, as the name suggests, is a simple dramatic character. He is a a trickster who delights in disguises and intrigues. His actions are complicated in the plot but simple in the psychology of the character that executes them. Volpone loves to trick people into giving him their most prized possessions. When he has secured these through cunning rather than ordinary means, the value is increased in the fox's eyes. In short, his character treasures the the chagrin of those he has cozened more than the wealth received as a result of the cozening.

There is an excellent comic sense in the simplicity and single-mindedness of Volpone's character. His insatiable desire to trick people is characteristic of the figure of the fool. Volpone is a nobleman, but he shares the same human nature as the lowly fools of his household. They are naturally deformed; Volpone is the cause of his own deformation. The plot shows his fall from the position of Venetian nobleman to the social position of a fool. Volpone's character flaw, the desire to trick people, has brought him to the final curtain.

He starts out playing the fool and ends up by being one. He fulfills Mosca's prescription of people: "Almost all the wise world is little else, in nature, but parasites or sub-parasites."

**Mosca:** (the gadfly) is a parasite; this bestial name encompasses the simple character of Volpone's servant. Mosca is only one step higher in the social scale than the three deformed fools of Volpone's household: the dwarf, the hermaphrodite, and the eunuch. He is socially deformed, a fellow of no birth or blood.

Mosca lives by his wits; he has no possibility of advancement in the Venetian world, and he is therefore free of the folly of greed. He takes his needs from the treasures of others, and he takes only his daily needs. The parasite's freedom from the normal ambitions of human nature makes him a formidable judge of it. He uses this knowledge to mock the frailties of his fellow men, and his only pleasure is in his wise observance that, if he is not noble, they are parasites. It is only when Volpone's need for cozening puts the weapon of financial advancement into Mosca's hands that the gadfly tries to live by his own means. Mosca's sudden opportunity for gain makes him vulnerable to the folly of greed, which eventually pulls down the charming and inventive rogue. This comic character flaw is particularly ironic in Mosca; it is the very folly he has been so delightfully mocking for five acts. Did he for a moment forget that "almost all the wise world is little else, in nature, but parasites or sub-parasites"?

**Voltore:**

The vulture is one of the three birds of prey that circle around the fox, greedy and full of expectation. He is a lawyer and consequently has a weakness for wills. He uses his legal knowledge to advocate injustice in order

to possess Volpone's fortune. Mosca wisely fools this gull by employing the advocate's own tactics; that is, he tells Voltore the biggest lie and documents it with elements of well-known facts. Voltore is tricked by his own folly. He can, he believes, with quick agility, make the wide world believe that a lie is the truth. He fails to observe that he, as part of the wide world, might be cozened himself.

**Corbaccio:**

The carrion crow is old and decrepit, deaf, round of back, and very avaricious. Partially deformed by old age, this fool completes his the transformation from nobleman to the parasite by being tricked into disinheriting his son.

The irony of Corbaccio's spiritual condition is wrapped up in his physical condition: He really expects to outlive Volpone and inherit his wealth! This comic character flaw is not physical blindness but spiritual blindness.

**Corvino:**

The raven is the last of the greedy trio, a peacock proud of his beauty, Celia. This bird of prey is an exceedingly jealous husband who guards his wife with great care. Nonetheless, his greed persuades him to demand that Volpone cuckolds him! When at last he discovers the error of his ways, he is too proud to reveal his foolish vanity. The paramount character quality of the three divergent birds of prey is their love and desire to possess money.

**Celia:**

Celia is Corvino's wife; she is also an important plot device. It is Volpone's desire that delivers her to his doorstep. Her presence there gives Bonario a chance to save her.

## **Bonario:**

Bonario is the good fellow of the play; he is also sentimentally romantic. Celia and Bonario are foolish as well as innocent. They look at life in Venice through the eyes of lovers of melodramatic, romantic fiction. Therefore, they are not human beings who suffer through uncontrollable circumstances. Rather, they seriously misjudge the people they should know best because of their naive ideas about human nature. If the gulls seem inhuman in their total greed, Bonario and Celia are equally inhuman in their purity. Their folly is more silly than vicious, but it is, nonetheless, folly

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### *المحاضرة الرابعة عشر*

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## **Symbols in Volpone**

### **Venice**

As the seat of greed, corruption, and decadence, at least according to the prevailing prejudices, Venice was the beneficiary of years of stereotype in English drama. Italians in general were seen as sensuous, decadent beings, thanks to their extremely sophisticated culture, history of Machiavellian politicians (Lorenzo de Medici, Cesare Borgia, Machiavelli himself) and beautiful (and often erotic) love poetry. Though not things considered particularly awful today, this type of decadence made English people wary of being infected with immorality, and Venetians were seen as the worst of the bunch. The direct influence of the "power of Venice" to corrupt can best be seen in the Sir Politic Would-be

subplot, where the English knight Sir Politic "goes Venetian" and becomes a lying would-be thief. But the Venetian setting probably made the story more believable for most English audiences, signifying the fascination of the play with disguise and deceit, though also, perhaps against Jonson's intentions, distancing them from the play's moral message, by placing the greed in a historic far away place traditionally associated with greed, instead of right in the heart of London.

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### المحاضرة الرابعة عشر

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#### **Motifs in Volpone**

The Sacred and the Profane Volpone, both in his initial speech in Act I and in his seduction speech of Act III, mixes religious language and profane subject matter to a startling poetic effect. In Act I the subject of his worship is money; in Act III it is Celia, or perhaps her body, that inspires prayer-like language. As a foil against this, Celia pleads for a distinction to be restored between the "base" and the "noble," (in other words, between the profane—that which is firmly rooted in our animal natures, and the sacred—that which is divine about humans. Through their respective fates, the play seems to endorse Celia's position, though Jonson invests Volpone's speeches with a great deal of poetic energy and rhetorical ornamentation that make his position attractive and rich, which is again, another source of tension in the play



Disguise, Deception, and Truth

Jonson creates a complex relationship among disguise, deception, and truth in the play. Disguise sometimes serves simply to conceal, as it does when Peregrine dupes Sir Politic Would-be. But sometimes it reveals inner truths that a person's normal attire may conceal. Volpone, for example, publicly reveals more of his "true self" (his vital, healthy self) when he dresses as Scoto Mantua; and Scoto's speeches seem to be filled with authorial comment from Jonson himself. Furthermore, disguise is seen to exert a certain force and power all of its own; by assuming one, people run the risk of changing their identity, of being unable to escape the disguise. This is certainly the case for Mosca and Volpone in Act V, whose "disguised" identities almost supersede their actual ones.