

Volpone's Fables and Allegories

A close reading of Ben Jonson's *Volpone* will reveal that the author used several fables as an inspiration for his story. Many elements of the play help to characterize it as a fable, including a purpose that is meant to entertain the reader, a moral ending to the story, a fictional tale usually with the use of animal characters, and a poetic use of allegory (Genre Chart). As inspiration for his play, Johnson likely used many of Aesop's Fables, which were originally written by a man who lived sometime during the sixth century BC (Aesop History). Jonson seems to have also gained inspiration from other sources such as the classical satirist, Lucian, who originally provided the theme of "the rich old man playing with moneygrubbing scoundrels who hope to inherit his wealth" (Greenblatt, Simpson, and David). It is apparent that Jonson was inspired by many different sources when writing his play and that he used both fables and allegory to represent numerous themes that he found significant.

Volpone is a play that was published and written in 1616 by Ben Jonson, as a part of his *Works* (Greenblatt 1441). The story reveals many themes related to an abuse of power and an attempt towards monetary gain. The major characters of *Volpone* are revealed to do nearly anything in pursuit of wealth and are willing to "argue anything for a price" (Griffiths 1441). Jonson's play also powerfully reflects a historical context concerning England at the time, with his views regarding society and politics. Jonson achieves this portrayal with his successful use of a traditional fox lore in a play that was widely accepted at the time (Scheve). The traditional use of fox lore to portray certain themes and opinions can be traced all the way back to satirists such as Lucian and Petronius (Scheve). Additionally, Jonson's own social outlook is reflective in his play, as he was a man who lived during the transition from the Renaissance to the Reformation. He was known to have "distrusted parliament as a vehicle for the self-interest of landowners,

merchants, and their agents” (Griffiths). These views are easily recognized in his play, with wealthy land owners, legacy hunters, and even judges being driven by greed and personal interests.

Jonson used his play to reflect several major and minor themes. Aside from his views regarding social and political issues, he also seemed to heavily criticize minor themes regarding the values of purity and honor, social responsibilities, and religion. The character, Celia, represents several of these minor themes. She is the wife of a wealthy, and jealous, man who is one of Volpone’s “clients”. At one point in the play, Celia is commanded by her husband to sacrifice her honor and bed the wealthy Volpone, whom her husband is trying to gain favor with. Celia would rather suffer a list of terrible fates, including being locked in a dungeon forever, “My chastity, why, lock me up forever; Make me the heir of darkness”, and boldly claiming that she would rather die than to lie with Volpone, “Sir, kill me rather. I will take down poison, eat burning coals, anything” (Jonson 1491-1492). After being assured that nobody would know of the affair, Celia replies that heaven and the saints would know, “Are heaven and saints then nothing? Will they be blind or stupid?” (Jonson 1491). Celia is a representation of a good and moral character who is highly religious and believes deeply in judgement and repentance. She portrays Jonson’s minor themes relating to his religious outlooks, which were influenced by the English tradition of medieval morality plays, where actors personified human characteristics. These characteristics often included Virtue, Vice, Lechery, or Curiosity to illustrate moral lessons, as seen in Celia who is often represented as virtuous.

A secondary character, Bonario, is another character who illustrates a moral lesson and is revealed to further stand for the importance of virtue and honor, and Jonson’s thoughts that there is a “necessary sense of social responsibility” with the way that he protects Celia even

when he is arrested and to be tried for his “crimes” (Griffiths). Like Celia, Jonson uses Bonario as a tool to illustrate the values he deemed important in society, versus the ones he did not, as seen in the other main characters of the play.

With Jonson’s central theme, it would seem that his main focus was to use fox lore as a portrayal of the dangers of greed. Our main protagonist, Volpone, is described as a character who is “morally bankrupt”, but also “intelligent” and “adaptable” (Greenblatt, Simpson, and David 1444). His name, which translates to “fox” in Italian, is highly reflective of his character. He is a crafty man who is manipulative, smart, and cunning. Just like the fox is characterized in this tale, it is comparable to how the fox is portrayed in Aesop’s fable *The Fox and The Crow*. In the fable, a fox desires a piece of cheese that is in the mouth of a crow, who he flatters in order to obtain the cheese. The fox tells the crow it is beautiful and asks if it has a voice to match its beauty- and when the crow opens its mouth to sing, the cheese falls to the ground and is eaten by the fox (Story Arts). Volpone acts just as the fox in the fable, using flattery to get others to give him something of theirs that he wants. Aesop’s fable was used as a warning towards listening to flattery, and Jonson used it as inspiration to represent the same theme.

As Jonson used his protagonist, Volpone, to symbolize the central subject of the play, he used the “specific tradition about the fox” to draw attention to his parallel theme of “legacy hunters”, or men who are especially attentive to an elderly or sick person who is rich in order to obtain their legacy (Scheve). The original idea of a fox feigning death is first seen in Conrad Gesner’s *Historia Animalism*, a book that Jonson had kept in his own library (Scheve). The scene plays out as follows:

“When she (the fox) sees the flocks of birds flying about, she lies prone on the ground and at the same time shuts her eyes, and places her snout on the ground,

and holds her breath, and at once assumes the appearance and likeness of one sleeping or rather dead. By when the birds see her thus stretched out upon the ground, thinking her dead, they glide down in flocks, and sitting on her, they mock her, as it were. But the fox devours them with her gaping and threatening mouth as they approach her snout” (Scheve).

The tale heavily parallels the way in which Volpone acts like he is near death in order to attract greedy birds. With the book lying in Jonson’s own library, it would be hard to argue that he had not been inspired by Gesner’s tale.

Jonson further used Gesner’s tale as a parallel to his story in the use of Volpone’s main clients as the “greedy birds” (Greenblatt, Simpson, and David). These clients include Corvino, Voltore, and Corbaccio, who names translate to “crow”, “vulture”, and “raven”. It is clearly recognized that the main character, a fox, manipulates his clients that are named for several different birds, which is a direct use of Gesner’s tale as inspiration.

Jonson similarly introduces us to another character whose name is revealing to his personality. Mosca, a name meaning “fly”, is the assistant to Volpone. His character can be compared to the fly in Aesop’s fable *The Fly and the Draught-mule*. In this fable, a fly sits on a chariot that is being pulled by a mule, which carries the master. The fly complains that the mule is not moving fast enough and threatens to sting the mule. The mule replies that he cares not how fast the fly wants him to travel, that he only quickens for his master, who holds the whip (Parq). Like the fly in the fable, Mosca uses many threats towards Volpone’s clients, though soon learns that he is not the one with the power and that he is not the master.

Corvino, one of Volpone's clients, is another character which can be related to a fable. Corvino is a name that means "crow". He is a man who is easily manipulated, which is seen in *Volpone* when he gives in to flattery by Mosca and then is easily led to believe that Volpone is so near death that he cannot even hear- at which point both Mosca and Corvino shout insults at Volpone (Greenblatt, Simpson, and David 1462). Later, Corvino is easily tricked into offering his wife to Volpone, while under the impression that there is competition from a doctor who has "offered there his daughter" (Greenblatt, Simpson, and David 1480). Mosca tells Corvino that the doctors have given Volpone a medicine that is healing him, but that he needs to bed a young and pure woman, at which point Corvino offers his beautiful wife Celia. In this part of the tale, Volpone, Corvino, and Celia are again comparable to Aesop's fable of *The Fox and The Crow*. Just as the fox uses flattery and trickery to get the crow to release what it is that he wants, Volpone has done the same. Celia is the prize, or the cheese.

Aside from the many fables present in *Volpone*, there is also the prominent use of allegory. An allegory is defined as "a figure of speech in which abstract ideas and principles are described in terms of characters, figures and events" (Literary Devices). An allegory can be considered a symbol, though it differs from symbolism in the sense that it is meant to portray an overall theme in a work of literature. Allegory is frequently present in fables, and both are often used in imaginative literature (Fletcher). They are often used together, though are also used separately as well. Both are used to encourage readers to look for hidden meanings, as Jonson does so clearly in *Volpone*.

Jonson uses allegory to portray themes of hypocrisy, greed, and abuse of power through the lengths that the "legacy hunters" (and several other characters) are willing to go through to obtain wealth or benefit their own self-interests (Griffiths). In D.A. Scheve's *The Review of*

English Studies, he speaks of Jonson's use of traditional fox lore as a "device" to portray the theme of "legacy hunting" which had been used traditionally before him (Scheve). Scheve further notes that "Jonson saw the device of the fox feigning death as an emblem or allegory of the deception of legacy hunters, and he worked it into the play in such a wise way as to draw out the parallels between it and the legacy-hunting theme (Scheve). Scheve also says that Jonson had intended and expected that the audience would recognize the "fox device" as it was used traditionally through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

The presence of fables and allegory in *Volpone* is evidently clear. Jonson's use of both can be interpreted as a way of giving us insight into his worldviews. Writers typically use allegory in this way, as it can help them to "add different layers of meaning to their works" (Literary Devices). The use of allegory makes an author's story "multidimensional", helping the author to make a statement on something larger than "what they literally stand for" (Literary Devices). Further, allegory allows writers to put forward their moral and political point of views, and likewise allowed Jonson to put forth his own. Jonson, who lived during "a period of extraordinary change in English society", approached society critically through his writing (Griffiths). He saw his role as one who could provide useful insight into the problems of the day, forcing readers to confront several truths about humanity. Therefore, Jonson creatively used his words to "express the complexities of life and truth in a form that could be appreciated by the common man" (Griffiths). This is especially seen in *Volpone*, where Jonson innovatively used a simple tale of legacy hunters to portray his views regarding society in a humorous way that was widely accepted and appreciated by many. With his use of both fables and allegory, he challenged the audience to recognize the deceitful ways that society was governed, while approaching this truth carefully and theatrically, recreating the contemporary world in which

they lived (Griffiths). He was able to “identify both general and specific aspects of the human experience”, which helped to pave the way for future writers (Griffiths).

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