
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Greed and Deception in the 17th Century England: An Analysis of Ben Jonson's *Volpone*

Md. Abdul Hannan¹ ✉ Mst. Alfi Anjum², Maliha Mouly³ and Md. Naeem Aziz⁴

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bangladesh Army University of Science and Technology Khulna

²Research Scholar, Bangladesh

³Lecturer, Department of English, Bangladesh Army University of Science and Technology, Saidpur

⁴Lecturer, Daffodil International University, Dhaka

Corresponding Author: Md. Abdul Hannan, **E-mail:** md.abdul.hannan.english@baustkhulna.ac.bd

| ABSTRACT

This paper brings out the mass greed and deception in the purpose of changing class status in the 17th century England by critically examining *Volpone* by Ben Jonson in the new historicist approach. The paper explores the psychoanalytic view of how these aspects trigger the behaviors and drives of the protagonists, especially Volpone and his servant Mosca. The article brings out the way Jonson criticizes the corruptness and moral decline of 17th century society by satirically and comedically exposing the ills of society as a social commentary. The study also delves into the effects of unregulated greed, which has been seen to create the elements of deception, betrayal, and manipulation, which culminate in the ultimate destruction of the characters. The article is intended to add to the knowledge of the destructive force of greed and fraud depicted by Jonson, revealing how the themes mentioned become topical nowadays in the face of social and moral disintegration.

| KEYWORDS

Chicanery, psychoanalysis, corruption, degradation of society, satire

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: July 10, 2026

PUBLISHED: August 22, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61424/jlls.v4i3.882>

1. Introduction

Volpone, a play by Ben Jonson, was composed at the beginning of the 17th century and it is a satire that criticizes moral and social decadence that prevailed during that period. Greed and deception are the central themes of the play, and the protagonists of the play (*Volpone*, *Mosca*, and the future heirs) show the world of lies and manipulations. *Volpone* is obsessively greedy and at the core of the play, he pretends to be sick and deceives people to obtain money. The lies are not confined to *Volpone*, his servant, *Mosca*, is also involved in this deceit and through his wit he is able to advance their fraudulent plans.

This paper aims to give an in-depth discussion of the interaction of greed and deception in *Volpone* and how the two themes act as driving forces behind the events and the development of the story. In the context of psychoanalysis, the paper examines the ways in which the characters discussed in this paper demonstrate the unconscious desires and motivations behind the characters' actions. The combination of greed and deceit is not merely a plot device, but a commentary on how greed and corruption were embedded in the society of the day, with the vices of his characters being used by Jonson to condemn the lack of morality in society.

1.1 Research Problem

Greed being a basic human need most of the time propels people to do unethical things and in *Volpone* the propensity is intensified by the lies of the characters. Although a lot of studies have been done on the comedic aspect of the play, not many have examined the devastating effects of unbridled greed and treachery. This paper aims to investigate the negative aspects of human nature as expressed in *Volpone*, through the interplay of these two themes which make the characters morally degenerate.

2. Literature Review

Greed and deception in *Volpone* have been a popular theme and several scholars have presented diverse views on this theme. The article by Carr on *Volpone* and *Mosca*: Two Styles of Roguery (1981) stands out as one of such works, where Carr compares the two characters as a representation of two types of roguery. Carr states that both *Volpone* and *Mosca* are masterful liars, although *Volpone* employs his manipulation to benefit himself, *Mosca* can manipulate others to elevate his societal position. Carr stresses that these characters are a criticism of Jonson for the greed and moral corruption existing in society.

In a similar vein, the article by Kurtulus, *Jacobean Morality and Moral Performativity in Volpone and Women Beware Women* (2021), makes a comparison of *Volpone* to other works of Jacobean literature to discuss how Jonson employs moral lessons to satirize greed and fraud. According to Kurtulus, *Volpone* is a moral play which illustrates the effects of these evils. Although Jonson depicts greed in such a way that it is comical, it is a warning story of how one can be deceived by a materialistic and immoral mindset at the expense of maintaining honesty and integrity.

By contrast, the article by Popoca *the Independent Parasite: Theoretical Service of Mosca in Volpone* (2022) is dedicated to the role of *Mosca* in the play. Popoca discusses the manipulation of others that enables *Mosca* to climb up the social ladder even though he is a servant. Although *Mosca* is being deceptive, his actions demonstrate social mobility, which can be experienced by the people who have an opportunity to take advantage of the greed of others. This discussion brings out the intertwining of deceit and ambition in the play as *Mosca* takes advantage of the greed of others to be assured of his own future.

The article by Tanaselea, *Volpone - Animal and Moral Monstrosity* (2018), explores the play in terms of animal images. Tanaselea contends that Jonson draws on animal qualities to emphasize the ethical corruptness of his characters. The animalistic nature of the greed of *Volpone*, *Mosca* and other heirs is likened to the animalistic behaviors, highlighting the dehumanizing aspect of their needs. The analysis can be added to the interpretation of how Jonson criticizes the immorality of contemporary society by depicting greed and deception.

Research Objectives

- To examine how greed and deception are used to form the characters of *Volpone*.
- To discuss how the connection between greed and deception propels the action in the play.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The analysis presented in this paper is presented in the light of psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud, who subdivides the human psyche into three components: id, ego and superego. The id is the primal desires and urges; the ego is the rational part of the mind mediating the desires and the reality and the superego is the moral conscience. In *Volpone*, these psychological features are reflected in the actions and motivations of the characters.

Volpone is a prime representation of id, whose desires are to acquire wealth and enjoy himself only. He acts out of instinctual greed and manipulates others to fulfill his needs. On the other hand, *Mosca* is a symbol of the ego, as he is shrewd and manipulative, and he controls his mind to make other people act according to his wishes and satisfies *Volpone* and himself. Such characters as *Celia* and *Bonario* represent the superego and uphold their own morality, regardless of the corruption around them. These characters can see the evilness of greed and deception as an ethical contrast to the other characters.

Through this psychoanalytic model of analyzing the characters, this paper aims at discovering the unconscious motives that motivate them to act the way they do and how these motives bring about their moral demise.

3. Research Methodology

The research methodology used in this study is a qualitative one, and the theme that is explored in depth in the research is that of greed and deception as it is evident in the *Volpone* by Ben Jonson. This analysis is based on the background of content analysis, a process that enables a structural, objective meaning of the contents of the text that is imperative in analyzing complexities of written works. The qualitative approach is suitable due to the purpose of the study as it helps to present the detailed insights into thematic aspects of the play, motivation of the characters, and social commentary, and to investigate the psychological aspects of the characters.

4. Discussion and Analysis

4.1 *Avarice as the Motivation behind Character*

The theme of greed is the main force behind all the actions of the characters of the play as it is at the heart of *Volpone*. From the very first scenes, Jonson sets the main theme of greed which is central to the lives and actions of his characters. The nature of *Volpone* is so obsessed with wealth that it rules his actions. He starts off the day saying in the morning, good morning to the day; and second, my gold! (Jonson, 1.1.61). This is not a mere statement of taste but a sign of the great value that *Volpone* gives to material riches in general.

Volpone is greedy, and this is seen through his deceptions. He pretends to be sick, and makes people believe that he is on his deathbed to draw potential heirs who will pay him all sorts of gifts in the hope of gaining his riches. His gold, the symbol of his wealth, comes to be worshipped by him. The religious connotation of the metaphor of the shrine to refer to the treasure chest of *Volpone* depicts the religious awe towards material wealth in which his greed has devoured him completely. Such greed is not just due to its possession but to enjoy the manipulation and control of others.

Besides *Volpone*, the other characters such as Mosca, Voltore, Corbaccio as well as Corvino are also flat by the motif of greed, and this aspect defines their behaviors as well. All these characters need persuading *Volpone* to win his money with the help of fraud. In the case of Voltore, a lawyer, it is a wish to acquire wealth and status by manipulating the law. Corbaccio, an old-fashioned miser, even disinherits his own son in hope of being made the heir to *Volpone*. Corvino is a merchant who is ready to prosecute his wife to be appointed as the successor of *Volpone*.

These characters help Jonson to demonstrate how greed could lead to the destruction of moral values and make people betray their values and relations. The activities of these characters are also a commentary on the threats of unchecked greed, and how it blinds them to moral concerns and leads them to behave with deceit and dishonesty.

4.2 *Fraud as a source of the Plot*

Although the characters are driven by greed, they employ the instrument of deceit to get what they want. All the schemes of *Volpone* are aimed at fooling the people around him and making them think that he is going to die on his deathbed. His faked sickness, and his machinations with his would-be heirs, is the main plot contrivance. *Volpone* can use the fact that he appears to be near death, so that he can control the behavior of Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, all of whom are keen on acquiring his wealth.

The deception theme is closely interwoven with the personality of *Volpone*. The Italian word '*Volpone*' means 'fox' and it is a direct indication of his cunning and deceptive character. *Volpone* plays the role of a liar and uses people around him to amuse and benefit himself. What is ironic is that, he cheats others; though, he is a victim of his own cheat. His confidence in the fact that he can manage the situation and other people surrounding him causes his downfall. The servant of *Volpone*, Mosca, is also very significant in the deception. The plot of the play is based on Mosca manipulating the other characters. Being the fly, Mosca can fly back and forth among the other characters, spreading rumors and increasing their greed.

The deception is not limited to the principal characters, and it is also applied to the minor characters like Bonario and Sir Politic Would-Be. The disinherited son of Corbaccio, Bonario, wants to reveal the lies of *Volpone* and Mosca, and Sir Politic, an English traveller, accidentally finds himself in their maze of lies. These characters also add to the plot complicating the idea of how much of the world Jonson has created is full of deception.

4.3 Greed and deception: Interplay

Greed and deception in *Volpone* have a symbiotic relationship. The vice of greed is the impetus of the vice of deception, and vice versa. This contradiction is best shown in the character of Mosca. Mosca is originally a servant of Volpone, and he plays around with the other characters intellectually and wittily to make them think that they get a possibility to inherit the wealth of Volpone. But the greed of Mosca starts to show as the play continues. He gets increasingly interested in getting the wealth of Volpone himself, and in the end betrays his master to get wealth.

The association between Volpone and Mosca is an intricate one with both manipulating each other and playing with their deceit. Even the master, Volpone, cannot avoid being fooled. His faith in Mosca turns out to be the catalyst to his ruin since Mosca takes the best advantage to overthrow his reign. This reversal of power is a major element of the play, as it supports the idea that greed and deceit can fall out of favor and result in betrayal and moral decay.

Being blinded by their greed, they become increasingly vulnerable to deception. The previously subtle machinations of Mosca and Volpone increase when the two characters get more panicked to earn their fortunes. This desperation results in even more deception such as the fake death of Volpone and the playing with Celia, the wife of Corvino. The greediness of the characters pushes them on a journey of continually rising deceits, which culminate in their revelation and punishment.

4.4 The Character of Celia and Bonario: Good in Bad Times.

Celia and Bonario are virtues and morally upright people in contrast to the morally corrupt characters of Volpone, Mosca, Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino. Celia, the wife of Corvino, a victim of the greed and lust of Volpone is a virtuous woman throughout the play. Although Celia offers this as a prize to Volpone to get wealth, she retains her dignity and denies his advances. Her request to Volpone, that he open his ears, that his eyes can be opened, a heart open to touch, is a cry to move his humanity (Jonson, 3.2.124). The character of Celia is used as a foil to the rest of the characters, and this helps bring out the moral decay of people surrounding her.

Likewise, the son of Corbaccio, Bonario, who was denied his inheritance, is a person of honesty and justice. As the other characters are blinded by the need to get rich, Bonario is focused on telling the truth and getting justice. His acts are the opposite of the cheating and manipulation of Volpone and Mosca, and the contrast between right and wrong can be further elaborated.

4.5 Social Critique of the Play: Greed and Deception.

Volpone is also a story of personal greed and deceit but also a critique of the social and moral decline of society in the 17th century. Jonson criticizes the values of his era through the activities of his characters especially the preoccupation with wealth, status and power. The moral decay that Jonson perceived in the world around him is embodied in the willingness of the characters to lie, deceive and betray other people to achieve wealth.

The play makes fun of materialism and the extent to which people will go to ensure that they are placed in the social order. The riches of Volpone, which he worships like an idol, are an emblem of the corruptive power of materialism. The other characters, ready to give up their dignity, integrity and even their family members to get a shot at the riches of Volpone, are symbolic of the moral decadence that Jonson felt was rife in society.

Even through the character of Mosca, Jonson criticizes the idea of social mobility. Mosca is a servant who plays with deception and manipulation to rise but his triumph is short lived. The fact that he finally betrays Volpone is indicative of the constraints of social mobility within a corrupt society, where greed and lies end up destroying one instead of making one a better person.

5. Conclusion

Volpone by Ben Jonson is a brilliant discussion of the issues of greed and deception, which are the two driving powers behind the actions of characters in the play and the plot. This paper has explored how these themes trigger factors to the motives of the characters and the action of the plot through the prism of psychoanalysis. The combination of greed and deception brings out the moral corruption that underlies the society that Jonson describes, which ends up bringing down the characters. Through the comparison of the good characters of Celia

and Bonario with the evil characters of Volpone, Mosca and the heirs, Jonson brings out the moral implications of unrestrained greed and manipulation.

The play is also a warning sign of the perils of materialism and the extent to which people will go to get money and power. The stinging satire of Jonson is a critique of the decadence of his era, and an endless commentary on the corrupting power of money and lies. By revealing and punishing the dishonest characters, Jonson brings out the poetic justice and underlines the fact that, as much as greed and lies can uplift a short-term benefit, it will inevitably result in destruction.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID iD: Md. Naeem Aziz: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5779-9597>

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure: The authors declare that no artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

References

- [1] Carr, Carol A. V and Mosca. (1981). Two Roguery. Johns hopkins university press.
- [2] Chaplin, G (2002). Divided Amongst Themselves Collaboration and Anxiety in Jonson Volpone. Johns Hopkins University Press, 69(1), pp. 57-81.
- [3] Gutierrez-Popoca, E (2022). Theoretical Service to Volpone by Mosca: The Independent Parasite. Edinburgh University Press.
- [4] Hallett, A. (1970). Charles. Satanic Nature of Volpone. Philological Quarterly, vol.49, no.1, pp. 41.
- [5] Huda, Md. Mohammad T and Nazrul (2015). Sadism in Volpone of Ben Jonson. *International Journal of Management and Humanities*, vol.1, no.5, pp.1-18.
- [6] Hussian, R H H (n.d). Thematic Study of Jonson Volpone. College of Education, University of Babylon, Scientific Council. Bachelors Thesis.1-18.
- [7] Jarin, T and Aftab Ur R Z (2023). Gender Performativity in Inter-Caste Relationship in the Indian Hindu Culture: A Postcolonial Gender Study in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable and Arundhati Roy's the God of Small Things. *Journal of Women Empowerment and Studies* 3.2: 23-32.
- [8] Jonson, Ben. Volpone. (1962). London: Methuen and Co.
- [9] Karim, Sajjadul. Volpone (2011). An unpredictable and original Jacobean Comedy, by Ben Jonson. IIUC Studies, vol.8, 2011, pp. 27-38.
- [10] Kurtulus, G. (2021). Jacobean Morality and Moral Performativity in Women Beware Women and Volpone. Bilkent University, Turkey.
- [11] Marchitell, Howard. Volpone (1991). Desire and Domination. Rice University, vol.31, no. 2. 287-308.
- [12] Rahman, M M. (2014). Perception of Morality in regard to the changing social structures in the play Volpone by Ben Jonson. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*, vol. 2, no.1, p.131-137.
- [13] Rawashdeh, A K I. (2018). The Nature of Human Avarice: Ben Jonson, Volpone. Languages and linguistics, *Journal of Literature*, vol.51, pp. 52-62.
- [14] Tanaselea, M I (2018). Voluta sciolto - Animal and Moral Monstrosity. Ovidius University Press.
- [15] Tasneem, N and Aftab Ur R Z (2026). Sign Exchange Value: The Centre of the Capitalist Reproduction from Marxist Lens. *South Asian Res J Art Lang Lit* 8.1: 16-19.
- [16] Tosi, L (1999). Verbal Deception and Violent communication in Volpone and The Alchemist by Ben Jonson. University of Venezia.
- [17] Tulip, J (n.d). The Intertextualities of Volpone by Ben Jonson. Sydney Studies, pp.20-35.
- [18] Zahin, Aftab U R (2022). Psychoanalytical interpretation of William Faulkner's A Rose for Emily: The exposition of unconscious through necrophilia. *International Journal of Academic and Practical Research* 1.2 (2022): 53-61.
- [19] Zahin, Aftab U R (2022). The Objectivity of Beauty: A Post-structural Study of the Hyperreal Screen of Media. *Journal of Media, Culture and Communication (JMCC)* ISSN: 2799-1245 2.05 (2022): 1-5.