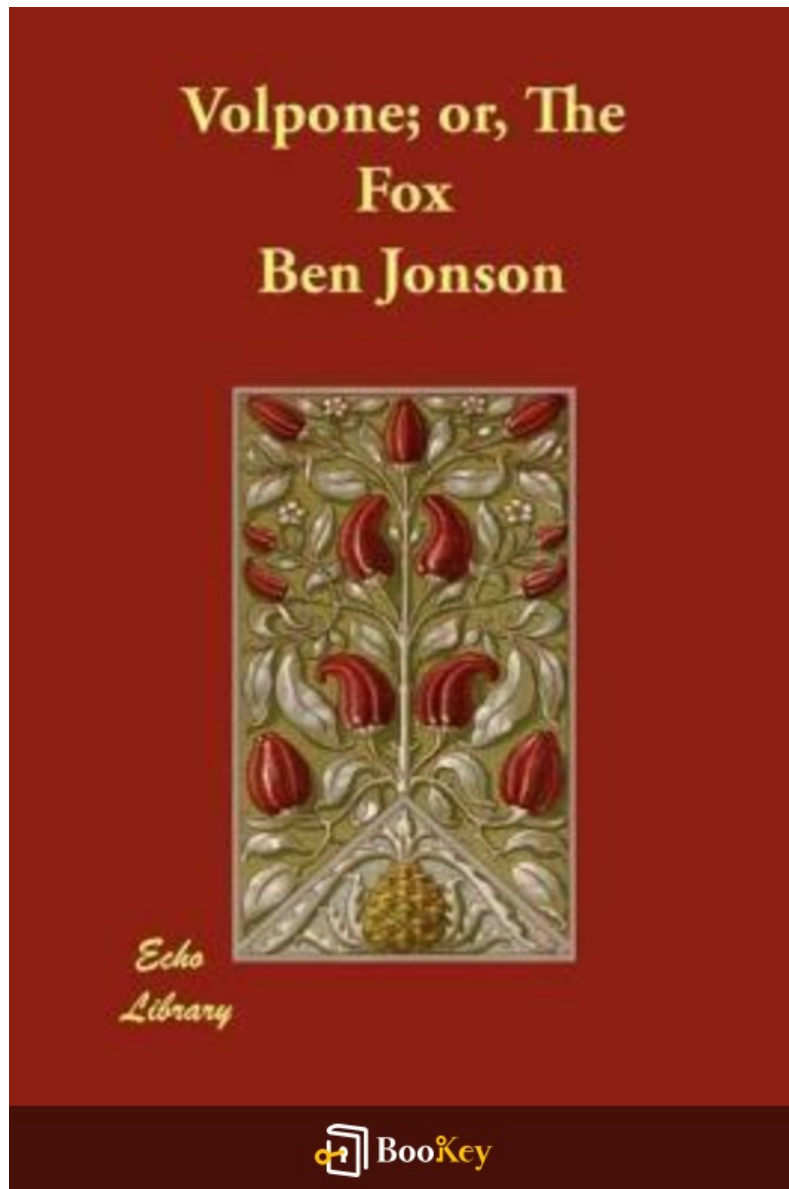


# Volpone PDF

Felix E. Schelling Ben Jonson



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# About the book

Exploration of Ben Jonson's "Volpone"

- **Setting:** The story is set against the luxurious backdrop of Renaissance Venice, rich in opulence and intrigue.
- **Main Character:** Volpone, a wealthy yet cunning character, becomes the centerpiece of a darkly comedic narrative.
- **Supporting Character:** His clever servant, Mosca, plays an essential role in orchestrating the deceptions that unfold.
- **Plot Summary:** Volpone deceives and manipulates various fortune-seekers, each driven by their greed and desire for his wealth.
- **Themes:** The play explores themes of greed, hypocrisy, and moral corruption, prompting readers to reflect on the vices influencing humanity.
- **Literary Significance:** Jonson's sharp social satire entertains while providing a critique of societal ethical decay.
- **Invitation to readers:** Engaging with "Volpone" offers the chance to appreciate Jonson's incisive wit and recognize the timeless relevance of his

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insights into human behavior.

Conclusion: "Volpone" is not just a brilliant comedy but a mirror reflecting the darker impulses that can pervade society.

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# About the author

## ### Overview of Felix E. Schelling's Contributions to Literary Criticism

**Scholarship:** Felix E. Schelling was a prominent American academic and literary critic recognized for his remarkable insights into English Renaissance literature. His research primarily encompassed the drama and poetry emerging from the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, with a notable focus on the works of Ben Jonson.

**Clarification on Authorship:** It's important to note that while Schelling was an influential figure in literary studies, he did not write "Volpone." This play is the work of Ben Jonson himself, a highly regarded playwright known for his incisive humor and satirical commentary.

**Jonson's Legacy:** "Volpone" exemplifies Jonson's skill in blending classical literary techniques with relevant social critique, which has solidified his status as a key player in English drama's history.

**Impact of Schelling's Work:** Schelling's analyses and interpretations of Jonson and his contemporaries have played a crucial role in enhancing the modern understanding and appreciation of this vibrant literary era.

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# Volpone Summary

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# Volpone Summary Chapter List

1. Introduction to the Main Characters and Themes of Volpone
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3. The Role of the Mosca: Manipulation and Irony Unleashed
4. Climactic Scenes: The Unraveling of the Conspiracy
5. Conclusion: Moral Lessons and Lasting Impact of Volpone

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# 1. Introduction to the Main Characters and Themes of Volpone

"Volpone," a brilliant comedy penned by Ben Jonson, unfurls a dramatic tapestry woven with themes of greed, deception, and the folly of human ambition. Set in Renaissance Venice, a city synonymous with wealth and opportunity, the play centers around its protagonist, Volpone, a wealthy con artist feigning illness to entrap his avaricious rivals. As the narrative progresses, the intricate interplay of the characters lays bare both the absurdity and tragedy of humanity's unabated desire for riches.

At the heart of the play is Volpone himself, an affluent nobleman with a sadistic flair for trickery. His name translates to 'fox' in Italian, which is emblematic of his cunning and sly nature. Volpone's wealth grows not from honest endeavors but from the manipulation of those who covet his fortune. He engages an array of characters in his elaborate ruse, presenting himself as bed-ridden and near death, enticing his would-be heirs to shower him with gifts and flattery, expecting to be named in his will. His shrewdness intricately showcases how greed can lead individuals to compromise their morals, illuminating a central theme: the destructive power of avarice.

Mosca, the clever servant to Volpone, epitomizes manipulation and deceit. His name, which means 'fly' in Italian, intriguingly reflects his role as the buzzing instigator in the web of deceit spun by his master. Mosca's loyalty to

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Volpone is both admiring and opportunistic; he savors his role as the brains behind many of the schemes, often engaging in witty banter and displaying a profound understanding of human nature. The relationship between Mosca and Volpone deftly captures the theme of servitude and the inversion of social hierarchies, as Mosca frequently outsmarts the wealthy clients his master has ensnared. Their relationship serves as an ironic commentary on power dynamics, wherein the servant proves to be more pragmatic and adroit at manipulation than his master.

The other principal characters—Corbaccio, the greedy old man; Corvino, the jealous merchant; and Celia, the virtuous wife caught in a web of male desire—further illustrate Jonson's exploration of greed and moral failing. Corbaccio represents blind ambition and senility, willing to disown his own child for a chance at Volpone's riches. Corvino, ensnared by jealousy and lust, betrays his own wife, Celia, seeking to offer her to Volpone as a sort of gift to win the latter's favor. Celia stands in stark contrast to these avaricious men; her purity and virtue often emphasize the moral decay surrounding her, accentuating the play's themes surrounding the perils of wealth and the erosion of ethical values.

As the plot thickens, the intertwining themes of deception and greed spotlight key societal critiques—that human beings will often elevate greed over morality, and in their relentless pursuit of wealth, they become

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participants in their own downfall. Jonson employs sharp wit and humor, allowing audiences to see the absurdity in the characters' greed-driven behaviors. The farcical nature of many events within the play renders a critique of Elizabethan society, inviting scrutiny of class, power, and virtue, ensuring that the spectators are entertained while contemplating the implications of their own values.

In examining these multifaceted characters against the backdrop of Venice's opulent settings, "Volpone" deftly illustrates the masked layers of personal ambition. The rich character development, combined with sharp social commentary, provides a vehicle for audiences to reflect not only on the nature of greed but also on the complex relationships that arise from it, ultimately forging a timeless narrative that remains relevant today.

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## 2. The Intricate Plot: Deception and Greed at Play

At the heart of Ben Jonson's "Volpone" lies an intricate web of deception and greed, where the motivations of the characters are interwoven with themes of avarice and cunning manipulation. The narrative unfolds in Renaissance Venice, a city synonymous with trade and wealth, serving as a perfect backdrop for those consumed by greed. Through the actions and schemes of its characters, Jonson explores the morality of deception and the often destructive nature of greed.

The plot centers around Volpone, a wealthy, childless connoisseur who pretends to be on his deathbed in a desperate bid to amass more wealth before he dies. His illness is a ruse, a calculated masquerade intended to deceive those around him—specifically, a cast of greedy hopefuls who wish to inherit his wealth. This portrayal of masked intent echoes throughout the play, revealing how easily individuals are swayed by their desires. Volpone's name, which means "fox" in Italian, symbolizes his cunning nature; he is a trickster who uses intelligence and deceit to manipulate those around him—particularly his sycophantic servant, Mosca.

Mosca plays a critical role in the ensuing deception. As Volpone's "parasite" or aide, he is essential to the execution of their schemes. Mosca not only helps orchestrate the ruse of Volpone's supposed imminent demise but also

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himself indulges in the greed of the other characters who vie for Volpone's favor and inheritance. This layering of deceit shows how greed propels the actions of each character, creating a domino effect of manipulation. For instance, characters like Corbaccio, an old miser and one of Volpone's potential heirs, are so blinded by their desire for wealth that they unknowingly play into Volpone and Mosca's hands. Corbaccio even goes so far as to disown his son in favor of a legacy left by Volpone, driven solely by his greed.

The other characters seeking their share of Volpone's riches also reveal their own mechanisms of manipulation. Each suitor—Corvino, a younger, jealous merchant; Lady Would-Be, a shameless woman eager to acquire Volpone's fortune; and the elderly Corbaccio—represents a unique facet of greed. In their pursuit, they resort to deceitful tactics of their own, vying for Volpone's favor by offering gifts and services. For instance, Corvino attempts to offer his wife as a sexual conquest for Volpone, revealing the depths to which individuals will sink when driven by greed.

This maniacal pursuit of wealth is underscored by the farcical nature of their schemes and the ironic situations that result from their manipulation. What is particularly noteworthy is how Volpone's seemingly deadpan decoy and Mosca's machinations result in an endless cycle of exploitation. Jonson crafts scenes filled with irony where the characters' greedy intentions blind

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them to the reality of their situations, resulting in absurd and humorous outcomes. For example, Lady Would-Be competes with Corvino and Corbaccio for Volpone's attention, only to discover they are unknowingly part of a grand hoax. Each character, intoxicated by their greed, also falls prey to their own devices, leading to revelations that culminate in personal and societal consequences.

Ultimately, the intricate plot of "Volpone" serves as a commentary on human character and the social dynamics of greed and deception. Each character becomes both a victim and perpetrator of their own ambitions. We watch as their attempts to deceive Volpone only lead to their own undoing, a direct testament to the moral lessons embedded in the narrative. Jonson's work poses critical questions about the ethics of manipulation and the far-reaching impacts of greed, reminding readers that deception often returns to haunt those who employ it.

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### 3. The Role of the Mosca: Manipulation and Irony Unleashed

In Ben Jonson's play "Volpone," the character of Mosca emerges as one of the most pivotal figures, driving the intricate web of manipulation and irony that characterizes the narrative. As Volpone's servant and self-proclaimed 'fly,' Mosca not only facilitates the schemes of his master but also exhibits a profound understanding of human nature and the deviousness that often accompanies greed.

From the onset, Mosca is depicted as cunning and resourceful. His role transcends that of a mere servant; he is an essential architect of the deception that ensnares the other characters. Mosca's craftiness is encapsulated in his ability to present himself as a humble assistant while simultaneously orchestrating elaborate plans that exploit the gullibility of the noblemen, each of whom is driven by avarice. For instance, he convinces Corbaccio, an elderly, wealthy character, that he will inherit Volpone's fortune if he only offers a token gift of gold. This manipulation underlines both Mosca's skills in persuasion and the depths of greed that define the other characters.

Irony plays a significant role throughout Mosca's manipulations. One of the most striking instances is found in his interactions with the various suitors vying for Volpone's favor. Jonson cleverly constructs a scenario where Mosca becomes a master puppeteer, deceiving those he should serve, while

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they, blinded by their desire for wealth, fail to recognize his true nature.

Mosca's line, "I am your servant, sir," is laden with dramatic irony, as he is anything but a humble servant. Instead, he wields absolute control over the situation, proving that appearances can be deceiving, and those who seem subordinate can actually possess more power than their masters.

Moreover, Mosca's actions reveal the broader themes of manipulation and power dynamics within the play. For example, he convinces Sir Politic Would-Be, a foolish character who aspires to be a man of intelligence and sophistication, to step up to a position of perceived authority while simultaneously exposing his own ignorance. Mosca champions the art of deception, suggesting a social commentary on the sycophantic behaviors present in society, particularly among those in pursuit of status and wealth. His manipulation exemplifies how deception can overshadow morality and ethics, as he deftly navigates the treacherous waters of the wealthy elite.

Additionally, Mosca's ironic twists on loyalty and friendship come to the forefront as the play progresses. Despite his loyalty to Volpone, it becomes increasingly apparent that Mosca's ultimate allegiance lies with himself. This selfishness culminates in a critical moment wherein Mosca, having risen in ranks and accrued personal wealth through his schemes, begins to contemplate a betrayal of Volpone himself. In this sense, Mosca embodies the very theme of betrayal that permeates the broader narrative, reminding

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audiences that loyalty can be as fluid as the fortunes that they chase.

As the plot thickens, Mosca's manipulations become more pronounced, leading both the audience and the characters into a labyrinth of deceit. He tactically plays Anna and Bonario against one another, steering their actions to serve his interests while maintaining the veneer of a subordinate. This relentless manipulation creates a dynamic where the audience can appreciate both the ingenuity and the moral bankruptcy of Mosca, who remains unscathed and even revels in the chaos he causes.

Ultimately, Mosca serves as both the engine of the play's machinations and a representation of the dangers that lie in unquestioned ambition and unbridled desire for wealth. He raises essential questions about morality, loyalty, and the human condition, demonstrating how individuals can become not only instruments of their own demise but also agents of a broader ironic commentary on society. As such, Mosca's role is central to understanding Jonson's critique of greed, manipulation, and the irony that often accompanies the pursuit of wealth in a corrupt society.

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## 4. Climactic Scenes: The Unraveling of the Conspiracy

In the climactic scenes of Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, the intricate web of deception and avarice begins to fray, leading to dramatic revelations and a cascade of consequences that underscore the play's critique of greed and moral corruption. The tension reaches its apex when the various schemes of Volpone and his sycophantic assistant, Mosca, start to unravel under the pressures of betrayal, suspicion, and the relentless pursuit of justice.

At the heart of this unraveling lies Volpone's elaborate plan to feign illness and hoax his wealthy would-be heirs into offering him lavish gifts in hopes of inheriting his fortune. The first significant moment of the climax occurs when Voltore, the lawyer, brings a formal suit expressing his claim for Volpone's estate. Voltore's trust in Mosca, who has orchestrated this pretense, becomes his downfall as the layers of lie begin to peel away, exposing the duplicitous nature of all participants in this greed-driven drama.

Notably, the character of Mosca, who thrives on manipulation, starts to overreach. As the plot thickens, Mosca becomes increasingly bold, urging the other suitors—Corbaccio, the old man; Corvino, the cuckolded husband; and the lustful Lady Would-be—to outdo each other in their gifts to Volpone. Each character's desperate attempts to curry favor for their own profit only serve to highlight their moral decay and foreshadow their

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downfall. For instance, the drastic measures Corvino takes—bringing his wife to Volpone’s bed as a gift—illustrate how depravity breeds among the greedy, ultimately leading to their collective ruin rather than fortune.

The scene grows even more intense when the disguised Volpone momentarily abandons his ruse, revealing himself among the assembled sycophants. This public unmasking serves as a pivotal moment where the sheer absurdity of their actions becomes painfully clear. The audience is presented with a vivid tableau of human folly where greed blinds the suitors to their own dignity and the insanity of their actions. Mosca's role as the puppet master falters as his lies push the narrative into chaos; he is no longer the undisputed architect of their fates, but rather someone whose own ambitions are coming back to haunt him.

As the action reaches fever pitch, the characters find themselves entangled not just in desires for wealth but in a tangled web of betrayal. The chaos within the play mirrors the theme of irony that Jonson so deftly employs throughout. For example, Mosca, who manipulated Volpone and his hopeful heirs into a frenzy, now needs to protect himself against the consequences of this deception. As the truth starts to reverberate through the court, the audience witnesses how quickly the tables can turn, transforming the supposed wealthy heirs into the accused. As the machinations of ambition collide with justice, the character of Sir Politick Would-be attempts to

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navigate the crisis with absurd schemes that only highlight the farcical nature of their plight.

Ultimately, the unraveling reaches its climax with the arrival of the authorities, representing the moral order that contrasts with the corruption depicted in the lives of Volpone and Mosca. The apprehension of Volpone and Mosca signals not just an end to their schemes but a moral retribution that echoes through the narrative. The initially untouchable trickster learns that justice can befall even the most clever and cunning. This climactic reveal upholds Jonson's commentary on the inevitable fallouts of greed and deception—suggesting that no matter the cleverness or riches garnered through manipulation, one cannot escape the judgment that follows.

Thus, the climax effectively encapsulates the moral degradation that runs rampant throughout *Volpone*, illustrating through its unraveling conspiracy that the pursuit of greed leads to inevitable ruin. Each character's fate serves to remind the audience of the deeper thematic underpinning of the play—a warning against the seductive allure of wealth and the often comical, yet tragic, consequences of human folly.

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## 5. Conclusion: Moral Lessons and Lasting Impact of Volpone

The conclusion of *Volpone* not only serves to tie together the multifaceted plot and character arcs crafted by Ben Jonson but also conveys profound moral lessons that resonate deeply with audiences and readers alike. One of the most salient themes of the play is the pernicious nature of greed, which serves as both a catalyst for the action and a flaw that leads to the characters' ultimate downfalls. Through the flawed ambitions of Volpone, Mosca, and their dupes, Jonson warns against the destructive power of avarice and the folly of allowing it to dictate one's moral compass.

Volpone, the titular character, epitomizes the extremes of greed, as his insatiable desire for wealth leads him to fabricate an elaborate scheme to deceive those around him. He pretends to be on his deathbed, luring in rich benefactors by feigning incapacity, thus highlighting how greed can distort human relationships and morality. A crucial moral lesson emerges here: the relentless pursuit of wealth can lead to isolation, betrayal, and ultimately, self-destruction. This theme is particularly relevant today, as many individuals become consumed by materialism, often at the expense of personal integrity and relationships.

Another character that underscores the moral teachings of *Volpone* is Mosca, who operates as a cunning parasite. His manipulation of both

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Volpone and the gullible avaricious characters seeks to demonstrate the irony that while he assists Volpone in his deceit, he is ultimately motivated by his desire for power and wealth. The play reveals that even those who consider themselves the architects of their own schemes can become victims of their ambitions—an echo of the universal truth that manipulation often leads to unforeseen consequences. Mosca's character begs the question: how far is one willing to go to achieve their desires, and what moral compromises must they grapple with along the way?

The climactic unmasking of the conspiracies serves as a narrative vehicle for reinforcing these moral lessons. As the plot spirals into chaos—exposed by the very consequences of their greed—Jonson enables the audience to witness the repercussions of deceit and manipulation. The punishments meted out to characters like Volpone and Mosca can be seen as a form of poetic justice, driving home the point that dishonesty and covetousness will inevitably come to light. This serves as a reminder that while individuals may temporarily reap the rewards of deceit, a reckoning will always follow.

Moreover, \*Volpone\* raises queries about social and moral hierarchies, illustrating how the desire for wealth can blur ethical lines. The characters' social statuses often shift in response to their greed and the degree to which they are deceived or deceiving others. Through the intertwined fates of noblemen, merchants, and the cunning servant, Jonson critiques the society

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that cultivates such disparities and incentivizes unethical behavior—an issue that remains prevalent in modern society.

Lastly, the lasting impact of *\*Volpone\** on literature and drama cannot be overstated. It remains a pertinent study in character motivation and morality, continually inviting discussions about ethics, wealth, and human relationships. It serves as a cautionary tale that transcends time, reminding new generations about the dangers of equating success and happiness with material gain. Through its exploration of these timeless themes, Jonson's *\*Volpone\** persists as a significant work, encouraging audiences to critically examine their values and the consequences of their aspirations. The way the play intertwines humor, irony, and moral seriousness makes it a complex and enduring reflection on human nature, reinforcing that greed, manipulation, and deceit offer no true pathway to fulfillment or happiness.

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