

UNIT 5 CHARACTERIZATION AND LANGUAGE

Structure

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the unit is to discuss the characterization and language used in the play.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Characterization, as you know, is an important aspect of plays. As characters contribute to the development of plot and attract the attention of the audience. Dexterous playwrights like Jonson and Shakespeare put in efforts to infuse blood into their characters and made them immortals in the minds of their audiences/readers. To make the characters realistic and lively, suitable language should be used by the playwright.

5.2 CHARACTERIZATION

Ben Jonson based his characterization on the doctrine of humours derived from the Middle Ages. The humours were four bodily fluids - choler, blood, phlegm and melancholy - corresponding in their attributes to the four elements; choler, like fire, was hot and dry; blood, like air, hot and moist; phlegm, like water cold and wet; melancholy, like earth, cold and dry. Just as the balance of the elements in a material body determined its kind, so the balance of the humours in a man determined his psychological type. A disturbance of the balance-appropriate for an individual's temperamentto both physical and psychological disorders, Jonson wrote two comedies, *Every man In His Humour* and *Every Man out of His Humour*, where he relied on the doctrine of humanness as a basis for his characters' personalities. Such an approach constituted a scientific justification for the extreme character types that have always been a staple of comedy.

Jonson stated his position in the opening scene of *Every Man Out of His Humour* and the key lines are worth quoting:

".....so in every human body
The choler, melancholy, phlegm, and blood
By reason that they flow continually
In some one part, and are not continent,
Receive the name of humours. Now this far
It may, by metaphor, apply itself
Unto the general disposition;

As when someone peculiar quality
 Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
 All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
 In than confections, all to run one way,
 This may be truly said to be a humour."

However, humours were not as important in Jonson's later plays as they were in his early plays. In the twelve years between *Every Man In His Humour* (1598) and *The Alchemist* (1610) his emphasis shifted. *The Alchemist*, like *Volpone*'s a few years earlier, was a satirical attack on lust, greed and hypocrisy. In *The Alchemist* "humour" means simply a quirk of character. Surly says "I have a humour/I would not willingly be gulled," which means "I have an odd quirk of character; I do not like to be cheated."

As a dramatic technique, the doctrine of humours has advantages as well as disadvantages. It is a simplifying method. If we compare Jonson and Shakespeare as dramatists, it is at once apparent that Shakespeare's characters are more complex; that their motives are more various than Jonson's; that they are capable of surprising us. In other words, they are more like real people. Jonson's, on the other hand, are like caricatures but not portraits. They are simplified and exaggerated, and just for this reason, they are alienated from our sympathy. We shall explain them by citing an example. It is a serious problem in *The Merchant of Venice* that Shylock is a traditional comic villain who suddenly turns into a deeply informed human being whose desire for revenge, if not pardonable, is at best understandable. This could not happen in *The Alchemist*: we feel little or no sympathy for the characters because we know from the start they are not human; They are both super-human and sub-human: superhuman in the extent and intensity of their passion and sub-human in its singleness and limitation and in the absence of redeeming counter qualities.

Attached to these broad principles of character creation are two devices that can be considered points of craftsmanship. Jonson always supplied a thorough introduction for each character on his first appearance, we come to know Subtle, Face and Dol in the first scene. We also come to know each of the victims as he arrives. After their introduction, characters do not develop during the play. The other device is the language. It is discussed in the following section.

We shall now discuss the important characters:-

A. The Cheats: The three cheats: Subtle, Face and Dol Common operate in different ways and, perhaps out of different motives. When they don the costumes of their roles, they assume the characteristics of the disguises they put on, not just playing the part, but by identifying themselves with the roles.

i) Subtle: He is the central figure in *The Alchemist*. As Herford and Simapson put it, he stands with one foot in the region of the prodigious, with the other planted firmly on the ground of contemporary human nature. It is through him that Ben Jonson has exposed and satirised the cheats and swindlers who flourished abundantly in his age.

Alchemy a pseudo-science - was a widespread social malady in the Elizabethan Age. The jargon of alchemy is the basis of Subtle's metaphors and our echo of how he thinks. Throughout the play he is the complete swindler who derives full satisfaction from his job of swindling. To illustrate: in Act III scene ii, when Face is not particularly concerned about not finding Surly in town - as, after all, there is no money to be made from Surly - Subtle has his mind on higher things than money: "O but to have gulled him/had seen a mastery."

Subtle is most interesting when he plays various roles, changes his role at a moment's notice, and behaves differently with different types. At the opening of the play, we

will find Subtle in ordinary clothes - the only symbol his craft being the vial of acid that he carries. But as soon as Dapper arrives he dons his robes, and he is now engaged in magic. He assumes the dignity that is required; he feigns reluctance to take money. He is equally dignified with Drugger when he reads his forehead or his palm. In his dealings with Mammon, Subtle apparently becomes the completely dedicated alchemist, working with his ambition to achieve the philosopher's stone. He proclaims that impure thoughts will result in the failure of the process. He is worthy of the awe with which Mammon treats him, who, except Surly, can doubt that Subtle is not the holy doctor? When he describes the process, he speaks with dignity and authority as though he has forgotten that no experiments are in progress and no work has been done. And when he explains the rationale of alchemy to Surly, he is the very spirit of sweet reasonableness - a man who is secure in his knowledge and has only pity for the skeptic who does not understand. Finally, when the fake explosion takes place, he succeeds in convincing Mammon that it has occurred due to Mammon's sin. With the puritans, Subtle adopts an entirely different image and is consistent in it: he is irascible, stubborn, opinionated, and impatient.

But he lacks the refinement, culture, and poetry of Jonson's Volpone. In this regard, Herford and Simpson wrote: Volpone yields nothing in knavery to Subtle, but Subtle is despoiled of the explicit poetry which breaks in lurid flashes from Volpone, the Fox; he comes before us, not chanting an exultant morning hymn to his shrined treasure, 'the world's soul and mine', but exchanging volleys of gutter language with his partner i.e. Face. And this sordid imposter of north is at bottom far more intelligible than the Venetian patrician. Volpone, so securely incorporated, by his rank and status, with the very body of the Venetian polity, is yet felt to be the alien he is. Subtle is bound by no such ties of ostensible community to the society. He prays upon, and his operations are far more deeply ingrained - with sham; but, we are made, nonetheless, to see that this creature had a natural history, that his is a growth of the soil, a fungus - growth rooted in the greed and hunger of London. In words of Carylean flavour and pungency, Jonson tells us what he preciously was:

"Taking your meale of steam in from cookes,
Where, like the father of hunger, you did walke
Piteously costive, with your pinche'd hrne-mess
And you complexion, of romane wash,
Stuck full of black, and melan cholique wormes.

And Subtle remains to the end sordid in his making and spending of money."

Subtle, thus, is a powerful representative of the medieval pseudo-alchemists who, - unlike the other alchemists that figured in literature - has some individual attributes. He is shrewd and versatile, perspicacious and persuasive. He is both a type and an individual.

ii) **Face:** In the play Face has not one face but many: he plays varied roles and wears many masks. In the beginning of the play, he is Jeremy, the butler in the house of Lovewit and so he is at the end. He is also a persuasive rogue who lures clients for Subtle by using his skills and shrewdness. It is he who builds up the image of Dr. Subtle as the man who can make the philosopher's stone; as a magician who has dealing with the world of spirits; as an astrologer who can read signs and lines on the palm and foresee the future. He is here, there and everywhere.

He is sharp-witted, glib-tongued and is always ready with some excuse or plan to save a situation. He is right in saying that he should be given a larger share of the projects as he lures in the clients and dupes and takes more pain than Subtle.

Jonson, in the opening scene, throws some light on the part of Face. The play opens with a quarrel between Face and Subtle, and the latter gives a graphic account of the earliest face of Face before he became Jeremy, the butler. In those days Face was

poor, thin, and had the company of ruffians whom he had met in disreputable taverns. As Subtle puts it:

"Thou Vermine, have I not taken thee, out of dung,
So poore, so wretched, when no living thing
Would keepe thee companie, but a spider or horse?
Rais'd thee from broomes, and dust, and watering pots?
Sublim'd thee; and exalted thee, and fix'd thee
I, the third region, call'd our start of grace?
Wrought thee to spirits, to quintessence, with panes
Would twice have won me the philosopher's works
Put thee in words and fashion?
Made the fit
For more than ordinarie fellowships?"

Moreover, Face is a typical rogue who reminds us of Mosca of Volpone. Here is the analysis of Herford and Simpson: "Face is much more nearly related to Mosca than Subtle to Volpone. But he is far from being a replica. The fabric of make believe which he sustains is several degrees more complicated and various; Mosca is a real parasite dependent upon a real patron; Face plays alchemist's drudge, as he plays the Captain in the joint business in which, at least, he is the more masterful partner and has the larger stake. The energetic opening scene, where the two rogues vie in tearing away the last ragged vesture of each other's self-esteem, makes us vividly aware of the natural history of Face no less than that of Subtle; but Jeremy, the enterprising butler, accomplished in all the varieties of back stair pilfering, who compounds with a conjurer for the use of his master's empty house on the terms of equal profits and a bonus horse-race, cock-pit, cards, must have been instantly accepted as a London rascal true to type."

Like Subtle, he responds to the roles he must play. He is Captain Face; he is 'Lungs', the sorcerer's apprentice, and at the end he is Jeremy the butler. As Captain Face he is the rude and over bearing bully. He can fight Subtle in the opening scene of the play, and this role gives him the required fillip to his confidence first and later, success. 'When he is the sorcerer's apprentice, 'Lungs', he is affable and obsequious. As Jeremy he retires from the limelight as soon as his real master, Lovewit arrives. You, as a discerning student, can understand the actor's (i.e. the one who plays this role of a rogue) difficulty in changing personalities while changing roles.

iii) Dol Common: Though Dol is not as active as Subtle or Face, she plays well the part assigned to her. The following are the comments of Herford and Simpson on her role: "If Face is a Mosca of more shifts and better luck; the third member of 'the indenture tripartite' has no equivalent in the earlier play. The female rogue, paramour, and partner of the chief contriver of the harms, was, however, a figure not unknown to Jonson. She is an indispensable member of the 'house' - indispensable to the precious pair whose game she plays and whose dangerous fends she quells, indispensable to the intrigue which she complicates and enriches, indispensable above all to the satire, to the flavour of which her presence adds an ironical pungency not to be otherwise obtained. Even the business of catering for the lust of clients illustrates less drastically the pretension of the alchemist to 'holy living' than do the sordid lotteries and altercations of Subtle and Face for the possession of their common mistress." Even though as the Queen of Fairies, she has no opportunity to improvise, she still stands in the front rank of Jonson's women.

B) The Dupes: The three dupes Mammon, Drugger, and Dapper, have different levels of imagination and are at different levels of evolution.

i) Sir Epicure Mammon: Surly describes Sir Epicure Mammon aptly:

"Heart! Can it be
That a gram sir, a rich, that has no need,

A wise sir, too, at other times, should thus,
With his own oaths, and arguments, make hard means
To gull himself?

Mammon is an imposing figure who stands head and shoulders above the other dupes viz., Dapper, Druggier, and Kastrill. His highly poetic imagination exalts and transmutes even the coarse and the vulgar into something noble and high. His passions are two: craving for money and lust for women. Due to these passions, he becomes a prey to the three cheats in the play, viz. Subtle, Face, and Dol.

Here are the comments of Herford and Simpson on Mammon's opulent imagination! "Sir Epicure Mammon stands apart and aloof. He belongs not merely to a different social rank as it's a different order of imagination. The realism of Jonson's method, elsewhere in this play so pervading and to all appearance so sedulously preserved, here gives way to personage who belongs to the London of Jonson and James I by about as good right - as Marlowe's Faustus to Wittenberg. The sinister romance of Volpone, the hint of poetry in the worship of gold, his god, is resumed and heightened in Sir Epicure's magnificent dreams. Jonson is here for once Marlowesque, but in a kind unborrowed and his own. Mammon is a Faustus of the senses, captivated by the dreams of exploring the utmost possibilities of recondite and requisite sensation, as Faustus by the dream of boundless knowledge and power. The sordid Mephistophiles of the laboratory never fulfils his bond, but Mammon has already taken possession of his kingdom and feasts full at the origins his imagination provides. Volpone's imagination is an instrument of his cunning and cruel brain, employed to discover new ways of explicating and deluding others. Both are magnificent in sin; even their lust is aristocratic and demands a noble prey; but while Volpone almost secures the noblest and chastest lady in Venice, Mammon hails a harlot as a princess, and discovers in the common mistress of Subtle and Face, not only the Austrian lip and the Medicean forehead, but an air,

"That sparkles a diceinitic, beyond an earthy beantie!"

Keeping in view the comments of Herford and Simpson given above, we can analyse his role: we first meet him after he has been a client of the three cheats for sometime and so we can conclude that they have had ample time to convince him. But, what we see is Mammon weaving fantasies - which are above the reach of Face's descriptive abilities - in a language full of poetic colour and imagery. He describes the virtues and the procedures of alchemy with learning and delight. He talks of books written by Adam (in 'High Dutch'); he reinterprets mythology (Jason's fleece) to fit his purposes. The weaving of fantasies never ends while he is on stage. The luxuries he describes are the measure of his character:

'I'll have no bawds.
But fathers and mothers they will do it best,
Best of all others. And my flatters
Shall be the pure and gravest of divines
That I can get for money. My mere fools..
Eloquent burgenes
The few that would give our themselves to be
Cant and town-stallions....
These will I beg, to make me eumuchs of "

Moreover, the famous passage about food is fascinating and enticing for Gourmets. Gluttony, a vice usually comic or distasteful is heightened by rich verse:

"My meat shall all come on, in Indian shells,
Dishes of agate set in gold, and studded
With emeralds, sapphires, hyacinths, and rubies,
The tongues of carps, dormice and Camel's heels,
Boiled in the spirit of sol, and dissolved pearl

Apicius' diet, 'gainst the epilemy:
And I will eat these broth's with spoons of amber,
Headed with diamond and carbunch.

-----I myself will have
The beards of barbell served, instead of salads;
Oiled mushrooms, and the swelling unctuous paps
Of a fat pregnant sow, newly cut off,
Desert with an exquisite and poignant sauce"

This poetry, full of imagery, which is evocative of lust and gluttony, peppered with dreams of luxury beyond belief and showing occasional display of omnipotence based on unlimited wealth describes - though partly - the character of Sir Epicure Mammon.

ii) **Drugger**: He is a simple tradesman with modest ambitions. As he intends to open a new tobacconist's shop, he is in search of a lucky sign; he wants his horoscope read so that he will know whether he will be successful; and he is keen on knowing how to arrange his merchandise and shelves on the best scientific principles, so that the supernatural forces will be favourable to him, so his quest is not for Philosopher's stone, but for lucky signs and days. We will, now, take a look at the analysis of Herford and Simpson:

"In the admirable character of Drugger, on the other hand, Jonson has exemplified the side of alchemy which commended it to the plain, prosaic philistine who wanted to insure his business, or to steal a march upon trade rivals by more 'scientific' methods than theirs. And the scholar's ridicule for pseudo-science is here compounded with the ridicule of a man of shrewd sense for the dabblers in science who try to make learning do the work of mother-wit, and book knowledge to take the place of practice. Drugger, proposing to plan his shop 'by necromancy,' and Kastrill, eager to qualify for the company of the other Angry Boys by learning the rule of duelling suffer equally. They are less innocently amusing creatures than Stephen; but the infusion of gull in their composition, if slighter, is intrinsically of a deeper dye. They are pedants of a bogus craft."

Moreover, had Drugger paid his money for knowing lucky signs and days, he would have succeeded in his business. But, unfortunately for him the team of swindlers lure him with the possibility of marrying a young, beautiful, wealthy widow i.e. Dame Pliant. Thus, the swindlers exploit the superstitious and credulous nature of Drugger to the fullest extent.

iii) **Dapper**: By profession, Dapper is a lawyer's clerk, but he doesn't have commonsense. He is easily gulled to believe that the Queen of Fairies is his aunt and that she is fond of him. He is inflicted with the most humiliating of personal indignities; he swallows anything including gingerbread gags. Of all the gulls, he is the worst.

C. **The Puritans**: In Act III we have discussed how Jonson made use of the happenings in contemporary England for the purpose of writing his plays. We find two such historical happenings, which were responsible for Jonson's depiction of the characters of the Puritans. Those are: i) The puritans of Amsterdam, in order to promote their 'holy cause' of converting more and more people of England to their faith, were in need of huge amounts of money; and they thought that they would get it through the Philosopher's stone. When they approached the alchemists in England for 'the stone' they were gulled by the latter. ii) The puritans wanted the theatres to be closed down as they considered them dens of inequity and disrepute. The playwrights like Jonson and Shakespeare accused them of hypocrisy and satirised their cant hypocrisy and greed in their plays: Jonson's most famous Puritanical hypocrite is Zeal-of-the-Land Busy in *Bartholomew Fair* and Shakespeare's is Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*.

We will take a look at the analysis done by Herford and Simpson of the two puritans: "The puritan dupes, Ananias and Wholesome, mark a new departure. Jonson, as a professed catholic, during the precious ten or eleven years, can never have felt any attraction for the 'saints of the Reformation', but this was his first undisguised exposure of puritan foibles on the pillory of the stage. His attitude to puritanism was indeed not unlike his attitude to alchemy. Both were, for him, social pests, offensive by their hypocritical pretension and their masquerade of hollow and questionable learning. He treats the two puritans, indeed, with a palpably deeper contempt than any of other dupes, or even than the chemist himself. The debates with Subtle are insidiously contrived to exhibit the similarity of their aims and his. The Philosopher's Stone is a more effective and certain way of getting that advantage which the puritans sought through the cumbrous machinery of 'longwinded exercises' and inconvenient dress; and Subtle's praise of it thus naturally takes the form of an ironical recital of the Puritans' practices with which the stone will enable them to dispense. When Ananias introduces himself as 'a faithful Brother', and Subtle affects to understand by this as devotees of alchemy, the two professions at once assume the air of parallel fraternities. And Jonson's erudite humour is thoroughly in its element when he is pitting the two professional jargons against each other as in the second scene of Act III."

i) **Ananias:** He is narrow and stupid, violent and inflexible. He regards Subtle and his language of alchemy as heathen and his stone 'a work of darkness', and does not want to have any truck with the alchemist. He firmly believes that the seared cause of Puritanism should flourish by good means. But, due to his great faith in the integrity and wisdom of his friend, Tribulation Wholesome, he approaches Subtle. But he disagrees with Subtle and says: 'please the profane, to grieve the godly; I may not'. But being a hypocrite, he concludes that 'casting of dollars is concluded lawful.' When Lovewit threatens to beat him with a cudgel, he grows violent and heaps curses on Lovewit's house:

"May dogs defie thy walls
And wasps and hornets breath beneath thy roof"

ii) **Tribulation Wholesome:** He also - like his naïve friend, Ananias - uses expressions peculiar to the puritans. But, unlike Ananias, he does not believe in means and he thinks that means are justified by the ends:

"We must bend into all means,
That may give furtherance to the holy cause".

When Ananias is horrified at the idea of appeasing a swindler like Subtle, for Tribulation,

"The children of perdition are oft-times
Made instruments, even of the greatest works."

Subtle-being a shrewd swindler - understands his client, Tribulation extremely well, Having been able to convince Tribulation about getting money by means of Philosopher's stone, Subtle moves from noble causes to those that appeal to the father's bases uses such as it is a cure for gout or palsy or drops; (for health purpose) it can restore 'A lady that is past the feat of body, though not of mind' (for lewd use) and as an offshoot 'you have made a friend/And all her friends' (again for lewd use) and then, 'To buy the king of France out of his realms, or Spain/out of his Indies.' Having been enticed and entrapped, Tribulation says, "We may be temporal lords ourselves, I take it." Thus, the puritans, Tribulation is an epitome of hypocrisy.

D) **Minor Characters:** Surly, Kastil, Dame Pliant, and Lovewit are minor characters but as they contribute to the development of the plot - especially denouement - their roles become significant.

i) **Surly**: We first meet Surly with Mammon. He suspects the alchemical cant and the elaborate masquerade, regards Subtle as a swindler, calls their house a bawdy house, and says Dol is a prostitute in league with Subtle and Face to cheat people like Mammon. The discerning comments of Herford and Simpson are as follows: "...he is the all-knowing and well-meaning in the play, a type of character who makes frequent appearance in Jonson's plays. If his function in the plot connects him with Asper, his name associates him with Morose, and the one who sees through and exposes imposture is as effectually denuded of heroic quality as Dame Pliant is, of pathos. He is beaten in argument by Subtle. When on the verge of triumphantly establishing his case, carrying out his just vengeance, and reaping his modest reward, he is checkmated by Lovewit's volte-face, and is involved in the discomfiture of the rogues and dupes. Surly corresponds to Bonario in *Volpone*, as Dame Pliant to Celia Bonario's rescue of Celia is a wooden imitation of the chivalry and pathos of romance; the rescue of Dame Pliant by Surly is denuded of romance to the last shred:

" You are
They say, widow, rich; and I am a bachelor,
Worth nought: Your fortunes may make me a man,
As mine have preserved you a woman. Think upon it,
And whether, I have deserv'd you, or no".

Surly at this point appears, like Bonario, to have the game in his hands. Subtle, like *Volpone*, is for the moment dumb-founded, but Face, like *Mosca*, promptly recovers the lost ground, and enlists the whole band of dupes against the one shrewd man. Druggier and Dapper testify against him, and he is forced to go away, humbled and disgraced by the support - Lovewit extends to Face. He is a shrewd man and disguised as a Spanish Don he gets inside knowledge of goings on in the house, but all his efforts are frustrated because Lovewit reverses the situation.

ii) **Kastril**: He is the brother of Dame Pliant and a heir to three thousand pounds a year who has come to town recently. He still retains the mannerisms and coarseness of a village:

"Ass, my suster,
Go kuss him, as the cunning man would have you;
I'll - thrust a pin in your buttocks else"

Even a cursory reader can notice the way he mispronounces 'sister' and 'kiss' and his coarse language. Jonson based his characters on 'humours' in *Every Man in His Humour*, Kastril's character in *The Alchemist* was also based on a humour called 'Choler'. In the play, he is referred to as 'the angry boy'. He has come to town to live by his wits and to learn the art of duelling. To a modern reader like you the idea of learning the art of duelling may look ludicrous, but - Kastril has some like-minded friends in Shakespeare's plays: In *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio talks about Tybalt, who adheres to the rigid etiquette of the duel; one in *As You Like it*, Touchstone describes the art of insult - the steps by which a duel is developed. Kastril, thus, is young, brash, purse-proud, and ill-mannered.

iii) **Dame Pliant**: She is a young, beautiful, and wealthy widow who does not have any individuality. She is offered as a bait to Surly; she is annoyed with Surly as he did not act in time for marrying her. She is meant to be a prize and is bestowed on Lovewit at the end of the play. We will take a look at the analysis done by Herford and Simpson: "Little need be said of the three characters who in various degrees and ways contribute to bring about the denouement, and who, though at one point or other victims of the imposture, yet stand apart from the main body of the alchemist's dupes. Dame Pliant is in every sense the least important. In his desire to make her character expressive of her name, Jonson, has really made her of 'no character at all'. Even Pope, however, would not have regarded her as like 'most women'; she is little more than a passion, and serviceable attraction - a ball whose

various movements serve exhibit the quality of the players and mark the progress of the game - projected by the Angry Boy, saved by Surly, struggled for by Surly and Face, and finally secured by Lovewit. It is in this last stage of her fortunes that she at length counts decisively in the plot, when her person and her money serve to buy off the *Nemesis* which threatens the chief rogue and brings about one of these amazing reversal with which Jonson was somewhat too fond of baffling the expectations of his audiences. Her part in the plot somewhat resembles that of Celia; but Jonson has this time taken care that as a character in a comedy, she should not excite any tragic pity. Unfortunately, in denuding her of this improper kind of interest he has made her too unsubstantial to be even matter for mirth."

iv) **Lovewit** He arrives late - i.e. in the last act of the play and describes himself in a single sentence. "I love a teeming wit as I love my nourishment." Like other landlords in London, Lovewit leaves his home in the care of his servant Jeremy, when the plague breaks out. On his unexpected return, he comes to know that his house has been misused by Jeremy in the guise of Face. He loves his servant for his 'teeming wit' and readily forgives him in return for a matrimonial alliance with Dame Pliant. The analysis of Herford and Simpson is pertinent: "Righteous Nemesis at the hands of an indignant mob allied with offended justice appears to impend, too secure for comedy. It is Lovewit, who at a stroke, reverses the situation. Jonson was bent upon avoiding the lofty retribution air by which in *Volpone* he had established his abhorrence of violence; and he has contrived the denouement with great skill for this end. Lovewit is as far as possible from resembling the ideal vindicator of virtue. He comes with an authoritative air; but strikes a bargain with the principal culprit - Face - for the lion's share of the spoils. He effects a revolution in the plot in virtue merely of a temper too easy and humorous, seriously to resent wrongs even when they concern himself, and ready for a jest to overlook a multitude of sins. 'I love a teeming wit, as I love my nourishment,' he declares and indeed his only concern, when he hears of the mysterious goings on in his house, is as to the 'nature of the device which his witty knave may have contrived.' Jonson has placed the jest in the hands of a joy boy'. Not hide-bound, whose easy geniality proves a ready solvent for menacing tragic harms. The witty trickster comes off unscathed, while the fools and dupes suffer." Lovewit - whose name is suggestive of love for wit and witty situations-brings out a merry denouement befitting for a comedy.

The aforementioned discussions of characters is sufficient to make you understand that with *The Alchemist* we are not concerned with 'characters' at the level of psychological realism that often we are in Shakespeare's plays. Jonson's characters are types, exemplifications of particular attitudes and capacities that are found in society, but rarely found in the isolated and purified form in which he presents them. His process is what the Elizabethans might have called an anatomy - meaning a dissection, a careful laying-out of the parts of a body, to show their essential nature and function, and their interrelations. *The Alchemist* is an anatomy of the 'humour' of greed, and it demonstrates with beautiful simplicity an obvious truth that is often forgotten; if everybody cheats, everybody will be cheated. This is not to say that Jonson is not interested in human nature, and that he does not know a great deal about it. Moreover we don't complain of a newspaper's cartoon that it is a worse picture of a politician than the news photo on the front page. The exaggerations may amuse and delight us in the caricature at the same time as they reveal things not apparent in the photo. Jonson's characterisation has the ruthless energy and economy of the best kind of caricature.

5.3 LANGUAGE

Over a period of time the Elizabethan playwrights developed a kind of dramatic verse which reached its pinnacle by the time *The Alchemist* was written. The entire area of development can be traced in Shakespeare's plays from his earliest to the latest.

Elizabethan and Jacobean verse is usually called 'blank verse' (please note that it is not 'free verse') A ten-syllable line 'iambic pentameter' is the basic. The line has five feet; each consisting of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables. By the time *The Alchemist* was written, the lines were irregular in stress, frequently contained more or fewer than ten syllables. They were frequently run on; that is, no natural pause in meaning occurred at the end of the line. These irregularities made for a more flexible verse. The lines did not cease to be poetry; the audience had a built in expectation, due to long habit, of the rhythmic line, and irregularity added a feeling of variety. At one extreme, a passage could be more mundane, less lofty, prosaic without being prose, while at the other end, passages become more poetic, flowery, musical without perhaps ever quite being poetry.

Further Jonson's dramatic verse is functional; it is the rhetorical means to the end of his art. *The Alchemist* is in blank verse except for Surly's phrases of Spanish, the concluding lines of the play - where rhyme is used unobtrusively and parts of the two scenes where Dapper is prepared for an then meets the Fairy Queen. Here the mock-ritual is emphasized by the addition of rhyme. The use of the one form of verse for all the varieties of idiom, mood, and social status in the play insists on its essential unity, but within this common form Jonson is capable of very varied effects. He can range from the coarse insults of the opening quarrel to the grandiose fantasies of Mammon. The language and the forms of syntax it takes are always appropriate to character and situation and the blank verse has great variety and rhythmic vitality.

I am a young beginner, and am building
Of a new shop, and't like your worship; just,
At corner of a street. (Here's the plot on't).
And I would know, by art, sir, of your worship,
Which way I should make my door, by necromancy,
And, where my shelves. And, which should be for boxes.
And, which for pots. I would be glad to thrive, sir.
And, I was wish'd to your worship by a gentleman,
One Captain Face, that says you know men's planets,
And thie good angels, and their bad. (I.III.7-16)

In this passage Drugger's stammering nervousness, his clumsy repetitions, and his low and monosyllabic vocabulary dislocate the verse until it scarcely exists. Only two of the lines above have ten syllables: they are consecutive, and linked by a violent enjambement which virtually imposes a different division on the speaker: 'just, /At corner of a street.'

Tribulation, the practised preacher, has by contrast an unctuous fluency:

The children of perdition are, oft-times,
Made instruments even of the greatest works.
Besides, we should give somewhat to man's nature,
The place he lives in, still about the fire,
And fume of metals, that intoxicate
The brain of man, and make him prone to passion.
Where have you greater atheists than your cooks?
Or more profane or choleric than your glass-men?
More antichristian, than your bell-founders?
(III.i.15-23)

This is much more regular and the units of syntax tend to coincide with the divisions of the verse. While he can carry a sentence over two or three lines of verse Tribulation never goes far before coming firmly to rest on a metrical and syntactic pause. The repeated rhetorical questions (a line apiece) indicate the pulpit orator as clearly as phrases like 'children of perdition', 'instruments ...of the greatest works', or 'more profane'. Mammon's syntax, like his range of allusion, is much more

adventurous. His clauses spring from one another and proliferate in apposition as his fantasy moves (by association) to wilder visions:

I am pleas'd the glory of her sex should know,
This nook, here, of the Friars, is no climate
For her, to live obscurely in, to learn
Physic, and surgery, for the Constable's wife
Of some odd hundred in Esses; but come forth,
And taste the air of palaces; eat, drink
The toils of emp'rics, and their boasted practice;
Tincture of pearl, and coral, gold, and amber;
Be seen at feasts; and triumphs; have it ask'd,
What miracle she is? Set all the eyes
Of court a-fire, like a burning-glass,
And work 'em into cinders; when the jewels
Of twenty states adorn thee, and the light
Strikes out the stars; that, when they name is mention'd,
Queens may look pale: and, we but showing our love,
Nero's Poppaea may be lost in story!

(iv.i.130-45)

The natural rhythm of the voice speaking these lines does not destroy the pattern of recurrence in the metre, as so nearly happens in Druggier's lines. Nor, as with *Tribulation*, does it reinforce it, offering only crude and simple variations. Rather it counterpoints and harmonizes to produce a rich and exciting rhythmic texture. The sixteen lines are all one sentence and can scarcely be divided: the energy of Mammon's vision carries through and unifies the almost Miltonically relaxed syntax. The syntax itself is like a dream or vision, where things shift into each other and change their form.

The syntax of Subtle's exposition of alchemy (ii.iii.142 ff.) is, like the verse, regular, logical, and orderly. As with *Tribulation's* speech, the verse - and sense-units tend to coincide, but here the linguistic structures are those of reasoned argument, not emotional exhortation. What Subtle is saying is non-sense, for the language of alchemy defines itself, and has no reference, for all its sonority and glamour, to the real world. But the forms the language takes are those of ordered rational discourse, of logical, learned, unimpassioned disputation. This tone is emphasized by the regular but not over-emphatic forward march of the verse. Here in the verse-form and the syntax is a parallel to the concern with disguise and the playing of parts noticed before (see p.xxiii). Subtle disguises his language in the forms of learning and reason, and therein demonstrates his subtlety. Surly cannot dispute with him on these terms, for to do so would be to move into Subtle's self-defining world and argue upon his premises. Accordingly he launches into a catalogue, a violent piling-up of terms (182-98) that

Would burst a man to name

And almost bursts the actor in speaking. The continued appearance of sweet reason in Subtle's response to this irascible and (in form) irrational outburst leaves Surly no reply. In the scene which follows, where Subtle has to deal with the much less sophisticated Ananias, his tone is more authoritative, his rhythm much more staccato. It is, as he says,

In a new tune, new gesture, but old language.
(II.iv.27)

The pattern of the verse is maintained not only in the longer set speeches. It persists in the most rapid exchanges of dialogue:

Sub. Cheater.
 Face. Bawd.
 Sub. Cow-herd.
 Face. Conjuror.
 Sub. Cutpurse.
 Face. Witch.
 Doll. Omel
We are ruin'd! Lost! (i.i.106-8)

Jonson admirably manages effects of interruption and rapid changes of gear:

Sub. The divine secret, that doth fly in clouds,
 From east to west; and whose tradition
 Is not from men, but spirits.

Ana. I hate traditions:

I do not trust them -

Tri. Peace.
 Ana. They are Popish, all.
 I will not peace. I will not-

Tri. Ananias.
 Ana. Please the profane, to grieve the godly: I may not.
 Sub. Well, Ananias, thou shalt overcome.
(III.ii.104-10)

Tribulation's 'Peace' fits into the caesura of Ananias's line. His 'Ananias' cuts a line short and completes it, but Ananias's next line is long and he need hardly pause in his delivery (which must be rapid) for Tribulation's interruption. Subtle's much slower line would come after a marked pause, leaving 'I may not' hanging in an embarrassing silence. Mammon and on occasion other characters) interrupts himself:

My baths, like pits
 To fall into: from whence, we will come forth,
 And roll us dry in gossamer and roses.
 (Is it arriv'd at ruby?) - Where I spy
 A wealthy citizen,...

(II.ii.50-4)

A most ingenious verse effect is the passage at IV.V.25-32, where against the background of Doll's incantory ravings 'out of Broughton', Face and Mammon have an agitated colloquy about what is to be done.

Jonson's dramatic verse is less easily quotable than Shakespeare's. Set pieces do not detach themselves so readily from context. It is exactly Jonson's 'art', in his sense of the term, the art that he said Shakespeare wanted, that makes this so. His dramatic verse has great range and energy but it is always ordered and controlled by a considered dramatic context, and this is both its strength and its limitation.

5.4 THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BEN JONSON

Jonson was a celebrity in his own day. Taking the English stage by storm with *Every Man in His Humour* he followed it up with the comical satire, *Every Man out of His Humour*, a theatrical success accompanied by considerable controversy. His characters were so life-like that to clear himself of the charge of attacking particular persons, he had to declare his purpose, viz., portraying follies, not individuals. The War of the Theatres, and the mature comedies brought his avowed critical principles so much to the fore that it was easier to label his artistry as classical, realistic, etc.,

rather than take into account its growth and development. Thus, the dynamism of his dramaturgy came to be ignored. Among the playwrights of his age, Jonson was alone in viewing plays as literature. The significance of the publication of Jonson's *Works* in 1616 has been pointed out in Unit-1. Jonson was in the habit of revising a play for publication and in the process expanded the text considerably. The acting versions of the play, on the other hand, reveal several cuts in the long speeches and expository passages. Jonson seems to have followed the Renaissance principle of 'copia' and elaborated so that a point is heavily underlined. Combined with this is his love of technical terminology of diverse kinds, which he was fond of displaying both for purposes of accuracy or realism and to impress others with his learning.

Milton was perhaps the first to pair Jonson and Shakespeare, and the familiar lines from "L'Allegro," as Michael Jaimieson explains, contain "a graceful compliment to Ben Jonson," which is missed by many modern readers. This pairing was continued by Dryden as well. The course of Jonson Criticism came to present an irony of sorts a little later. In the eighteenth century Jonson who praised Shakespeare as "not of an age," was declared not "a universal genius, but of his time only." In 1753 an enthusiastic champion of Shakespeare, Robert Shiells, quietly added his own comments into an edition of *Conversations*: As Shiells' 's interpolations were not detected till the end of the century, his unfavourable comparisons of Jonson to Shakespeare was regarded as the testimony of one who knew the poet in the flesh. A few years earlier, Macklin, a Shakespearean actor brought out a letter supposedly referring to a pamphlet published in the last days of Jonson's career. Barish cites a passage to establish the malicious forgery:

"It would greatly exceed the limits of your paper to set down all the *contempts* and *invectives* which were uttered and written by Ben ... as unanswerable and shaming evidences to prove his ill-nature and *ingratitude* to Shakespeare, who first introduced him to the theatre and fame [modernised spelling]."

The critical reception of Jonson is coloured by misconceptions about Jonson's views on Shakespeare's art. The 1616 Folio edition of Jonson's *Works* probably paved the way for the publication of the First Folio of Shakespeare for which Jonson wrote the commemorative poem, "To the memory of my beloved, The Author, Mr. William Shakespeare". Jonson's tribute reaches out to the quintessential Shakespeare, and his very phrases have been assimilated into all estimates of the bard: Soul of the age! The applause! Delight! The wonder of our stage! ...

He was not of an age, but for all time! ... My gentle Shakespeare...

But what has stuck in the public mind is the oblique criticism of Shakespeare incidental to the defence of Jonson's own conception of comedy. References to Pericles. 'Tales, Tempests and such drolleries' and his general condemnation of the violation of the Unities, considered along with Jonson's remark cited by William Drummond in the course of conversation. "That Shakespeare wanted Art" had initiated unfavourable comments on Jonson, the man, and the dramatist.

As a kind of literary eminence, Jonson presided over the 'tribe of Ben' which used to assemble at the Devil's tavern. This circle included Robert Herrick and other "poetic sons". The tribute to Jonson's memory, *Jonsonus Virbius* (1638), in spite of the hyperboles, does reveal, remarks D.H.Craig, "something like an alternative literary history, an English Renaissance without Shakespeare. According to the elegists, it is Jonson who has brought English culture, and the English language from obscurity and crudity to one that can match the culture of the ancients". The motivation behind this tirade remains to a large extent a mystery. It was a half-apologetic Edmund Malone who cleared Jonson's name but diffidently. The final cleansing of the blot on Jonson was chiefly the work of William Gifford much later. An unfavourable comparison of Jonson, the artist, with Shakespeare became in the words of Barish, "

a conditioned reflex," and Gifford "silenced the chorus of detraction against Jonson as man."

The eighteenth century presents a paradox, while Jonson the man was reviled, his plays enjoyed immense popularity. A feverish contest seems to have run its course "the 18th century critics – those who were involved – competed with each other in ascribing ignoble motives to Jonson." scenes were invented purporting to sketch Jonson's being "forced to acknowledge Shakespeare's superiority." Forgeries were resorted to so that Jonson could be presented as a plagiarist and even a blackmailer. The malicious forgeries of Robert Shiells and the fabrications of Macklin are well known instances. It was the actor David Garrick, who in the role of Drugger, secured for *The Alchemist* a special place in English stage history.

Jonson's self-image did not fit in with the Romantic conception of the artist, a dreamer; in temperament and artistic aim he was the opposite of Shelly and Keats. Hazlitt, for one, deplored what he perceived to be a defect in Jonson, the inability to roam imaginatively, being just a grub. Much stress was laid on artifice. As Barish notes, "To praise Jonson, one had to turn him into a schoolmaster, or an exhibitionist of learning, or a purveyor of exoticism".

The tone of criticism changed somewhat in the Victorian era. Jonson's lyrics were singled out for renewed appreciation, thus accounting for the inclusion of a few pieces in that celebrated anthology, Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. T.E.Hulme paved the way for an appreciation of classicism and romanticism in his famous essay, and indirectly for a critical re-orientation more responsive to Jonson's kind of art. It was, however, T.S.Eliot with whom there was a turning of the tide. His identification of Jonson's artistry as a matter of overall design rather than of single passages, and his emphasis on Jonson's relevance to the modern times brought about a revival of interest in Jonson. Edmund Wilson, in spite of his general censure of Jonson, isolates *The Alchemist* for special praise. A number of twentieth century critics carried forward the new enthusiasm for Jonson's art and some of them were cited in Unit-III.

The researches of Herford and Simpson over a quarter of a century bore fruit in the massive edition of Jonson's *Works* in ten volumes (1925-52). Most critical studies and editions have been referred to in the preceding Units and in the Bibliography. A review of Jonson scholarship of the 1980's is provided by Daryl W.Palmer. Besides examining the biographies by Rosalind Miles and David Riggs, he summarises the findings of seven studies of Jonson's oeuvre and of nine critical approaches to isolated aspects. The final word on this survey is furnished by D. H.Craig: "In a special sense then, Jonson is irreparable from his critical heritage; the student of his works in the late twentieth century must still begin with questions which he himself raised and which his contemporaries and his immediate posterity were compelled to answer."

5.5. QUESTIONS

1. Write a long note on the swindlers: Subtle, Face, and Dol Common
2. Write a long note on the dupes: Mammon, Drugger, and Dapper
3. Write a short note on the female figures in the play.
4. Discuss the appropriateness of the names given to the characters in the play.
5. Show how language reflects the social standing, the temperament, or the intellectual background of various characters.
6. "The Alchemist is a satire on human follies and foibles." Discuss.

5.6 ANNOTATION PASSAGES

Annotate the following passages with reference to context.

- i) Sure he has got
Some bawdy pictures, to call all this ging;
The friar and the nun; or the new motion
Of the knight's curser covering the parson's mare;
The boy of six year old, with the great thing;
Or 't may be he has the fleas the run at tilt
Upon a table, or some dog to dance?
- ii) But that 'tis yet not deep I' the afternoon,
I should believe my neighbours had seen double
Through the blackpot, and made these apparitions!
For on my faith to your worship, for these three weeks
And upwards, the door has not been opened.
- iii) Sir, you were wont to affect mirth and wit—
But here's no place to talk on't I' the street.
Give me but leave to make the best of my fortune,
And only pardon me th' abuse of your house:
- iv) But the sweet face of your hath turned the tide,
And made it flow with joy, that ebb'd of love.
Arise, and touch our velvet gown.
- v) To leave him three or four hundred chests of treasure,
And some twelve thousand acres of Fairyland,
If he game well and comely, with good gamesters.
- vi) She must by any means address some present
To the cunning man; make him amends for wronging
His art with her suspicion; send a ring,
Or chain of pearl; she will be tortured else
Extremely in her sleep, say, and ha' strange things
Come to her. Wilt thou?
- vii) Good faith, now she does blame y' extremely, and says
You swore, and told her you had ta'en the pains,
To dye your beard, and umber o'er your face,
Borrowed a suit and ruff, all for her love;
And then did nothing. What an oversight,
And want of putting forward, sir, was this!
Well fare an old harquebusier, yet,
Could prime his powder, and give fire, hit,
All in a twinkling.
- viii) That master
That had received such happiness by a servant,
In such a widow, and with so much wealth,
Were very ungrateful if he would not be
A little indulgent to that servant's wit,
And help his fortune, though with some small strain.