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# THE IMPORTANCE OF ALCHEMY AS A THEME: AN ANALYSIS OF “*THE ALCHEMIST*” BY BEN JOHNSON

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## Abstract

Although the real theme of the Alchemist may be described as avarice and lust, alchemy figures so largely and prominently in the play that it deserves the first and foremost consideration. The very title shows the importance of alchemy in the scheme of the play. Considerable space has been devoted by the author in this play to a discussion of the theory of alchemy and the vast potentialities of this pseudo-science. The objective of this paper is to analyze how the actions and the characters of the play portray alchemy as the main theme of the play. Various characters and their actions are analyzed to conclude that “The Alchemist” is a play with a wide scope and It would be unfair to limit its theme to avarice and lust. Alchemy as one of the themes cannot just be set aside on the plea that it is incidental.

**Keywords:** The Alchemist, Ben Johnson, theme of alchemy, avarice and lust, etc.

## Introduction

The real theme of the play is usually considered “avarice and lust,” but alchemy as a theme is so prominent that it deserves to be given the status of the most important theme. Even the title of the play shows alchemy as a theme in the plot and the scheme of the play. Considerable space has been devoted by Johnson in “The Alchemist” to a discussion of the theory of alchemy and the vast potentialities of this pseudo-science (Russell, 1929). In the concluding speech of Act I, Subtle tells Dol that Mammon is expecting to receive the philosopher’s stone from him on this day and that the knight has been entertaining great hopes of working wonders with the stone.

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Mammon, according to Subtle, is already planning to cure people of all their diseases through the philosopher's stone and that; furthermore, he wishes to turn everything in the world to gold. When Mammon himself appears before audience and readers at the beginning of Act II, he tells his friend Surly that, in entering Subtle's establishment, they are setting foot on the shore of the new world; and he compares Subtle's establishment to King Solomon's gold mines, because from this establishment he will receive the "philosopher's stone," a stone that can turn metal into gold. He tells Surly that he has a plan to convert all metal in his house into gold after obtaining that stone from Subtle (Donaldson, 1997).

In fact, Mammon is apprehensive lest he should fail to collect a sufficient quantity of inferior metals to be converted into gold. He links the various metals with heavenly bodies, associating copper with Venus, silver with the Moon, and gold with the Sun. One part of the great medicine, elixir, projected on a hundred parts of mercury, or copper, would turn the inferior metal into a hundred parts of gold, or even into a thousand parts of gold. He then refers to other advantages of the philosopher's stone or the great medicine. This magnificent stone can "confer honor, love, respect, long life, safety, valor, and victory" upon anyone; and in twenty-eight days it can transform an old man of eighty into a child.<sup>2</sup> By taking just a grain of this medicine once a week, a man can become as strong and stout as Mars and can beget sons and daughters as powerful as giants. Furthermore, the philosopher's stone has the power to combat all infections and cure all diseases (Russell, 1929). A month-long injury can be healed in a day; a year-long injury can be healed in twelve days, and an injury of the longest imaginable standing can be healed in a month by means of this elixir. In three months, says Mammon, the philosopher's stone can drive out the plague from all over the country.

When Surly disputes Mammon's claim about the philosopher's stone, Mammon cites the various ancient myths, arguing that all these ancient stories are the allegorical accounts of the wonders which the philosopher's stone can perform. Just then Face comes and informs Mammon that the philosopher's stone will soon be ready because the red ferment has done its office and that Mammon should be ready for the projection which will take place in about three hours' time. On hearing this, Mammon turns to Surly and says: "Be rich. This day thou shalt have ingots" (Donaldson, 1997). When Subtle makes his appearance, he warns Mammon not to be covetous. He then urges Mammon not to make a worldly use of the philosopher's stone but to use it for noble purposes and for the benefit of the poor and the needy. The philosopher's stone, says Subtle, should be put to pious uses and should be employed in the service of "dear charity" (Donaldson, 1997).

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<sup>2</sup> meaning that the philosopher's stone can rejuvenate an aged man.



Here Subtle is referring to the religious aspect of alchemy. It had long been believed that, if the matter could be transformed into something more precious such as gold, this must be by divine ordination and that such a great and powerful blessing as the making of gold must be so by God's will. Therefore, only that person, who has God's favor, could "hope to lay hands on the secret," and such a man must be in a perpetual state of grace. That is why Mammon afterward praises the moral character of Subtle, saying that Subtle is a holy man who mostly prays and fasts.

As Surly remains skeptical, Subtle propounds the theory of alchemy, saying that gold did not originally exist as gold in the depths of the earth but that it had developed from the prime matter which had originally existed. The prime matter had developed into gold over endless ages of time, passing through many intermediate stages. The laboratory method of producing gold is a rapid one, and the alchemical process which Subtle had started is about to be completed (Donaldson, 1997).

When Ananias appears on the scene and describes the technical terms used by Subtle as heathen language, Subtle loses his temper and proceeds to put a series of questions to his assistant, Face, in order to convince Ananias that the language being used in these questions and in the answers given by Face is not heathen but scientific and proves the authenticity of the alchemical process (Russell, 1929).

In this way, the whole plot is constructed on the belief among the people of that time that alchemy was true science. It was also believed by general people that Subtle was "a genuine alchemist because he had set up an establishment to produce and supply the philosopher's stone to his clients"(Donaldson, 1997). Therefore it can be said that the belief in alchemy controls the entire action of *The Alchemist*.

### **A Play about Possession**

Alchemy works "as a vehicle in this play while the real center of interest lies elsewhere"(Foley, 1949). Ben Jonson has used "the specific subject of alchemy as the means to another end." Johnson proves to be a social critic whose business was "to strip the ragged follies naked as at their birth" (Russell, 1929). In almost every play, Jonson attacked the follies of the time holding up the mirror to truth and making people see their corruption in all its nakedness. He does this so effectively in *Volpone*, where a *magnifico* of Venice, pretending that he is as ill as to be on the point of death, can be seen. Around him come men and women who hope to inherit his wealth (Ouellette, 2005). Greedy as they are, they yet present him with gold and with ornaments because they think that these presents "would prove a good investment for them." More than this, a father is "ready to disinherit his son" and a jealous husband is ready "to prostitute his wife rather than lose the inheritance" which they hope to receive from that dying man. Still more savage is "the exposure of a lawyer" by the name of Voltore (Craig, 1999; Sherman, n. d.).



All these avaricious characters possess wealth as sickmen possess fevers. Indeed, it is wealth that possesses these men, and it is not they who possess wealth. "The Alchemist" also dramatizes this kind of possession. Subtle's various clients look upon Lovewit's house as a gold mine. An example of this may be that characters like Dapper, Mammon, Drugger, and Tribulation are different by nature but in fact are common when it comes to their folly and greed. Therefore all those who" visit Lovewit's house are possessed by the single idea of gain, and this is their humor" (Foley, 1949).

### *Avarice, The Real Theme of the Play*

Dapper, Mammon, Drugger, and Tribulation, all are dominated by avarice and greed and they accept alchemy as genuine science. They think that alchemy can produce "the philosopher's stone which would make all of them wealthy." Dapper who is a clerk with a lawyer is ready to quit his job and become a whole-time gambler to acquire wealth as his sole aim. He wants a spirit to help him in winning money at horse-races, cards, and dice parties. He is told that he is "a nephew of the Queen of Fairies" who would surely make him rich. He obeys the instructions given to him by Subtle with regard to the sharpening of his senses by the use of vinegar. He is robbed of every little thing that he carries on his person and is subjected to a lot of humiliation, all of which he accepts gladly in the hope that the Queen of Fairies would favor him with her blessings and make him rich(Arnold, 1965).

Drugger, a tobacconist, wants "help from the alchemist for the construction of his shop and the arrangement of its shelves." Moreover, he is desirous to get "a sign of good luck," a "thriving sign" and he is provided with the one. He wants that Subtle should "strike out unlucky days from the calendar." In this way, he would not do any business on the days which are declared unlucky for him. Drugger also wants to get married to Dame Pliant, a widow. This is so because he still is not satisfied with all this. He receives an assurance in this respect also(Sherman, n. d.; (Dykeman, 1988).

Mammon's ambition is to become rich equal to King Solomon. By means of the wealth which he hopes to acquire through the philosopher's stone, he would lead a life of great luxury. He will lie on soft beds, and he would eat the most delicious and costliest foods. He really shows himself to be an epicure by the manner in which he gives a catalog of the rare foods which he would eat. A desire for gold has become an obsession with him (Russell, 1929).In fact, an obsessive craving for gold and money is common to all these clients. Nor are the Anabaptists free from this "taint of avarice." They claim to be holy men, but in fact, they are as worldly-minded and as greedy as Subtle's other clients. In order to acquire riches, the Anabaptists are ready to go to any extent. They are even ready to accept counterfeit dollars from Subtle, and they agree with Subtle that the casting of dollars is to be distinguished from the



coining of dollars. The coining of dollars may be unlawful but the casting of dollars is quite lawful (Gurr, 1996; Craig, 1999).

In this connection, these conspirators symbolize greed and avarice. Their desire for money justifies their fraudulent activities and their actions throughout the play. The disguises they wear, the lies they tell, the frauds they practice, the false assurances which they offer, and the tricks which they play upon various persons, (Arnold, 1965) all these have their origin in their longing for money. The actions of the play are a series of episodes revolving around the clients of the alchemist (Gurr, 1996; Craig, 1999). They ask for riches, are assured of riches, and are robbed of whatever riches they already have. Thus wealth and their longing for the wealth dominates the play.

Through these people greedy for wealth, Jonson depicts society and civilization of that time. As *Subtle* casts his spell by his magic word "projection" so the capitalists of Jacobean England, the projectors of the new economic order, had begun at that time to assume the powers of the social magicians (Gurr, 1996; Sherman, n. d.). Capitalism had lured people with exciting prospects of private enterprise. There was a thrust of competition, which is inevitable in all spheres of power, but it was particularly fierce in London during the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (Gurr, 1996; Keenan, 2014). Earlier for centuries, the basis of power had been "the land and rank" but later it became money (Gurr, 1996; Ouellette, 2005). The play was written at the time when London had individuals making money to cut a figure and to obtain influence (Keenan, 2014). Jonson was "the great chronicler of this development" as is obvious from his other plays also.

### ***Lust as a Theme***

The character of Mammon presents lust as one of the themes of the play. He wants to become fabulously rich and his lust is immense as he wants a harem of wives, mistresses, and concubines like the ancient King Solomon (Keenan, 2014). He would have his bed-chamber filled with erotic pictures of the kind which the Roman emperor Tiberius had taken away from the town of Elephanits. He would have mirrors in his room so that he might be able to see the reflection of the naked bodies of his mistresses. His rooms would be full of the mists of perfume (Dykeman, 1988). Wherever he finds that there is a wealthy citizen or a rich lawyer having a pure and beautiful wife, he would send a thousand pounds to that man, asking him to provide his wife to him for his sexual pleasure. He would engage no pimps because the fathers and mothers of the women desired by him would themselves act as his pimps (Ouellette, 2005). With the help of the philosopher's stone, he would become as strong and tough as Hercules and would be able to perform sexual intercourse with fifty women during one night only.



Such are the visions of sexual gratification that Mammon entertains. Soon afterward, when he sees Dol, he feels simply charmed by her and urges Face to provide that woman to him for his sexual pleasure (Malin, 1992; Lake & Questier, 2002). Dol is then introduced to him and he becomes overwhelmed by his lustful desire for her. He pays glowing tributes to her beauty and grace. He finds that her features and countenance resemble those members of the highest families, and that, all in all, she is a rare kind of woman. Indeed, he thinks himself lucky to have been provided with an opportunity to have sexual intercourse with this woman who is in reality just a prostitute (Arnold, 1965). Therefore he is completely blinded by his lust.

### *Credulity; Gullibility; Vanity*

The Alchemist is a play with a wide scope. It would be unfair to limit its theme to avarice and lust. Alchemy has already been pointed out as another theme which cannot just be set aside on the plea that it is incidental. Furthermore, this play gives a general insight into humans' nature as it is fundamentally concerned with the nature of humans. All those who come to Subtle are credulous by nature as they only desire wealth and to achieve the wealth they are ready to believe anything (Craig, 1999; Ouellette, 2005). Dapper even believes that the Queen of Fairies is present before him and is speaking to him. Druggier believes that he would soon be married to the widow, Dame Pliant, when in actual fact Face himself is planning to marry her and when, in the long run, she is married to Lovewit. The Anabaptists readily believe that Subtle is capable of providing Dutch dollars to them without limit. They believe that when they would get the philosopher's stone, they would not only get wealth but also influence and prestige in their community. This shows that credulity and gullibility are also important themes of this play (Arnold, 1965).

Vanity is also one of the themes of the play, symbolized chiefly by Kastril. He proudly declares that he has a property which brings him fifteen hundred pounds a year, and that; furthermore, he would like his widowed sister to marry nobody below the status of a knight. After he has driven away Surly from Subtle's and Face's premises, he asks Face: "Did I not quarrel bravely?" (Sherman, n.d.). This also shows his vanity because he thinks that he has now become adept in the art of quarreling. Earlier, he saw feeling vain of his having already learned how to smoke tobacco like "angry boys" of London (Keenan, 2014). Ananias also is a vain person because he regards Subtle as a heathen and evil man. On the other hand, he believes himself to be a pious and saintly person although in fact, he is equally dishonest and hypocritical as Subtle.



## **Conclusion**

On the basis of the analysis, it is concluded that the belief in alchemy controls the entire action of *The Alchemist*. The real theme of the play is usually considered "avarice and lust," but alchemy as a theme is so prominent that it deserves to be given the most important theme of the play. Even the title of the play shows the importance of alchemy as a theme in the plot and the scheme of the play. Considerable space has been devoted by the author in this play to a discussion of the theory of alchemy and the vast potentialities of this pseudo-science. The whole plot is constructed on the belief among the people of that time that alchemy was true science. It was also believed by general people that Subtle was a genuine alchemist because he had set up an establishment to produce and supply the philosopher's stone to his clients. Therefore it can be said that the belief in alchemy is the most prominent theme of "The Alchemist."

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