BEN JONSON'S *THE ALCHEMIST*, AS A SOCIAL HISTORY

Olaniyan, Modupe Elizabeth, PhD
Department Of English And Literary Studies,
Ekiti State University (Eksu), Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

Abstract

Drama has been perceived in multi-faceted ways. On a general note, it has been viewed as the reflection of life; the society, to be precise. Thus, any literary work is a by-product of the society where it is written. This study focuses on the play-text as a reflection of the social history of a particular society (London), at a particular period in time(1610), using Ben Jonson's ***The Alchemist*** as our main paradigm. It also examines Jonson's central themes and characters, as well as taking into consideration, the picture of some outstanding phases of his contemporary life and estimating their values as a contribution to the knowledge and understanding of his time; such subjects as the influence of the Court, Puritanism and the inter-relationship of the classes. The problem has been two-fold; to determine as accurately as possible, Jonson's view of the time in which he lived and to show how that time shines through his pages, coloured by that view. It is believed that the intellectual perspective of this study has been rightly chosen, hence ,it is expected that the resulting picture of contemporary life, drama and society, will add to the interpretation of the past, and help to widen the horizon of human experiences

Keywords: Alchemist, London, Plague, Play-text, Puritanism and Social history

Introduction

The picture of life, drama and society which Ben Jonson gives in his writings is full of the colour and atmosphere of London at one of its fascinating moments. The court had learnt how to be brilliant and lavish and often irresponsible. The literary world was open to a great variety of people; University wits and Courtiers shared its honours and failures with men of small education and training. Everyday life was full of theatrical contrasts; luxury and poverty ran parallel courses. At any moment, by the machinations of someone in authority, a man might pass from one state to the other; from

the elaborate silken attire of the court, to the rags and squalor of the debtor's prison. It was a time of sharp distinctions and little compromise.

In fact, the contrasts were becoming so marked that more and more people were questioning them. Society was growing self-conscious and turning its eyes upon its own code and manner of living. One group of people was protesting against the religious autocracy of the Bishops, another group of young satirists scourged the foibles of contemporary society in the manner of Juvenal and enjoyed both phases of the process. The great theatre-going public grew conscious of its influence and made its demands upon the playwright forcefully that the development of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama was largely a reflection of the changing preference of public taste. Thus, in all the departments of life, the reign of authority was weakening. The relationships of classes and groups to one another were examined; when they were faulty, they were challenged. The modern world, as it is known today, was then beginning.

In the midst of this exhilarating time, came Ben Jonson. His nature was in accord with the critical view of life. Everyday activities as they passed before his keen observation fell into their places until the world was reduced to categories and the people in it to types. When Bacon was propounding a new method for science, that is, observation of a number of separate objects and the induction from them, their governing principle, Jonson was applying the same process to human society. His experience of the phenomenon of a human society was as wide and accurate as a scientist could possibly ask for. Thus, in the midst of living, Jonson's comic sense was looking upon life and preparing to show it to the world delicately distorted in the oblique light of his personal and artistic creed.

Conceptual Framework

Writers have often played an active part in the social movement of their time. It is in this context that the interpretation of literature (in this context, drama) in its social, economic and political aspects, conceive of social history as total history. This concept of interpreting a literary creation posits serious question about the overt fictional nature of literature and the understanding of reality. Since writers write as eye-witnesses or as participants in the events as they occurred, what they produce then may be a faction, where real and fictitious people are simultaneously created. This is the heart of any theorizing on the text as a social history. It produces texts that are strong in social description with such other random events and elements that make up a particle of history such as domestic life, fashion and opinions. It presents a sort of social tableau with a kind of journalistic reality in which we can equate the writer to the "Secretary of the society" (Bamidele, 2003:71).

The idea of social history is concerned with the daily life of the inhabitants of a land in past ages which according to F. R. Leavis (1945:80).

> *…includes the human as well as the economic relation of different classes to one another, the character of family and the household life, the conditions of labour and of leisure, the attitude of man to nature, the culture of each age as it arose out of these general conditions of life, and took over changing forms in religion, literature and music, architecture, learning and thought.*

Putting it more succinctly, Hans Reiss (1978:30) says:

> *Apart from the work of art,*
> *there is very little other evidence*
> *which allows us to appraise the*
> *temper of an age by helping us*
> *to grasp its emotional quality and its sensibility*.

This view has severally been expressed by cultural critics who opined that without the literary witness, a student of society will be blind to the fullness of that society.

When history starts to examine the complicated structure of society, when it starts to ask questions on the political economy of the state, when greater attention is paid to the study of social question, then the imaginative writer too will take part in such questioning and recording of events. The imaginative writer's attitude to history is a Marxian stride between fiction and reality. While the writer uses all available literary styles to make his record interesting so that it reads like literature, he still shows that the fictive world and the social world share the same level of reality. If the aim of literature is to make the reality more coherent, more understandable and significant, then the work will be expressive of an epoch.

The position is that the work of an artist tells us of phenomena not usually accessible to historians. Novels, drama and poems do reveal the emotional undergrowth of history. In other words, these forms can help us in the construction of a vital aspect of an epoch besides only the political undercurrents.

The baseline of all these is that writers and poets more than any other creative artist do concentrate on fundamental questions and do also take keen interest in social matters and in the burning questions of their day.

AN ANALYSIS OF *TheAlchemist*

An outbreak of plague in London forces a gentleman, Lovewit to flee temporarily to the countryside leaving his house under the sole charge of his Butler, Jeremy. Jeremy uses the opportunity given to him to use the house as the headquarters for fraudulent acts. He transforms himself into 'Captain

Face' and enlists the aid of Subtle, a fellow Con man and Dol Common, a prostitute.(*https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/**The_Alchemist**_(play)}*

The play opens with a violent argument between Subtle and Face concerning the division of riches which they have, and will continue to gather. Dol breaks the pair apart and reasons with them that they must work as a team if they are to succeed. Their first customer is Dapper, a Lawyer's Clerk who wishes Subtle to use his supposed necromantic skill to summon a familiar spirit to help in his gambling ambition. The tripartite suggest that Dapper may win favour with the 'Queen of Fairy', but he must subject himself to humiliating rituals in order for her to help him. **(***https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/**The_Alchemist**_(play))*

Their second gull is Drugger, a Tobacconist, who is keen to establish a profitable business. Then, a wealthy nobleman, Sir Epicure Mammon arrives, expressing his desire to gain for himself the 'philosopher's stone', which he believes will bring him huge material and spiritual wealth. He is accompanied by Surly, a sceptic and debunker of the whole idea of alchemy. He is promised the philosopher'sstone and that the stone will turn all base metals into gold. Surly, however suspects Subtle of being a thief. *(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/**The_Alchemist**_(play))*

Mammon accidentally sees Dol and is told that she is a Lord's Sister who is suffering from madness. Subtle contrives to become angry with Ananias, an Anabaptist or Puritan and demands that he should return with a more senior member of his sect. Drugger returns and his given false and ludicrous advice about setting up his shop, he also brings news that a rich young widow (Dame Pliant) and her brother (Kastril) have arrived in London. Both Subtle and Face in their greed and ambition seek to win the widow.(*https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/**The_Alchemist**_(play))*

The Anabaptists return and agree to pay for goods to be transmutted into gold. These are in fact Mammon's goods. Dapper returns and is promised that he will meet with the Queen of fairy soon. Drugger brings Kasril who, on being told that Subtle is a skilled match-maker, rushes to fetch his sister. Drugger is made to understand that the appropriate payment might secure his marriage to the widow. Dapper is blindfolded and subjected to fairy humiliations but on the reappeance of Mammon, he has been gagged and is hastily thrust into the privy. Mammon is introduced to Dapper. He has been told that Dame Pliant is a nobleman's sister who has gone mad, but he is not put off, and pays her extravagant compliments. Kastril is given a lesson on quarrelling and the widow captivates both Face and Subtle. They quarrel over who is to have her.(*https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/**The_Alchemist**_(play))*

Surly returns, disguised as a Spanish nobleman. Face and Subtle believe that he has come for the woman, but Dol is elsewhere in the building

'engaged' with Mammon, so Face has the inspiration of using Dame Pliant. She is reluctant to become a Spanish Countess but is rigorously persuaded by her brother to go off with Surly. The tricksters need to get rid of Mammon. Dol contrives a fit and there is an 'explosion' from the 'laboratory'. In addition, the lady's furious 'brother' is hunting for Mammon. Surly reveals his true identity to Dame Pliant and hopes Surly also reveals his true identity to Face and Subtle and denounces them. In quick succession, Kastril, Drugger and Ananias return. Drugger is told to go and find a Spanish costume if he is to have a chance of claiming the widow. Dol brings news that the master of the house has returned. **(***https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/**The_Alchemist**_(play))*

Lovewit interrogates the neighbours as to what has been going on during his absence. Face is now the plausible Jeremy again, and explains that there cannot have been any visitors to the house since he has kept it locked up because of the plague. Surly, Mammon, Kastril and the Anabaptists return. There is a cry from the privy; Dapper has chewed through his gag. Jeremy can no longer maintain his fiction. He promises Lovewit that if he pardons him, he will help him marry a rich widow-Dame Pliant. Dapper meets the 'Queen of Fairy' and departs happily. Drugger delivers the Spanish costume and is sent to find a parson. Face tells Subtle and Dol that he has confessed to Lovewit, and that officers are on their way, Subtle and Dol have to flee, empty-handed. **(***https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/**The_Alchemist**_(play))*

The victims come back again.Lovewit has married the widow and has claimed Mammon's good. Surly and Mammon depart disconsolately. The Anabaptists and Drugger are summarily dismissed. Kastril accepts his sister's marriage to Lovewit. Lovewit pays tribute to the ingenuity of his servant and Face asks for the audience's forgiveness. **(***https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/**The_Alchemist**_(play))*

In ***The Alchemist,*** Jonson unashamedly satirizes the follies, vanities and vices of mankind, most notably greed-induced credulity. People of all social classes are subject to Jonson's ruthless, satirical wit. He mocks human weakness and gullibility to advertising and to "miracle cures" with the character of Sir Epicure Mammon, who dreams of drinking the elixir of youth in order to enjoy fantastic sexual conquests.

The Alchemist focuses on what happens when one human being seeks advantage over another. In a big city like London, this process of advantage-seeking is rife. The trio and con-artists-Subtle, Face and Dol-are self-deluding, small-timers, ultimately undone by the same human weaknesses which they exploit in their victims. Their fate is foreshadowed in the play's opening scene, which features them together in the house of Lovewit, Face's master. In a metaphor which runs through the play, the dialogue shows them to exist in uneasy imbalance, like alchemical elements

that will create an unstable reaction. Barely ten lines into the text, Face and Subtle's quarrelling forces Dol to quell their raised voices: "Will you have the neighbours hear you? Will you betray all? (1:3:7).

The con-artists' vanities and aspirations are revealed by the very personae they assume as part of their plan. The lowly housekeeper, Face, casts himself as a sea captain (a man accustomed to giving orders, instead of taking-them), the egotistical Subtle casts himself as an Alchemist (one who can do what no one else can;who can turn base metal into gold) and Dol Common casts herself as an aristocratic lady. Their incessant bickering is fuelled by vanity and jealousy, the root of which is Subtle's conviction that he is the key element in the 'venture tripartite'.

Face: 'Tis his fault. He ever murmurs and objects his pains, and says the weight of all lies upon him (1:3:12).

The 'venture tripartite' is as doomed as one of the Roman triumvirates. The play's end sees Subtle and Dol resume their original pairing, while Face resumes his role as housekeeper to a wealthy master. Significantly, none of the three is severely punished (the collapse of their scheme aside). Jonson's theatrical microcosm is not a neatly moral one; and he seems to enjoy seeing foolish characters like Epicure Mammon get their comeuppance. This is why, while London itself is a target of Jonson's satire, it is also, as his prologue boasts, a cozening-ground worth celebrating: "Our scene is London, cause we would make known/No country'smirth is better than our own/No clime breeds better matter for your whore …" (1:2:8).

The Alchemist is tightly structured, based around a simple dramatic concept. Subtle claims to be on the verge of 'projection' in his offstage workroom, but all the characters in the play are overly-concerned with projection of a different kind-image projection. The end result, in structural terms, is an onstage base of operations in friars, to which can be brought a succession of unconsciously-comic characters from different social backgrounds who hold different professions and different beliefs, but whose lowest common denominator-gullibility-grants them equal victim-status in the end. Dapper, the aspirant gambler, loses his stake; Sir Epicure Mammon loses his money and his dignity, Drugger, the would - be businessman, parts with his cash, but ends up no nearer to the success he craves; the Puritan duo, Tribulation and Ananias never realize their scheme to counterfeit Dutch money.

Jonson reserves his harshest satire for these Puritan characters-perhaps because the Puritans, in real life, wished to close down the theatres (Jonson's play, ***Bartholomew,s Fair*** is also anti-Puritan). Tellingly, of all those gulled in the play, it is the Puritans alone whom Jonson denies a moment of his audience's pity; presumably, he reckons that their life-

denying self-righteousness renders them unworthy of it. Jonson consistently despises hypocrisy, especially religious hypocrisy that couches its damning judgments in high-flown language. Tribulation and Ananias call their fellow men "heathen" and in one case, say that someone's hat suggests "the Anti-Christ" (2:10:8). That these Puritans are just as money-hungry as the rest of the characters is part of the ironic joke.

As Jonson's writing chronologically progresses either by authorial tone and intent or by characters in the plays, they become much less admirable to the audience. This transformation in Jonson's writing is most likely a result of his political or more accurately, religious surroundings. As earlier said, ***The Alchemist*** was written in 1610, at the height of Puritanism in London. Because of his dislike of Puritanism's harsh judgment, Jonson begins to create characters who are sympathetic, despite their vices.

In ***The Alchemist***, Jonson's characters are static and identifiable by their names. For example, Drugger is a Tobacco-man, and Dame Pliant's name suggests her pliability-which is accurate because she so freely moves from one suitor to another. Face's name represents the many facades he can apply in order to successfully trick his victims.

In many English and European comedies, it is up to a high-class character to resolve the confusion that has been caused by lower class characters. In ***The Alchemist***, Jonson subverts this tradition. Face's master Lovewit at first seems to assert his social and ethical superiority to put matters to rights. But when Face dangles before him the prospect of marriage to a younger woman, his master eagerly accepts. Both master and servant are always on the lookout for how to get ahead in life, regardless of ethical boundaries. Lovewit adroitly exploits Mammon's reluctance to obtain legal certification of his folly to hold on to the old man's money.

The ALCHEMIST AS A SOCIAL HISTORY

For centuries in London, the plague presented a very real danger to its citizens. However, some people were more concerned with other moral dangers that city life offered, like prostitution, alcoholism, drug addiction, and gambling. In ***The Alchemist,*** Ben Jonson presents the interesting idea that not only the plague thrives within the populated city, but vice also flourishes. Since urban areas historically house more poor people than rural areas, a desire for money may understandably become associated with the inner city. This greed as Jonson illustrates with his plot and characters, leads to people's immoral activities.

The Alchemist is set in London in 1610, the same setting as when the play was first performed, so it became a commentary on the current social scene. Because of the plague's contagion, Lovewit flees from the city to the country-side for safety. Upon leaving, he leaves his Butler, Face in charge of

his house and Face takes the opportunity to invite his friends, Subtle and Dol Common, to help him take advantage of stranger's greed with their profitable cons. The three characters convince numerous other characters that they can profit from Subtle's philosopher,s stone, which turns metal into gold or from his astrological visions. These characters vary from a gambler who wishes to use Subtle's vision to win more money to two Puritans who wish to bring money to their congregation.

In fact, Jonson purposefully provides a wide span of immoral characters to satirize, as he demonstrates in his statement that

No clime breeds better matter
(than London) for your whore/Bawd,
squire, impostor, (and)
many persons more (prologue, 7-8).

Apparently, Jonson believes that a large range of immoral people inhabited London, which is why he reflects this spectrum. Eventually, Lovewit returns home to disrupt the cons profits from these numerous characters and order is finally restored when Lovewit forgives Face because he arranges Lovewit's engagement to Dame Pliant.

The play's plot and its characters provided relative success to the early performances but it later fell out of favour with audiences and is rarely reproduced on modern stages. This early success most likely reflects the audience's interest in its immediate social relevance especially as the play heavily satirizes its Puritan characters. These Puritan characters, Ananias and Tribulation, wish to raise money for their church, yet Subtle and Face suggest that the only possibility for making more money will be if they use the philosopher's stone to create gold. Thus, though Ananias refers to himself as "a faithful brother" (2:5:7), he considers counterfeiting money and, in turn, defying the law.

These two characters present Jonson's opinion of religious zealots who will defy all of man's laws and morals in order to rigidly adhere to God's. In fact, Jonson further mocks the Puritans in his creation of Tribulation Wholesome; Ananias's "very zealous pastor" (2:5:10), who entirely contradicts his "wholesome" name.

Though Ananias at least initially denies the philosopher's stone, which defiles God as "it is a work of darkness/And with philosophy, blinds the eyes of man" (3:1:9-10), Tribulation immediately rejects his objections because he believes they "must bend unto all means/That may give furtherance to the holy cause" (3:1:11-12).Tribulation is perfectly willing to use any means in his life in order to reap benefits for his congregation, even if his actions are immoral. Thus, he is willing to be immoral in order to benefit his life of supposed morality. These two characters' hypocrisy highlights the central objection of Jonson and his contemporaries, as

Puritans' objections to their plays were based around the idea that the plays were immoral, yet they could be immoral as long as it benefited God. This dislike of hypocrisy, and degrading representation of Puritan, becomes an even stronger theme in one of Jonson's later works.

This play, although rather different from some of Jonson's earlier works, exhibits striking similarities to a play he wrote just four years later;***Bartholomew,s Fair***. This play displays the interconnectedness between human indulgence and exploitation and is a play of craft and cunning. The people who come to the fair and those who work at the fair are alike in their infectious desire and avarice. Similarly, Subtle, Face and Dol, are really victims of their own greed. Thus, as with the people who work at the fair, Face and his accomplices are able to take advantage of and profit from the various people because of their own excessive desire for money.

Jonson's increased disgust with Puritanism, and its reflection through the literature of the time, presents such an interesting cultural revolution, since the increased public displays of intolerance, like with literature and performances, led to the Puritan's colonization of America. Thus, Jonson's ***The Alchemist*** and other works provide a societal window through which historians can see the motivations for the beginning of a religious reformation.

Conclusion

The Alchemist is a social satire which transcends the Jacobean London period to our age. It represents a type of all practitioners of fraud. The hero and his confiderates personify the scientific challatan and solemn knave with his indispensable accomplice who will continue to flourish as long as nature is mysterious and mankind, gullible. In our age, we find greed plentifully represented by spiritualists, clairvoyants, theosophists and thought-readers. The play thus presents familiar situations and also the picture of a world turned upside down; a society motivated by folly and greed. There is an array of characters representing almost every degree of folly and gullibility like the Jero plays of Nigeria's Wole Soyinka.

If we reflect on the social commentary of this play, we will see it as a society so moved by avarice that all moral standards are abandoned. Sir Epicure Mammon's venture which is his capital, replaces virtue, which means in effect that if one is rich, one needs not be good. The motivating forces in this play are folly and avarice and Jonson has by this, created a microcosm complete in itself not so much a reflection of the world in ordinary experience as one in which a single aspect of experiential world, folly acts as the prime mover of all that occurs. There is a similarity of Aristophanic method in Jonson; a method which eschews factual verisimilitude but presents a clearly understandable symbolic reality in

which the world is turned topsy-turvy by a logical extension of its shortcomings in order to comment didactically on the real world of experience.

Jonson's comedies are timeless, affecting the Jacobean England of the 17th Century in the same way as they would affect any society in any part of the world anytime in history. No society would advocate for those vices against which he was writing over six hundred years ago. As these vices constituted a social problem to Londoners in the 17th Century, so do they affect us here in Africa and in Nigeria in particular today. Even the setting, set, costumes and props as well as lighting of Jonson's plays could fit into any age and any type of stage. The characters could be drawn from any set of people and his message could reach any audience throughout the world. Hence, one can unequivocally say that Jonson's life and works are exemplary and worthy of emulation by any country at any age. In fact, Jonson is for all ages.

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