

Don Quixote

Miguel Cervantes

Context:

Miguel De Cervantes Saavedra was born in 1547 to a poor Spanish doctor. He joined the army at twenty-one and fought against Turkey at sea and Italy on land. In 1575, pirates kidnapped Cervantes and his brother and sold them as slaves to the Moors, the longtime Muslim enemies of Catholic Spain. Cervantes ended up in Algiers. He attempted to escape his enslavement three times and was eventually ransomed in 1580 and returned to Spain.

Only with the publication of the first volume of *Don Quixote*, in 1605, did Cervantes achieve financial success and popular renown. *Don Quixote* became an instant success, and its popularity even spawned an unauthorized sequel by a writer who used the name Avellaneda. This sequel appeared several years after the original volume, and it inspired Cervantes to hurry along his own second volume, which he published in 1615. Cervantes died later that year.

Many of *Don Quixote*'s recurring elements are drawn from Cervantes's life: the presence of Algerian pirates on the Spanish coast, the exile of the enemy Moors, the frustrated prisoners whose failed escape attempts cost them dearly, the disheartening battles displaying Spanish courage in the face of plain defeat, and even the ruthless ruler of Algiers. Cervantes's biases pervade the novel as well, most notably in the form of a mistrust of foreigners.

Funded by silver and gold pouring in from its American colonies, Spain was at the height of its European domination during Cervantes's life. But Spain also suffered some of its most crippling defeats during this time, including the crushing of its seemingly invincible armada by the English in 1588. The tale of the captive, which begins in Chapter XXXIX of the First Part of *Don Quixote*, recounts in detail many of the historical battles in which Cervantes himself participated. In this sense, *Don Quixote* is very much a historical novel.

Nevertheless, the novel illustrates Spain's divergent worlds. Spain at the time was caught in the tumult of a new age, and Cervantes tried to create in *Don Quixote* a place to discuss human identity, morality, and art within this ever-shifting time. Though the Renaissance gave rise to a new humanism in European literature, popular writing continued to be dominated by romances about knights in shining armor practicing the code of chivalry. Chivalry emphasized the protection of the weak, idealized women, and celebrated the role of the wandering knight, who traveled from place to place performing good deeds. Books of chivalry tended to contain melodramatic, fantastical stories about encounters with cruel giants, rescues of princesses in distress, and battles with evil enchanters—highly stylized accounts of shallow characters playing out age-old dramas.

On one level, the first volume of *Don Quixote* is a parody of the romances of Cervantes's time. Don Quixote rides out like any other knight-errant, searching for the same principles and goals and engaging in similar battles. During these battles, he invokes chivalric ideals, regardless of how ridiculous his adventures may be. On another level, however, the adventures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in the novel's First Part attempt to describe a code of honor that could serve as an example for a Spain that was confused by war and by its own technological and social successes. Cervantes applies this code of values to a world in which such values are out of date.

In the Second Part, however, Cervantes provides the answer to questions about identity and codes of conduct in the personalities of Don Quixote and especially his sidekick, Sancho Panza. The Second Part is a textured work with responsive and credible characters who engage one another in sincere and meaningful ways. Cervantes

wanted to place his novel within a literary tradition that was fluctuating at the time, and the novel's numerous discussions of playwriting, poetry, and literature mark this effort to understand the changes in the intellectual environment.

Cervantes also includes social and religious commentary in *Don Quixote*. He bitterly criticizes the class structure in Spain, where outmoded concepts of nobility and property prevailed even as education became more widespread among the lower classes. The arrogance of the Duke and the Duchess in the Second Part highlights how unacceptable Cervantes found these class distinctions to be. Likewise, the prevailing of Sancho and Teresa Panza's wisdom at the end of the novel is a victory for old-fashioned goodness and wisdom in the face of a world that makes people practical but petty. Finally, Cervantes, who was briefly excommunicated from the Catholic church in 1587, discusses the church in the novel as well. Sancho's self-identification as an "old Christian," in particular, informs the new morality he represents.

Summary:

Don Quixote is a middle-aged gentleman from the region of La Mancha in central Spain. Obsessed with the chivalrous ideals touted in books he has read, he decides to take up his lance and sword to defend the helpless and destroy the wicked. After a first failed adventure, he sets out on a second one with a somewhat befuddled laborer named Sancho Panza, whom he has persuaded to accompany him as his faithful squire. In return for Sancho's services, Don Quixote promises to make Sancho the wealthy governor of an isle. On his horse, Rocinante, a barn nag well past his prime, Don Quixote rides the roads of Spain in search of glory and grand adventure. He gives up food, shelter, and comfort, all in the name of a peasant woman, Dulcinea del Toboso, whom he envisions as a princess.

On his second expedition, Don Quixote becomes more of a bandit than a savior, stealing from and hurting baffled and justifiably angry citizens while acting out against what he perceives as threats to his knighthood or to the world. Don Quixote abandons a boy, leaving him in the hands of an evil farmer simply because the farmer swears an oath that he will not harm the boy. He steals a barber's basin that he believes to be the mythic Mambrino's helmet, and he becomes convinced of the healing powers of the Balsam of Fierbras, an elixir that makes him so ill that, by comparison, he later feels healed. Sancho stands by Don Quixote, often bearing the brunt of the punishments that arise from Don Quixote's behavior.

The story of Don Quixote's deeds includes the stories of those he meets on his journey. Don Quixote witnesses the funeral of a student who dies as a result of his love for a disdainful lady turned shepherdess. He frees a wicked and devious galley slave, Gines de Pasamonte, and unwittingly reunites two bereaved couples, Cardenio and Lucinda, and Ferdinand and Dorothea. Torn apart by Ferdinand's treachery, the four lovers finally come together at an inn where Don Quixote sleeps, dreaming that he is battling a giant.

Along the way, the simple Sancho plays the straight man to Don Quixote, trying his best to correct his master's outlandish fantasies. Two of Don Quixote's friends, the priest and the barber, come to drag him home. Believing that he is under the force of an enchantment, he accompanies them, thus ending his second expedition and the First Part of the novel.

The Second Part of the novel begins with a passionate invective against a phony sequel of *Don Quixote* that was published in the interim between Cervantes's two parts. Everywhere Don Quixote goes, his reputation—gleaned by others from both the real and the false versions of the story—precedes him.

As the two embark on their journey, Sancho lies to Don Quixote, telling him that an evil enchanter has transformed Dulcinea into a peasant girl. Undoing this enchantment, in which even Sancho comes to believe, becomes Don Quixote's chief goal.

Don Quixote meets a Duke and Duchess who conspire to play tricks on him. They make a servant dress up as Merlin, for example, and tell Don Quixote that Dulcinea's enchantment—which they know to be a hoax—can be undone only if Sancho whips himself 3,300 times on his naked backside. Under the watch of the Duke and Duchess, Don Quixote and Sancho undertake several adventures. They set out on a flying wooden horse, hoping to slay a giant who has turned a princess and her lover into metal figurines and bearded the princess's female servants.

During his stay with the Duke, Sancho becomes governor of a fictitious isle. He rules for ten days until he is wounded in an onslaught the Duke and Duchess sponsor for their entertainment. Sancho reasons that it is better to be a happy laborer than a miserable governor.

A young maid at the Duchess's home falls in love with Don Quixote, but he remains a staunch worshipper of Dulcinea. Their never-consummated affair amuses the court to no end. Finally, Don Quixote sets out again on his journey, but his demise comes quickly. Shortly after his arrival in Barcelona, the Knight of the White Moon—actually an old friend in disguise—vanquishes him.

Cervantes relates the story of Don Quixote as a history, which he claims he has translated from a manuscript written by a Moor named Cide Hamete Benengeli. Cervantes becomes a party to his own fiction, even allowing Sancho and Don Quixote to modify their own histories and comment negatively upon the false history published in their names.

In the end, the beaten and battered Don Quixote forswears all the chivalric truths he followed so fervently and dies from a fever. With his death, knights-errant become extinct. Benengeli returns at the end of the novel to tell us that illustrating the demise of chivalry was his main purpose in writing the history of Don Quixote.