

# [Cervantes – don quixote essay](https://assignbuster.com/cervantes-don-quixote-essay/)

Word Count: 1005Cervantes’ greatest work, Don Quixote, is a unique book of

multiple dimensions. From the moment of its appearance it

has amused readers or caused them to think, and its

influence has extended in literature not only to works of

secondary value but also to those which have universal

importance. Don Quixote is a country gentleman, an

enthusiastic visionary crazed by his reading of romances of

chivalry, who rides forth to defend the oppressed and to

right wrongs; so vividly was he presented by Cervantes that

many languages have borrowed the name of the hero as the

common term to designate a person inspired by lofty and

impractical ideals.

The theme of the book, in brief, concerns Hidalgo Alonso

Quijano, who, because of his reading in books about

chivalry, comes to believe that everything they say is true

and decides to become a knight-errant himself. He assumes

the name of Don Quixote de la Mancha and, accompanied

by a peasant, Sancho Panza, who serves him as a squire,

sets forth in search of adventures. Don Quixote interprets

all that he encounters in accordance with his readings and

thus imagines himself to be living in a world quite different

from the one familiar to the ordinary men he meets.

Windmills are thus transformed into giants, and this

illusion, together with many others, is the basis for the

beatings and misadventures suffered by the intrepid hero.

After the knight’s second sally in search of adventure,

friends and neighbors in his village decide to force him to

forget his wild fancy and to reintegrate himself into his

former life. The “ knight” insists upon following his calling,

but at the end of the first part of the book they make him

return to his home by means of a sly stratagem. In the

second part the hidalgo leaves for the third time and

alternately gives indication of folly and of wisdom in a

dazzling array of artistic inventions. But now even his

enemies force him to abandon his endeavors. Don Quixote

finally recognizes that romances of chivalry are mere lying

inventions, but upon recovering the clarity of his mind, he

loses his life.

The idea that Don Quixote is a symbol of the noblest

generosity, dedicated to the purpose of doing good

disinterestedly, suggests the moral common denominator

to be found in Cervantes’ creation. But in addition to

furnishing a moral type capable of being recognized and

accepted as a symbol of values in any time or place, Don

Quixote is a work of art with as many aspects and reflections

as it has readers to seek them. Considerations of general

morality thus become intermingled with the psychological

and aesthetic experience of each individual reader in a way

that vastly stimulated the development of the literary genre

later known as the novel, and Fielding, Dickens, Flaubert,

Stendhal, Dostoyevsky, and many others have thus been

inspired by Cervantes. In Madame Bovary, is Gustave

Flaubert, for example, the heroine changes the orientation

of her life because she, like Don Quixote, has read her

romances of chivalry, the romantic novels of the nineteenth

century.

Cervantes demonstrated to the Western world how poetry

and fantasy could coexist with the experience of reality

which is perceptible to the senses. He did this by

presenting poetic reality, which previously had been

confined to the ideal region of dream, as something

experienced by a real person, and the dream thus became

the reality of any man living his dream. Therefore, the

trivial fact that a poor hidalgo loses his reason for one cause

or another is of little importance. The innovation is that

Don Quixote’s madness is converted into the theme of his

life and into a theme for the life of other people, who are

affected as much by the madness of the hidalgo as is he

himself. Some want him to revert to his condition of a

peaceful and sedentary hidalgo; others would like him to

keep on amusing or stupefying people with his deeds,

insane and wise at the same time.

Before Cervantes, literature was, as occasion offered,

fantastic, idealistic, naturalistic, moralistic, or didactic.

After his time, literature continued to exploit all these

types, but with them it was inclined to incorporate, as well,

some readers’ experience of them. Romances of chivalry

could now attain a significance beyond that of mere books

and could become what people felt or thought about them,

thus growing to be the very dynamic functioning of living

persons. In Don Quixote, for example, the hero takes them

for the gospel; the priest believes them to be false; the

innkeeper admires the tremendous blows delivered by the

knights; his daughter is taken by the sentimental aspect of

the love affairs which they describe; and so on. But the

reality of the literary work is the ideal integration of all

possible experience which all of the possible readers

undergo. This point can be further illustrated by taking

proverbs as an example. Before Don Quixote, many

collections of sayings and proverbs had been published, but

when Sancho interspersed these proverbs helter-skelter in

his conversation and thus brought his master to despair,

the proverbs became the living experiences which Sancho

and Don Quixote derived from them. In this manner,

everything in Don Quixote can be either real or ideal, either

fantastic or possible, according to the manner in which it

affects the variety of readers, whether they be creators of

beautiful and comforting illusions or dispassionate

demolishers of dreams. To live, for Cervantes, is to let

loose the extensive capacity of all that is human; it may also

be to remain deaf and inert before the attractions of love,

faith, and enthusiasm. All who live in the human universe

of the greatest book of Spanish literature succeed or

destroy themselves, according to one of these opposing

trends.

When compared with such a prodigious book, all of

Cervantes’ works which have not previously been

mentioned, no matter what their value, must be relegated to

a lower level. Among his dramatic works, La Numancia, a

description of the heroic defense of that Iberian city during

the Roman conquest of Spain in the second century b. c.,

and the amusing Interludes, such as El Juez de los

divorcios (“ The Judge of Divorces”) and El Retablo de

las maravillas (“ The Picture of Marvels”), are

outstanding. Also worth mentioning is the verse Voyage

to Parnassus (1614), in which almost all of the Spanish

writers of the period are lauded, and Persiles y

Sigismunda, published posthumously in 1617. In this

last-named work the author returns to the theme of the

Byzantine novel and relates the ideal love and

unbelievable vicissitudes of a couple who, starting from

the Arctic regions, arrive in Rome, where they find a

happy ending for their complicated adventures.