

Cervantes – don quixote essay



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Word Count: 1005 Cervantes' 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.