

# Symptoms of mental disorder in don quixote novel

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Don Quixote, an avid reader of medieval literature, can often be found pillaging groups of Franciscan monks, charging windmills, or attacking armies of livestock. Though some may justify Don Quixote's peculiar actions, as he is merely on a quest to fulfil his dream to become a chivalric knight errant, any person learned in the field of psychology would use these abnormal behaviors as symptomatic support for a schizophrenic diagnosis. Cervantes utilized humanistic models to analyze society at a level so low, it had yet to be researched in depth by scholars at the time: mental illness.

The story of Don Quixote took place in 1615 in Spain, though the concept of schizophrenia as a mental illness did not begin to take shape until Dr. Emil Kraepelin, a German doctor often referred to as the founder of modern psychiatry, created the term "dementia praecox" in 1887. This term can be translated to "early dementia" and claims that this type of psychotic behavior could be attributed to a disease in the brain. The name of the modern diagnosis, "schizophrenia", was coined in 1911 by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler. The term derives from the word schizo, meaning split, and phrene, meaning mind: this alluded to the observation that schizophrenic patients experienced fragmented thinking, which is an accurate summation of Don Quixote's methods of thought.

In order to receive a schizophrenic diagnosis, Don Quixote must display symptoms consistent with those listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5). He must display at least two of the following symptoms: hallucinations, delusions, disorganized speech, disorganized or catatonic behavior, or negative symptoms. Negative symptoms include negative emotional range, poverty of speech, decreased interest or drive, and

increased inertia. One of these two displayed symptoms must be either hallucinations, delusions, or disorganized speech. Furthermore, symptoms must be present for at least six months, with one month of active symptoms. The symptoms must cause social or occupational deterioration issues which cannot be attributed to another condition.

Don Quixote satisfies the first criteria, as he mainly displays hallucinations, delusions, and disorganized behavior. Hallucinations are sensations that appear to be real when, in fact, they are only present in the individual's mind. Though hallucinations can be perceived through any of the five senses, the two most common in schizophrenic patients are auditory and visual. Throughout the text, Don Quixote is plagued by a plethora of hallucinations that manifest themselves simultaneously as auditory and visual.

One example of these hallucinations is when he comes across two opposing armies of men. He and Sancho travel to higher ground to gain a better vantage point to watch the anticipated battle take place. Don Quixote began describing to his squire many specific individuals on the opposing armies in fantastic detail: he described their armor, color schemes, weapons, and history (128). Though the scene was not extremely clear, as the armies were kicking up a great deal of dust, Sancho was not convinced that these were in fact armies. " Senor, may the devil take me," his squire explains, " but no man, giant, or knight of all these your grace has mentioned can be seen anywhere around here... I don't hear anything except the bleating of lots of sheep" (129). Don Quixote is not convinced by this counterargument, and

instead acts impulsively in attacking the armies. As a result, he kills over seven sheep and is attacked by the shepherds (130). The fact that Don Quixote's hallucinatory experiences are vivid enough for act on is a strong indication of his severe schizophrenic symptoms.

Furthermore, Don Quixote also displays delusional behavior as a symptom of schizophrenia. A delusion can be characterized as firmly held ideas that provide no logical evidence; they are often bizarre and fantastical. This behavior is exemplified, as he is under the impression that a great sorcerer—his mortal enemy—is out to destroy him. When he and Sancho encounters a group of “giants”, though they are merely windmills, Don Quixote states the following of his foe:

“ I think, and therefore it is true, that the same Freston the Wise who stole my room and my books has turned these giants into windmills in order to deprive me of the glory of defeating them: such is the enmity he feels for me; but in the end, his evil arts will not prevail against the power of my virtuous sword” (59).

Throughout the text, Don Quixote is convinced that many of the negative events that he encounters can only be attributed to the sorcerers that are determined to destroy him. Though Sancho often attempts to appeal to his master using logical rhetoric, Don Quixote is resolutely convinced that these claims are genuine.

Disorganized behavior, which Don Quixote also displays, impacts a person's ability to perform day-to-day tasks, as well as their ability to interact

appropriately with the people around them. One type of disorganized behavior displayed is a lack of inhibition and impulse control. Don Quixote, convinced that all his actions are justified by his duty to uphold the code of chivalric knights, too often acts without prior thought. In one scene, Don Quixote spots what he assumes to be a knight wearing the helmet of Mambrino, though it is only a barber traveling on a donkey with a basin on his head. Holding fast to his chivalric delusions, he acts: “ And when he saw the poor gentleman approaching, without saying a word to him, and with Rociente at full gallop, he attacked with lowered pike, intending to run him through” (154). Though in this particular scene, the barber was able to flee the scene safely, Don Quixote’s impulsive action oftentimes results in harm to other people—a clear sign of the severity of his schizophrenic tendencies.

The second criteria of diagnosis states that two of the symptoms displayed must be either hallucinations, delusions, or disorganized speech. As Don Quixote displays both hallucinations and delusions, he also satisfies the second criteria of schizophrenic diagnosis.

The third criteria states that symptoms must be present for at least six months, with one month of active symptoms. Don Quixote set off on his chivalric quest in 1615, and he died soon after his return in 1616. Thus, it can be assumed that his journey, which consisted of his most pronounced active symptoms, lasted longer than one month. Furthermore, the first chapter of the text states that for a long period of time prior to his journey, he was engrossed in the delusions of knighthood.

“ His fantasy filled with everything he had read in his books, enchantments as well as combats, battles, challenges, wounds, courtings, loves, torments, and other impossible foolishness, and he became so convinced in his imagination of the truth of all the countless grandiloquent and false inventions he read that for him no history in the world was truer” (21).

Using this introductory chapter as a guideline, it can be presumed that from time Don Quixote began spending night and day engrossed in this alternate reality to the time he returned to his village upon concluding his adventure as a knight, a period of at least six months passed. Therefore, he satisfies the third criteria for a schizophrenic diagnosis.

The final criteria states that the symptoms must cause social or occupational deterioration issues which cannot be attributed to another condition.

Cervantes states that Don Quixote spend his days reading novels about knighthood from dawn until dusk day after day. Though he sometimes conversed with the locals in his village, this conversation consisted only of aspects of his novels, indicating that there is a high level of social decline in his behavior. More explicitly exemplified, however, is Don Quixote’s high levels of occupational deterioration. “.. this aforementioned gentleman spent his times of leisure—which meant most of the year—reading books of chivalry with so much devotion and enthusiasm that he forgot almost completely about the hunt and even about the administration of his estate” (20). Cervantes continues by stating that Don Quixote became so engrossed in his fantasy, he sold acres of his arable land in order to purchase more books of chivalry. He had no job, aside from his self-administered task to

read as much as possible, and therefore had no income, aside from selling portions of his estate. With this fulfillment of the final criteria, Don Quixote can, with reasonable and sufficient support, be diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Critics may argue that Don Quixote is not schizophrenic and does not possess any type of psychological illness, but is instead experiencing a midlife crisis. This crisis develops from thoughts of dissatisfaction with one's own life and the desire to change one's surroundings as soon as possible. In the novel, Don Quixote was at the perfect age to experience a midlife crisis, was unsatisfied with his current situation, and changed his life in a hurry. However, this refutation does not account for the illogical delusions and disorganized behavior, as well as the auditory and visual hallucinations, Don Quixote experiences on several occasions throughout his journey. Consequently, I argue that although he may have been experiencing a midlife crisis, this is subordinate to the fact that he displays enough symptoms to be clinically diagnosed with schizophrenia.

One of the main themes of Don Quixote is that belief is a choice and your perception determines your reality. In order to exemplify this type of perspectivism to his readers, Cervantes created a character that displays this characteristic to an absolute extreme. Don Quixote is not simply thinking positively in order to better his life, he is adhering to delusions of grandeur in the effort to fulfill his destiny of becoming a knight errant. By presenting a character that displays this theme to such an extreme, readers are better

able to recognize the theme and become inspired to apply it to their own lives.

Though Don Quixote displays sufficient symptoms to be clinically diagnosed with schizophrenia, this does not detract from the main themes and ideologies that Cervantes conveys in the text. It is this humanistic presentation of the lowest level of society, those with mental illness, which was so unique to literature at the time Cervantes published this novel in the 17th century. This “ultimate and most sublime work of human thinking” can be argued to be the catalyst for all fictional literary works concerning mental illness from the 17th century forward (citation). Because of this, I argue that, though fictional, Don Quixote was one of the first case studies of a psychological individual with schizophrenia, and that his symptomatology may have been used to develop the ideas that contributed to Kraepelin’s classification of “dementia praecox” in the 19th century, which thereby supplemented Bleuler’s research and classification of the modern illness, schizophrenia, in the 20th century.