

DON QUIXOTE

TEACHER GUIDE

BACKGROUND

Quixotic is a term for anything that is idealistic or impractical. “Tilting at windmills” is a metaphor for fighting imaginary enemies. These two common phrases highlight the absurdity found in Miguel Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, which tells of an aging man’s delusional quests as a knight errant. Written in Cervantes’s native language, Spanish, the novel is a clever satire of chivalric romances. Its episodes are packed with hilarity, absurdity, and wit. Don Quixote’s adventures have inspired artwork, music, and a popular musical. First published in 1605, the novel has been called the first modern novel. But what has caused it to endure for so long?

At the heart of the novel is the question—should life be viewed realistically or idealistically? Don Quixote himself is an ultimate idealist, even to the point of insanity. The humor of the novel comes from the contrast between the reality of the world and the idealistic way in which Quixote views it. Prostitutes become princesses, innkeeper-pimps become noble lords, and mentally-unstable old men become valiant knights. Although Don Quixote’s actions are dangerous to others and himself, one has to admire his sense of honor and devotion to ideals. But Cervantes never tells us what to think. Is Don Quixote pathetic—or heroic? He leaves the answer up to us to decide. Do our ideals make us deluded and dangerous? Or are they what makes life worth living?

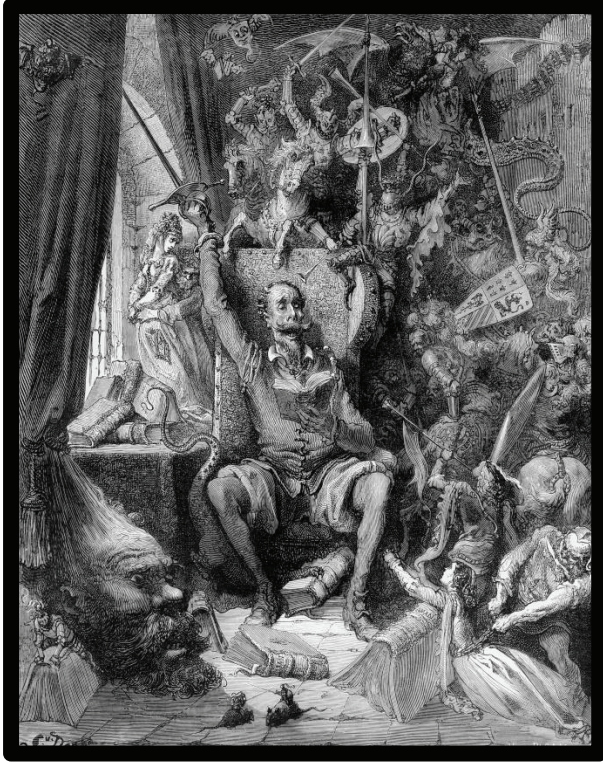
SUMMARY

Senor Quixada is an aging landowner, who reads too many books of chivalry. Slowly delusions of knights and damsels take over his mind, and he changes his name to Don Quixote and vows to become a knight errant. He names one of his nags Rocinante, his noble steed, and rides out for adventures. Don Quixote comes to a seedy inn, which he mistakes for a castle. He also mistakes the harlots standing in front of the inn to be princesses and treats them grandly. When the innkeeper appears, Don Quixote mistakes him for the lord of the castle and asks him to knight him. Shortly after Quixote gets into a fight with one of the inn’s patrons, the innkeeper performs a mock knighting ceremony on the old man—mainly to get rid of him. Don Quixote collapses from exhaustion and passersby take him back to his plantation.

Don Quixote’s housekeeper and niece try to talk sense into him when he awakens. They have bricked up the entrance to his library to prevent him from reading any more books of chivalry, but they tell him that the one who did this was an evil magician. When they leave Don Quixote unattended, he sneaks out for more adventuring.

Passing through the countryside, Don Quixote encounters a peasant named Sancho Panza, whom he promises the rulership of an island if Sancho will be his squire. Throughout their further adventures, Sancho tries to talk sense into Don Quixote, but the knight refuses to listen.

Finally, Don Quixote does battle with a couple of windmills that he claims are actually giants in disguise. When the rotating sails of the windmills throw Don



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CAST

QUIXOTE	<i>Gentleman of La Mancha</i>
HOUSEKEEPER	<i>Don Quixote's Housekeeper</i>
NIECE	<i>Don Quixote's Niece</i>
INNKEEPER	<i>Shady Innkeeper</i>
WOMAN ONE	<i>Sleazy Woman</i>
WOMAN TWO	<i>Sleazy Woman</i>
GUEST	<i>Guest at the Inn</i>
SANCHO	<i>Poor Laborer</i>
WIFE	<i>Wife of Sancho</i>

NARRATOR: In the region of La Mancha in a certain village, the name of which I have no desire to remember, there lived one of those gentlemen that keep a lance in the lance-rack, an old shield, a lean horse, and a greyhound for hunting. The gentleman, whose name was Senor Alonso Quixada, was almost fifty and gaunt-featured.

Whenever he was at leisure—which he was almost all year round—this gentleman loved to read books of knights and chivalry.

QUIXOTE: Ha-ha! That foolish giant thought he could defeat such a noble knight!

NARRATOR: He loved these books so much that he neglected all of his other duties—even the management of his property—and squandered all of his money on filling his library even fuller.

This gentleman became so absorbed in his books that he spent his days and nights poring over their lofty prose. With so little sleep and so much reading, his brains got so dry that he lost his wits. His imagination filled with what he read about in his books—enchantments, battles, damsels, giants, dragons, and all sorts of impossible nonsense. These ideas so possessed his mind that they became more real than the reality of the world.

HOUSEKEEPER: Senor Quixada, would you like your breakfast now?

QUIXOTE: No! No! I'm much too busy. Who do you think is the greatest knight—El Cid or the Knight of the Burning Sword?

HOUSEKEEPER: What? I do not understand.

QUIXOTE: El Cid was a very good knight, but the Knight of the Burning Sword cut two fierce giants in a half with a single backstroke. So which is better?

HOUSEKEEPER: Que? I—I do not know, sir.