Background Information

In the year 711 A.D., Moors from Northern Africa invaded the Iberian Peninsula. Within one hundred years, they had made their way from the southern tip all the way into what is present-day France. Many Christians had fled the invading Muslims, and led by Pelayo, launched their counter-attack from the mountainous regions of northern Spain. Thus began what is known as the “Reconquest” (*La Reconquista*), a period of nearly 800 years during which the Christians and the Moors held skirmishes for territory. During this time Spain was not yet a modern, unified nation, but was instead a collection of independent “kingdoms.” Spain was not united until the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella in 1469. Each kingdom looked out for its own good and there were sometimes strange alliances of Christians and Moors against other Christians or Moors! At the time there was also a large Jewish presence in Spain, but the battles for territory took place between the Christians and the Moors. There was sometimes peace for long periods of time, and even relative religious tolerance in that the dominant group would allow the minority to exist and practice its own religion in exchange for paying extra taxes. Nonetheless, the Reconquest was at its heart a religious war that determined the future Christian character of Europe. (The Moors were finally defeated at Granada in 1492.)

In order to deal with this invasion by the Moors, medieval Spanish society needed warriors (knights) and horses. To accommodate this need, the land was divided into vast territories where large quantities of horses could be raised and trained. The territories were controlled by marquises, who owed allegiance to their kings. The lands were further subdivided for administrative purposes among counts, dukes and barons. With such a hierarchical social pyramid, the common man was a peasant who owed his allegiance to a knight, who in turn owed allegiance to a baron, and so forth. A knight was obligated to show loyalty to his master in all affairs, to protect his master and his property, to contribute to the costs of maintaining the castle, etc. The peasants were protected in war by those above them, at least in theory, but they paid a heavy price in hard labor.

Knights were prepared for war from childhood. Their training led them to be loyal in the extreme to their superiors, and sometimes without compassion for those below them. One civilizing force that turned a mere brute into a knight was the concept of courtly love as expressed in the code of chivalry. Some of the characteristics of this tradition included the idea that “love hurts,” that the love a knight felt for his lady might not be returned, and that the ensuing suffering was an integral part of loving. In addition, knights had specific
commandments or rules governing their behavior, including maintaining chastity, avoiding
greed, respecting other knights and maintaining loyalty to one’s own class, as well as
truthfulness, modesty, courteousness, and obedience to one’s lady.

Boys from aristocratic families became knights after lengthy preparation. They served their
apprenticeship in neighboring castles as pages from about the age of eight to fifteen years. There
the boys practiced martial arts and courtly manners. As teenagers, boys became squires in
service to knights, and only after proving their worth underwent an initiation ceremony,
 somewhere around the age of 20. The night prior to the ceremony, a youth fasted and kept vigil;
in the morning, he bathed and donned a white tunic to symbolize his purity. Then he knelt
before his lord, who tapped him on each shoulder with a sword, and before an audience, declared
(“dubbed”) him a knight. As the Renaissance unfolded in Spain and feudalism lost its power to
centralized government, “working” knights became obsolete.

By the time Cervantes wrote Don Quixote around 1600, Spain was considered to be a modern
country, the first in Europe. The independent kingdoms had been united under the strong
government of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic monarchs. In 1481, they established the
Tribunal of the Inquisition, the purpose of which was to make sure that all people were
practicing orthodox Catholicism, the official religion of the country, inextricably interwoven
with the powers of the State. The result was cruel persecution and the eventual expulsion of
Jews, Protestants, and Moriscos (Muslims who remained in Spain after the conquest of Granada).
Nonetheless, for the first time in 800 years, Spain had one government and one religion. When
Ferdinand and Isabella’s grandson, Charles I, took power in 1517, he had inherited the vast
Spanish possessions in America, Italy, and the North of Africa. From his father’s side, he
inherited the territories of the Holy Roman Empire, including Holland and Belgium. Spain
became a strong political and economic power, and the country enjoyed its famed “Golden
Century” under the reign of Charles I and his son, Phillip. (The Spanish century came to a close
however, as the intolerant Charles wanted all of Europe to be Catholic, embroiling Spain in the
first of many costly wars that would cause the country to go into economic collapse and general
decline a century later.)

Despite all of its riches, Spain felt the influence of the Italian Renaissance rather late. Still,
the new ideas about art, independent thought, and the worth of the human body as well as the
human spirit did influence Spanish society. Try as they might, the monarchy and Inquisition
were unable to suppress secular influences in the arts. In literature, new publications of proverbs
and refrains were popularized, poetry and theater were revitalized, and the novel, in various
versions, became wildly popular, probably due in part to the recent invention of the printing press, which allowed much greater access to writing.

Cervantes published the first portion of *Don Quixote* in 1605, in the middle of the Golden Age of literature in Spain. In the novel, he makes reference to and incorporates elements of four different types of novels that still enjoyed at least some popularity during his time: books of chivalry, pastoral novels, “morisco” novels, and picaresque novels. Many critics feel that Cervantes was satirizing these “inferior” types of literature, and yet he clearly uses elements of all types within his own work. He makes reference to the novel *Amadis de Gaula* (1508), which is one of the novels of chivalry responsible for Don Quixote’s losing his mind. (The moralists of the age thought that these books were the devil’s work and that they did indeed contributed to madness.) This book has all the elements present in the Quixote: sorcerers, magic potions, damsels in distress, knights-errant, etc. As the popularity of the books of chivalry waned, the pastoral novel gained fame. In these, there is a false idealization of rural life; in Don Quixote, the nobles have time to play at being shepherds, which they see as a romantic fantasy. The “morisco” novel portrays the Moor as capable of nobility, not just as the sensual and exotic pagan; Cervantes includes several Moorish characters in the original version of the novel. Finally, the picaresque novel influences Cervantes. Like the picaresque novel, *Don Quixote* is episodic, it portrays real geography, and it has characters who are deeply human and who often show us a view of society from the bottom up. Regardless of Cervantes’ real intentions, it is clear that he made use of the literary styles that preceded him.

A typical theme of Spanish Baroque literature is the question of what constitutes reality. We see this in various guises in the novel: enchantment versus disenchantment, true reality versus dreams, optimism versus pessimism, free will versus capricious fate. What is reality? Who determines reality? Can reality differ from one person to another? Can the perception of reality actually change reality? If Sancho embodies the common man who is motivated by basic needs and desires, complete with a practical viewpoint of life, then Don Quixote is the uncommon man, the irrational dreamer who has not one iota of common sense despite his position in society. Where Sancho sees windmills, Don Quixote sees giants. Where Sancho sees sheep, Don Quixote sees armies. Where Sancho sees inns, Don Quixote sees castles. Why? Sancho may be Don Quixote’s antithesis, but he does represent common sense and folk wisdom. Seemingly opposites, they grow to understand one another and to take on one another’s characteristics. As the novel unfolds, Sancho, the practical and dull-minded squire begins to understand Don Quixote’s ‘game,’ and at points becomes a ‘player’ himself. He develops the capacity to change
what he sees into something else, at least in his own mind. The two complement one another perfectly. Cervantes may have been making us question what reality is at its core—is it the reality we see and think we know, or is it something else? To what point is Don Quixote mad? Certainly his code of chivalry is a gentler way of living than that of many of the people the pair encounter during their adventures. To what degree does Cervantes poke fun at Don Quixote and to what degree does he empathize with him? While Quixote may be overly passionate in his attempt to administer justice and right wrongs and while he seems to have lost the capacity to reason, the situation is ironic. Often it seems to take a madman to see the world as it really is. Don Quixote catches glimpses of the essence of things through his own peculiar lens, and so do we.

Cervantes had experienced what might be considered reality turned inside out, and perhaps that accounts for his playful yet sometime caustic look at the world. He certainly had cause to question whether there was any justice or kindness in his society. Don Quixote may very well be his mouthpiece, as there are certain thinly veiled autobiographical elements in the story. Cervantes was an educated man, but held a low-paying and not very prestigious job. Serving his country in the fight against the Turks who were prohibiting Spain from plying their ships on the Mediterranean, he lost his left arm (1571). Later he was captured by Moorish pirates (1574) who held him for ransom, but the Spanish government refused to pay for his release. After five years, some monks finally raised the money. Upon his return to Spain, he wrote his first novel, La Galatea, for which he was excommunicated from the church. He was jailed upon being falsely accused of embezzlement, and later was placed in debtor’s prison. He published the first part of Don Quixote in 1605, and while it was an immediate success, he was again incarcerated for having wounded a gentleman in a duel. The second portion of the novel was published in 1615, and Cervantes died the following year.

It is with good reason that Don Quixote still stands as one of the world’s most important novels. Miguel de Unamuno, a famous Spanish philosopher, said that Don Quixote is a symbol of the highest aspirations of man: heroism, truth, justice, glory, immortality. It is a novel that can be read on many levels, and you and your students will enjoy and remember the story forever! Good luck!

Don Quixote: The Enduring Legend

Just what is it that makes Don Quixote so enduring? This story still has the power to make us laugh and cry. What is it that Cervantes wanted us to take from this book? Centuries later, the