

Cervantes and the Brilliance of Don Quijote

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (May 2025)



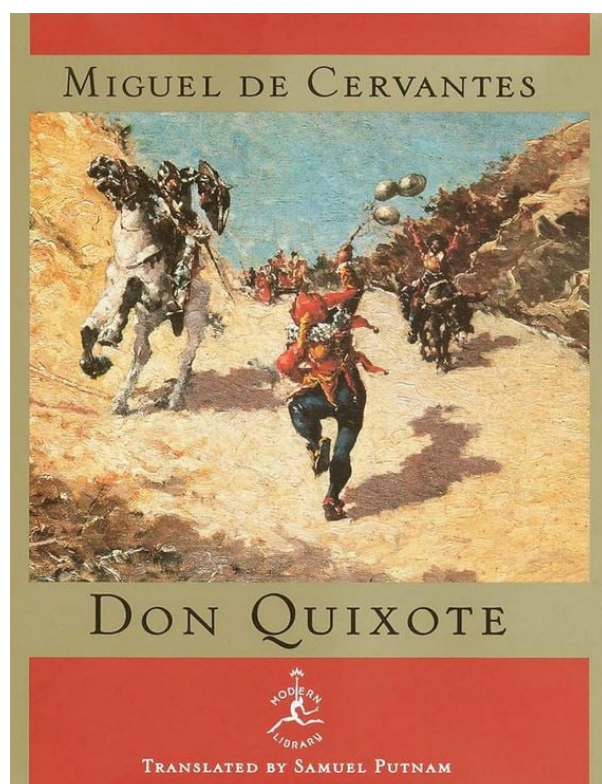
The Black Sun of don Quixote (Marcel Pajot, 21st C)

Let it be your aim that, by reading your story, the melancholy may be moved to laughter and the cheerful man made merrier still; let the simple not be bored, but may the clever admire your originality; let the grave ones not despise you, but let the prudent praise you. –Don Quijote, Prologue

Flying over Castilla-La Mancha, the region of Spain made famous by the Ingenious Gentleman of La Mancha, Don Quijote, in Miguel de Cervantes' novel *Don Quijote*; the arid, desolate plain fuels the imagination.

The view of La Mancha from the ground is equally sublime. From atop the Alcázar in Toledo, the landscape of La Mancha appears expansive. One only needs to ignore the present-day villages and imagine Don Quijote riding his skinny horse Rocinante and Sancho Panza a donkey that he describes as el Rucio, both animals' slow jog hardly creating a cloud of dust.

Don Quijote and Sancho Panza are legendary characters. Idealist and realist, respectively, they are complementary literary personages, not mere characters, in the first novel, to boot.



Don Quijote and Sancho confront us with time-immemorial, universal first principles, for *Don Quijote* is the ultimate school, the greatest university, and consummate education. That is one reason why *Don Quijote*, a work that was published in two installments, in 1605 and 1615, will continue to be read long after late postmodern man has exhausted itself with the illiteracy brought on by technological imbecility.

Cervantes tells us, "Nothing that is human is eternal but is ever declining from its beginning to its close." Life, death, and immortality are some of the cardinal themes that Cervantes presents readers with in *Don Quijote*, and in his shorter works, the series of twelve *Exemplary Novels* (*Novelas ejemplares*).

Considered the first novel, *Don Quijote* offers readers an exquisite narrative that has a beginning, middle, and end. Cervantes develops characters that are complex, inwardly, and in their behavior in society and the world at large. One rarely encounters more lovable, resiliently stubborn, and tragic characters in literature than Don Quijote, a romantic; Alonso Quijano is his birth name.

Cervantes sets the bar high for the novel. *Don Quijote* contains universal human emotions, passions, aspirations, will, and thought. *Don Quijote's* protean themes place Cervantes' masterpiece in the stratified company of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and the works of Shakespeare.

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's life (1547-1616) makes the creation of *Don Quijote* an inscrutable enigma. He was in prison for debt. The globe-trotting author fought in the Battle of Lepanto, where he was wounded and lost the use of his left hand. After that, he was called 'El Manco (one-handed man) de Lepanto.'

In 1588 Cervantes was appointed deputy purveyor for the Spanish Armada. His job was to stock the Armada with supplies. As a sailor, Cervantes was captured by pirates and kept prisoner in Algiers for five years. One can only imagine the sheer brutality of his imprisonment.

Don Quijote began as a parody of knighthood and chivalry. Cervantes pokes fun at medieval stories of romance. However, the story of the idealistic 'Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote'

took on a life of its own that might have even surprised the author himself. That is the nature of literature and literary imagination when allowed to flourish.

Don Quijote: More than Life

Don Quijote is a paradoxical work that, by accepting and embracing life on its own terms, evokes more than life. Cervantes was a man of the world, a realist who understood the strain that life and thought produce in thoughtful, sensitive souls. This is why *Don Quijote* launches readers to the limits of the possible, while respecting the limitations that life forces us to appropriate. Paradoxes abound in *Don Quijote*.

Cervantes jostles with life. In eschewing a life restrained by the limitations of human reality, Don Quijote leaves his home and goes on a dream-like adventure of discovery. Paradoxically, this signals the embrace of the worldly. Yet his embrace of the world is a form of realism that can be construed as clipping the wings of Don Quijote's imagination, his romance with chivalry.

Robust Don Quijote vacillates between desiring life-conditions that the mind desires but knows are not possible, and accepting the genuine possibilities that are presented to him. In effect, the poetic Don Quijote leads two lives, one for his dreams, the other governed by the contingencies of human reality. The middle ground between these possibilities is supplied to him by the practical Sancho.

Don Quijote's vivid imagination, what some critics refer to his *madness*, remains sharp enough to recognize the existence and force of human reality, which sets up the limiting conditions that the romantic Quijote attempts to battle. This is Cervantes sparring with life, what I consider to be Cervantes' desire to confront life by savoring *more than life*.

Cervantes draws his Spanish idioms, customs, and colloquialisms from the Spanish people and the Spain of his time. The Spanish language version of *Don Quijote* has an effect on native Spanish readers that is conveyed more intuitively than intellectually. The musicality of the Spanish language presents readers with a lyrical world of sights and sounds, and human reality itself as picaresque.

The Spanish people in Cervantes' time possessed an acute perspicuity about life-conditions—not to be confused with living-conditions. These were hardy, courageous people. This is evident in Spain's explorers and sailors, people who were not afraid to embark into the unknown. Apparently, Spaniards in Cervantes' time were a practical and wise sort. Don Quijote is considered *ingenioso*. This is one reason that explains *Don Quijote's* universal appeal.

Whether for practical or idealistic reasons, hardiness requires a cavalier attitude toward life that, in turn, springs from an imaginative sensibility regarding life and death. This sensibility is why I suggest that *Don Quijote* evokes *more than life*.

Don Quijote and Sancho Panza attempt to give life a beatdown, as it were, and readers go along for the ride, hoping they succeed. The wise Cervantes knows better.

Another way to pinpoint *Don Quijote's* universality is the realization that Cervantes' novel works on two levels. There are the wacky, even surreal, adventures that Quijote and Sancho embark on. These are as lyrical as they are visual. When presented to children in puppet theater or as modern cartoons, these boneheaded adventures make children roll over with laughter. There is hilarity in *Don Quijote*. The humor in the novel suspends the lurid optics of real world suffering, mayhem, and destruction. That is another aspect of the novel that makes it universal.

Does humor in *Don Quijote* come at the expense of life, or is it life itself that mocks man? This is a delicious entanglement of no small consequence that Cervantes' novel enlists readers to ponder. This is the time-proven question of appearance and reality in human life. As such, this Platonic problem makes Cervantes a metaphysician of human reality. If we understand Don Quijote to be cognizant of the dance of appearance and reality in human concerns, we must accept Don Quijote's quest to uncover truth as the ultimate existential concern. This is one of the multifaceted levels that *Don Quijote* presents to readers, one which I suggest is the main narrative that Cervantes intends, though the crafty Spanish author does so in allegory fashion.

Don Quijote's Battle with Appearance and Reality and Beyond

In the event that the starry-eyed Don Quijote stretches the possibilities of human reality to his own detriment, there is Sancho Panza to save the day. Their relationship serves as Cervantes' blueprint to present the two levels of the novel—appearance and truth—in an allegorical manner.

Don Quijote is a hunter who is nearing fifty years of age. He "was in the habit of reading books of chivalry with such pleasure and devotion as to lead him almost wholly to forget the life of a hunter and even the administration of his estate."

One fine day Don Quijote makes up his mind to address the ills of the world, "For he could not but blame himself for what the world was losing by his delay, so many were the wrongs that were to be righted, the grievances to be redressed, the abuses to be done away with, and the duties to be performed." This is the beginning and culprit of Don Quijote's misadventure.

Throughout the ordeals, ridiculous and crude, that Don Quijote and Sancho Panza experience, it is Sancho's aphorisms that

bring coherence to their misadventures. Sancho's final heuristic advice for Don Quijote, while the hidalgo is in his death bed, rounds out the many tales contained in *Don Quijote*. Sancho tells the idealistic nobleman: "Ah master ... don't die, your Grace, but take my advice and go on living for many years to come; for the greatest madness that a man can be guilty of in this life is to die without good reason, without anyone's killing him, slain only by the hands of melancholy."

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Pedro Blas González is Professor of Philosophy in Florida. He earned his doctoral degree in Philosophy at DePaul University in 1995. Dr. González has published extensively on leading Spanish philosophers, such as Ortega y Gasset and Unamuno. His books have included [*Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay*](#), [*Ortega's 'Revolt of the Masses' and the Triumph of the New Man*](#), [*Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality and Autonomy*](#) and [*Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity*](#). He also published a translation and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset's last work to appear in English, "Medio siglo de Filosofía" (1951) in [*Philosophy Today*](#) Vol. 42 Issue 2 (Summer 1998). His most recent book is [*Philosophical Perspective on Cinema*](#).

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