

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Cyrano de Bergerac

by Edmond Rostand

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Cyrano de Bergerac

Notes

This classic play centers around the universal theme of the conflict between inner worth and physical appearance. The play is set in the seventeenth century, and Cyrano, the main character, embodies the romantic values of honesty, courage, wit, and honor, which are associated with this period in history. Along with beautiful love poetry, this play is full of action and humor. It is interesting to note that the character of Cyrano is based on a historical figure. There is also a historical basis for other characters in the play, including Roxane and Le Bret. A brief biography of the historical Cyrano is included with this unit.

All quotations and page references come from the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Classics edition of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, copyright 2006.

Cyrano de Bergerac

A Brief Biography

The actual person upon whom this play is based, the real Cyrano de Bergerac, was born in Paris in 1619. He grew up in Mauvieses where he met Henri Le Bret, who became his lifelong friend. As a youth, Cyrano was beaten by his teachers at the College of Beauvais. In order to defend himself, Cyrano began to practice using a sword, and he became very proficient at dueling.

After college, Cyrano and Le Bret joined a company of musketeers. Cyrano had a long nose, swaggering manner, quick wit, and an eagerness to duel. He was wounded twice in battle. While recovering, he was helped by his cousin Madeleine Robineau, who was the historical basis for Rostand's character, Roxane. Madeleine married a man named Christophe de Champagne. There was no historical record of any romance between Cyrano and Madeleine.

Like his fictional counterpart, the historical Cyrano began to write poetry. He also fought a dozen men who were hired to harm one of Cyrano's friends. Cyrano made many enemies because of his dueling, his outspokenness, and his criticisms of the Church.

In 1654, Cyrano was struck on the head by a wooden beam. It was unknown at the time whether or not this incident was an accident. He died of his wounds six months later at the age of thirty-six.

Cyrano de Bergerac

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define vocabulary words used in this play.
2. point out incidents in the play that serve as comic relief.
3. discuss life in the seventeenth century as portrayed in this play; consider the morality of the time, the role of women in society, the poet's need for a patron, and the political climate; point out incidents in which Rostand seems to poke fun at licentious behavior.
4. cite incidents from the story to demonstrate that the conflict between appearance and reality is a major theme of *Cyrano de Bergerac*.
5. discuss the reasons this play has stood the test of time and is considered a classic.
6. comment on the ways Rostand builds Cyrano's reputation before his first entrance on stage so that the audience can accept him as the romantic hero.
7. discuss whether or not Christian is an honorable man.
8. discuss the ways the Comte de Guiche evolves by the end of the play; comment on whether or not he is an honorable man.
9. define the term "willing suspension of disbelief"; in light of the definition, discuss whether or not the following incidents in the play are believable:
 - Cyrano single-handedly fights and defeats one hundred men;
 - Roxane safely travels through enemy lines;
 - Roxane fails to recognize Cyrano as the man under the balcony and as the author of the letters.
10. write a character sketch of Ragueneau; point out the ways he is similar to Cyrano.
11. discuss whether or not Roxane is a vain, frivolous woman and how she changes by the end of the play; consider the position of women in seventeenth century society.
12. point out incidents in the play to support the following overall theme: The freedom to be an individual is more important than wealth or physical comforts.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Review the biography of the historical Cyrano de Bergerac. Which incidents from the play are taken directly from his real life history?
2. What power does Count de Guiche have to harm Roxane? How does she fight him? How would a woman in a similar situation today handle the problem?
3. A popular theme in literature is the conflict between appearance and reality. Cite incidents from this play to support the idea that this theme is a major one in *Cyrano de Bergerac*.
4. List three reasons that this classic play remains popular today.
5. What measures does Rostand take so that the audience is fully prepared for Cyrano's appearance and to accept him as the romantic hero in this play?
6. Write a brief character sketch of Christian. Consider whether or not he is an honorable man and if he is worthy of Roxane's love. What evidence is there that Cyrano likes and respects Christian?
7. Characters frequently evolve or grow by the end of the play. Discuss whether or not each of the following characters changes in the end and cite incidents from the play to support your answer: Cyrano, Count de Guiche, Roxane, and Ragueneau.
8. Define "willing suspension of disbelief." Briefly summarize one incident in this play that seems to be impossible or unbelievable. Discuss the ways that Rostand prepares the audience for this incident so that they are able to suspend their disbelief for the duration of the play.
9. Discuss Cyrano's white plume as a symbol in this play.
10. State a theme for this play based on Cyrano's refusal to accept De Guiche as his patron.
11. What is ironic about Cyrano's death?
12. Write an alternative ending to this play; assume that Cyrano reveals his true identity as the author of the letters to Roxane right after Christian's death. Include whether or not you believe they could have actually had a good life as husband and wife.
13. Critics refer to Cyrano as an idealistic romantic hero. List the qualities that Cyrano possesses which qualify him to be an idealist.
14. Define the following vocabulary words from the play: swashbuckler, muscatel, scabbard, obsequious, stentorian, intrepid, madrigals, truckle, salubrious, ripostes, panache, and rakehell.
15. List three incidents in the play that provide the audience with comic relief.

Cyrano de Bergerac

A Performance at the Hotel de Buorgogne

Act I, Scene I

Vocabulary

burghers – middle-class citizens (bourgeois); merchants
falsetto – a high-pitched male voice
foils – fencing swords
lackeys – low-level servants
marquises – noblemen who rank one below the ranking of a duke
oblong – rectangular
pages – messenger servants
proscenium – an area of a theater between the orchestra and the curtain
troopers – soldiers on horseback; cavalrymen

1. List two ways that Rostand lets the audience know that the play is set in 1640.

2. What do the two Musketeers, the First Lackey, and the Guardsman all have in common? What do you think Rostand is saying about life in France at this point in history?

8. What adornments or decorations does Cyrano consider to be of more importance than gloves, ribbons, or lace?

9. Why do you suppose Cyrano decides to compose a ballad while he is dueling with Valvert? What does Cyrano plan to do just as he finishes reciting the refrain?

10. What evidence is there that the audience's opinion of Cyrano changes after he duels with Valvert?

Act IV, Scene VIII

Vocabulary

frivolous – thoughtless, careless

1. How has Roxane changed since she last saw Christian on their wedding day? Why is Christian disturbed by this change?

Act IV, Scene IX

1. Why does Christian insist that Cyrano tell Roxane the truth?
