

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
the Novel Club of Cleveland
February 7, 2017

Place: Catherine LaCroix's home

Novel: Miguel Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

Discussants: Biography: Peter Haas; Critical Analysis: Joyce Kessler

Members: about 30

Guests: Mort Levin, plus others

Committee reports; Louise Mooney, chair, discussed progress of Program Committee on the choice of novels for program year 2017-2018. The proposed theme is: Novels Based on Classical Themes. A list of books has been developed and members are busily engaged in reviewing them for presentation at the annual meeting at the home of Tom Slavin, on Sunday, April 23.

Celebratory dinner: Cost to members was \$921; 42 members and guests attended; James paid for the postage of the invitation.

Secretary: on proposing members: 3 letters and approval by the Council of Admin. Club actively looking for members.

Also, there are many missing papers, both for the electronic file and for the archive. Contact James and Ham. Members urged to submit past papers.

Biographical sketch:

Peter Haas prepared the biographical sketch:

Cervantes was born on September 29, 1547, and died 68 years later. He died within a few days of Shakespeare, only 800 miles away. But the comparison ends there, since Shakespeare wrote primarily for the theater, part-owner of a theatrical company. Cervantes on the other hand started as an enlisted member of the Spanish Marine infantry. He served and was wounded in the famous battle of Lepanto, off the coast of Greece (Ottoman Empire). In this battle, he lost the use of his left arm. Later, he served under Ponce de Leon. He was on a ship off Algiers when it was captured and spent several years in prison, eventually ransomed in 1580 by his family and the "Order of the Most Holy Trinity".

After gaining his freedom, he reenlisted but soon thereafter was either forced out or retired. At this point, his literary career begins. His experience becomes the basis of two plays, *Life in Algiers* and *The Dungeons of Algiers*, places where he was imprisoned. About this time, 1585, his romance, *La Galatea*, appeared. At this point he fathers a child, has a mistress, marries but later his wife enters a convent as he bounces from job-to-job.

According to Peter's research, part of *Don Quixote* may have been written while Cervantes was in jail for a crime or financial irregularity, starting in 1601.

The book became an overnight success when it was published, leading to his membership in the prestigious "Los Esclavos del Santo Sacramento", a major literary society in Spain. The book eventually enabled him to get a pension

from the Duke of Lemos, from 1608 until his death in 1616. He is buried in a convent cemetery in Madrid. His bones were lost, as might be expected of the author of the Don. But they were eventually found and reburied again in the same convent cemetery.

Critical Review: Joyce Kessler

According to Joyce Kessler, in her marvelous paper, the Don is not your typical romance of knighthood, “not like most novels, not exactly a comedy, nothing like a tragedy.” The Don has been driven mad by too much reading, possibly a caution for Novel Club members.

The book offers a new set of possibilities: a blending of epic and medieval romance, “capitalizing on an existing literary genre recycling events neither heroic or comic...into a hilarious, delusional, proposition of reality.” Following Cervantes example Joyce continued, “early novelists employed a plot-less picaresque structure, leading eventually to Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, and later to even Umberto Ecco’s Baudolino.” She added that the narrative structure is easy to follow even into our own times.

But there is a majesty and grace in the character of the Don. She added “In the clash of terror and silliness...we have an evolving appreciation of the Don’s knightly bearing.” In this process, his knight errantry leads to “significant hits to body and soul”. Maybe this harks back to Cervantes own experience as a wounded captive.

Part II was written ten years later, in part to deal with a number of writers, who sought to take advantage of the popularity of the Don, with their own versions of the story. Cervantes may have realized that many people, according to Joyce, were being given a “false impression of his deeds, his honor and even his identity.” There is a need for Cervantes to recapture the story by eliminating the flaws and misunderstandings of the Don, as in the story of the encounter with the Knight of the Mirrors, managing by luck to defeat (unseat) his foe. According to Joyce, “this victory does not reverse the gathering darkness of his subsequent encounters.”

The remainder of the book is described as cruel deceits for both the Don and Sancho Panza, “but does not seem to demoralize the Don as much as the Squire (Sancho).”

Finally, the Don takes to his bed confesses to the sin of knight-errantry, wills his property to his niece and ‘gives up the ghost’”. Joyce continued, “...most scholars agree that the serious purpose of the book is hard to pin down”, even though it has a positive image of the knight who embodies truth, love and courage. As Nabokov has written, “He stands for everything that is gentle, forlorn, unselfish, pure, unselfish and gallant.”

Questions:

1. Don Quixote is a type of “buddy literature”. How does it develop over time? What do we learn at the end? Several said the story became more serious at the end. According to some members, it appeared to underplay the relationship

between the two protagonists, even at times making them antagonistic. But Sancho realizes that it is the Don's "my view: or the highway."

2. Does Cervantes himself relate to the Don or Sancho? It may appear that he can relate to Don Quixote because of his setbacks and wounds. One view that was expressed is that a current political one that the Don appears to mirror the antics of the Donald (Trump) in his mad fights, tilting at windmills.

3. How would you distinguish the two parts of the book? There is a serious discussion about the two aspects of the Don's personality. Some of psychologist members had some opinion on his sanity.

4-6. Cruelty in both parts of the book: what is your view? Do they come out even? Also, there was some opinions on the influence of Spanish life of the period in the book. One member mentioned that there were a number of anti-Semitic references in the book, which was rampant in the period of the Spanish Inquisition.

Submitted by Art Stupay