

# ***Cyrano de Bergerac* by Edmond Rostand\***

## **STUDY QUESTIONS Act I**

### **Recalling**

1. Why has Christian come to the play? What concern does he express to Ligniere?
2. Prior to his entry on stage, what do we learn of Cyrano's appearance and personality from the descriptions of his friends?
3. Briefly retell what happens when Montfleury tries to begin the play. How does Cyrano appease the audience?
4. List three of the comments Cyrano makes up about his nose. Describe his duel with Valvert.
5. What does Cyrano confide to Le Bret after the crowd leaves? How does the duenna's visit change his mood?
6. What favor does Ligniere ask of Cyrano, and how does Cyrano respond?

### **Interpreting**

7. What does the fact that Cyrano gives away his money to refund the tickets show about him?
8. In his verbal battles in Act I, what skills and qualities does Cyrano display?
9. What does Cyrano's eagerness to take on the enemies of Ligniere reveal about him?
10. What does Cyrano mean when he says, "I may not cut a stylish figure, but I hold my soul erect"? List two actions that illustrate this statement.

### **Extending**

11. Do you think pride like Cyrano's is foolish, or do you find it admirable? Why?

## **STUDY QUESTIONS Act II**

### **Recalling**

1. Briefly relate Cyrano's conversation with Roxane in the beginning of Act II. What news does she give him, and what promise does he make to her?
2. Describe De Guiche's offer to Cyrano. What is Cyrano's response?
3. What does Christian do to prove himself to the Cadets?
4. Relate the terms of the private agreement between Cyrano and Christian concerning Roxane.

### **Interpreting**

5. In referring to his triumph over a hundred men, Cyrano tells Roxane, "Oh, I've done better since then." What does he mean?
6. What is your impression of Roxane from her conversation with Cyrano? How does she treat her cousin? Do you think she deserves his love? Explain.
7. What does his offer to Cyrano reveal about De Guiche's attitude toward other people? What does Cyrano's refusal reveal about *his* attitude toward himself and his art?
8. Why do you think Cyrano makes his agreement with Christian? What might he hope to gain?

### **Extending**

9. Do you think the agreement between Cyrano and Christian is practical? What problems do you foresee in it?

\* All questions and assignments from *Appreciating Literature* (NY: Scribner-Macmillan, 1984).

## **LITERARY FOCUS: Dramatic Irony**

**Dramatic irony** is a form of irony that occurs when a character acts without knowing an important piece of information that the audience knows -- for example, if the audience knows that a character is in danger, but the character does not know. Dramatic irony can occur in both fiction and drama, but it is an especially effective way of building tension in drama.

### **Thinking About Dramatic Irony**

1. Explain the dramatic irony in the scene between Cyrano and Roxane in the pastry shop. What piece of information does the audience know that a character on stage lacks? How does dramatic irony add to the tension in this scene?
2. In what way is Christian's attempt to provoke Cyrano in front of the Cadets another instance of dramatic irony?

## **STUDY QUESTIONS Act III**

### **Recalling**

1. In the beginning of Act III, what does Roxane tell Cyrano about Christian and his letters?
2. Explain the circumstances that lead to Cyrano's speech under the balcony to Roxane.
3. During the balcony speech what does Cyrano tell Roxane about his feelings for her? Describe Roxane's response to him.
4. Explain how Roxane arranges for her marriage to Christian.
5. What does Cyrano do to delay De Guiche, and what does De Guiche do to retaliate?

### **Interpreting**

6. Describe Cyrano's mixed feelings when he speaks to Roxane unseen. Why might he be both happy and sad?
7. Explain how Cyrano's speech to Roxane and his deception of De Guiche each represent a triumph of the imagination over physical reality.
8. An idealist is someone who follows his or her beliefs beyond the point of practicality and who acts as if the world were better than it really is. From what you have seen of Cyrano so far, show how he is an idealist.

### **Extending**

9. Do you think a love like Cyrano's is actually greater than a love like Christian's? Why or why not?

## **LITERARY FOCUS: Staging and Character**

Because plays are written to be performed by actors for an audience, acting is a vital part of any dramatic work. Actors greatly increase the impact of a play by creating living, breathing people from the playwright's words. In addition, actors can emphasize certain aspects of the characters, presenting the audience with a particular interpretation not simply of their characters but of the play as a whole.

The role of Cyrano is a favorite one for actors because it is so colorful and lends itself to different interpretations. Some actors have played Cyrano as a big-voiced swashbuckler; others, as a soft-spoken poet. Some actors have emphasized Cyrano's wit; others, his pride; still others, his bittersweet love of Roxane. In order to appreciate the play fully, you should imagine what dimensions an actor's performance might add to Cyrano's words.

### Thinking About Staging and Character

Look again at the balcony scene in Act III of the play, and decide how you would direct the actor playing the role of Cyrano. You might want to keep the following questions in mind:

1. How far would Cyrano be from Roxane? Would he look at Roxane throughout his speech to her? Would he move or stand still?
2. Would Cyrano speak softly or in full voice? Would he grow louder or softer during his speech to Roxane?
3. What emotions would he show during the scene? Would he seem happy or sad? How would he show his love for Roxane? At what lines would he show the greatest emotion?

## STUDY QUESTIONS Act IV

### Recalling

1. What mission does Cyrano undertake each morning at Arras?
2. How does Roxane explain the reason for her visit to the camp to Christian? According to her, how and why has her love for him changed?
3. How does Christian feel about Roxane's declaration? What does he ask Cyrano to do?
4. What event prevents Cyrano from fulfilling Christian's request? What does Cyrano tell Christian about Roxane's love?

### Interpreting

5. What new dimensions does Roxane reveal in her conversation with Christian? What does she fail to see?
6. What discoveries about Roxane and Cyrano does Christian make in this act? What new sides to his character do we see?
7. Why does Cyrano not tell Roxane the truth about the letters? Why does he not tell Christian the truth about Roxane?
8. Do you agree with Christian when he says that it is really Cyrano whom Roxane loves? Explain.

### Extending

9. How do you think Roxane would have responded if Cyrano had been able to tell her the truth about the letters and his feelings for her?
10. Do you think Cyrano will reveal his feelings to Roxane? Why or why not?

## LITERARY FOCUS: Dramatic Plot

A play follows a **plot structure** that is similar in many ways to the plot structure of a story. In fact, since drama is an older form of literature than fiction, most of our ideas about plot originally come from ancient writers' observations about drama. The plot structure of a play, however, is usually defined more sharply than that of a story or novel. Because the audience at a play does not have the luxury of rereading what they have just seen, every speech and event must clearly advance the action and develop the characters.

In a well-made play, the exposition establishes the play's overall setting and introduces the main characters. Conflict appears very early in a drama; the rising action complicates this conflict, and the climax points toward the final outcome of this conflict. The falling action grows logically from the climax, and the resolution provides a satisfying conclusion to the play.

### Thinking About Dramatic Plot

In the first four acts of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, identify the exposition, the major conflicts, the rising action, and the climax.

## STUDY QUESTIONS Act V

### Recalling

1. According to the nuns, what has happened since Christian's death? What do they and Le Bret reveal about Cyrano's circumstances?
2. Describe Cyrano's condition when he arrives at the convent. How does he disguise it from Roxane?
3. How does Cyrano finally reveal his feelings to Roxane? How does she respond?
4. What "old enemies" does Cyrano see in his dying vision? What are his last words?

### Interpreting

5. Why do you think Cyrano finally reveals his love to Roxane?
6. What does Roxane mean when she says that she has lost the man she loved twice? Do you agree?
7. Show that Cyrano meets his death in a style that is consistent with his life. What do his very last words mean?
8. Cyrano says of himself that he "was everything and was nothing." Why would he make such a comment about his life? Do you agree with him?

### Extending

9. Cyrano is a very colorful character. Do you think that he is too flamboyant for real life, or do you believe that people like Cyrano actually exist?

### VIEWPOINT

The introduction to one of the first English translations of Rostand's play notes that Cyrano's idealism might serve as a model for all of us:

"The brilliant author of *Cyrano* tells of things better than those we see around us, of things of beauty which [we might] bring somewhat nearer to our touch, if we will only have the courage to live up to them." -- A. Cohn

What ideals does Cyrano live up to in this play, and why might it take courage to live up to them? In what way does the play point to a better world than the one in which we live?

### LITERARY FOCUS The Total Effect

In staging a play, a director tries to present the audience with an integrated view of the entire work. *Cyrano de Bergerac* presents a fascinating challenge to any director, because it is full of contrasting emotions and effects that move audiences both to laughter and to tears. Anyone who directs this rich work must be aware of the impact of each of the various elements in the play --its plot, characters, setting, symbols, irony, and themes -- on the work as a whole.

### Thinking About Plot, Character, and Setting

1. Explain how the falling action and resolution of the play follow logically from the play's major conflict and its climax. Did you find the ending a satisfying conclusion to the play? Why or why not?
2. Romantic heroes are colorful characters, more dashing and flamboyant than the people around them. In addition, they are usually attractive and inspire great love. Using examples from the play, explain why Cyrano could be regarded as a romantic hero. In what ways is he an *unusual* romantic hero?
3. Identify the setting of each act of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Briefly explain how the action of each act is appropriate to the setting in which it occurs.

### Thinking About Symbol

4. The image of the white plume appears several times in the play: for example, in the exchange between Cyrano and De Guiche in Act IV. What might the white plume symbolize in this exchange? What does it come to symbolize at the end of the play?

### Thinking About Irony

5. Since irony often involves a gap between appearance and reality, why is it fitting that Cyrano's life should be so full of irony?

### Thinking About Theme

6. What does the play say about the relationship between physical and spiritual beauty? Is one more "real" than the other? Explain.

7. According to the play, why should we admire an idealist like Cyrano? Does the play suggest that idealists are ultimately defeated by the real world? Explain.

8. What are the good and bad sides to individualism like Cyrano's, according to the play?

9. What is the value of poetry and beautiful language, according to the play? Do you think the play places too high a value on language? Why or why not?

### VOCABULARY: English Words Borrowed from French

William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066 from Normandy, a province on the northern coast of France. The Norman Conquest made French the official language of the ruling class of England, and a tremendous number of French words came into the English language. The English word *language* itself comes from the French word *langage* meaning "speech." In most cases, the spellings and pronunciations of the French loan-words gradually changed as they entered the English language.

All of the following words, taken from the English version of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, were originally French words and have since become part of our language. Using a dictionary, write the original French word and note any changes in spelling.

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| 1. cadet   | 6. brilliant |
| 2. stage   | 7. danger    |
| 3. secret  | 8. tremble   |
| 4. fool    | 9. flower    |
| 5. courage | 10. plume    |

In English we also use many French words *without* changing their French spellings and pronunciations -- for example, *tableau* and *gazette*. Another French word used by speakers of English is *panache*, which is actually the last word that Cyrano speaks in the original French text of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Look up the various meanings of *panache*, and explain why the word is a fitting one for Cyrano.

### COMPOSITION

**Writing About Character** -- Of all of Cyrano's speeches, choose the one that you think best sums up his character. Identify the speech, noting where it occurs in the play, to whom it is addressed, and why Cyrano speaks it. Then explain what it reveals about Cyrano, and why you think it represents his character so well. You should take into account both what Cyrano says in the speech and the style in which he says it. Use quotations from the speech to support your opinion.

**Writing a Speech for a Character** -- Look again at Cyrano's "nose" speech to Valvert in Act I, and add new descriptions to it. Follow the form that Cyrano uses; for example, "Dramatic: When it bleeds, it must be like the Red Sea!" Try to match Cyrano's humor.