Miguel de Cervantes, born in Alcalá de Henares in 1547, was the son of a surgeon who presented himself as a nobleman, although Cervantes's mother seems to have been a descendant of Jewish converts to Christianity. Little is known of his early years. Four poems published in Madrid by his teacher, the humanist López de Hoyos, mark his literary début, punctuated by his sudden departure for Rome, where he resided for several months. In 1571 he fought valiantly at Lepanto, where he was wounded in his left hand by a harquebus shot. The following year he took part in Juan of Austria's campaigns in Navarino, Corfu, and Tunis. Returning to Spain by sea, he fell into the hands of Algerian corsairs. After five years spent as a slave in Algiers, and four unsuccessful escape attempts, he was ransomed by the Trinitarians and returned to his family in Madrid. In 1585, a few months after his marriage to Catalina de Salazar, twenty-two years younger than he, Cervantes published a pastoral novel, La Galatea, at the same time that some of his plays, now lost except for El trato de argel and El cerco de Numancia, were playing on the stages of Madrid. Two years later he left for Andalusia, which he traversed for ten years, first as a purveyor for the Invincible Armada and later as a tax collector. As a result of money problems with the government, Cervantes was thrown into jail in Seville in 1597; but in 1605 he was in Valladolid, then seat of the government, just when the immediate success of the first part of his Don Quixote, published in Madrid, signaled his return to the literary world. In 1607, he settled in Madrid just after the return there of the monarch Philip III. During the last nine years of his life, in spite of deaths in the family and personal setbacks, Cervantes solidified his reputation as a writer. He published the Novelas ejemplares in 1613, the Viaje del Parnaso in 1614, and in 1615, the Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses and the second part of Don Quixote, a year after the mysterious Avellaneda had published his apocryphal sequel to the novel. At the same time, Cervantes continued working on Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda, which he completed three days before his death on April 22, 1616, and which appeared posthumously in January 1617.

What we know of Cervantes's life is the result of a long series of inquiries begun during the first three decades of the seventeenth century. But the most significant contributions have been those of scholars in the early part of this century, especially Cristóbal Pérez Pastor. The documents that have been published through their efforts come from public, parochial, and notarial archives, and they generally refer to Cervantes's captivity, the posts that he occupied in Andalusia, and certain other important events in his life. Few of these documents, however, cast any light on his life as a writer, much less on his personality. We need a methodical commentary on these documents to bring up to date the sketch which James Fitzmaurice Kelly published in Oxford in 1917: Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra; reseña documentada de su vida. We also need a critical biography worthy of the name. Luis Astrana Marín's big book Vida ejemplar y heroica de Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (Madrid, 1948-1958, 7 vols.) suffers from a less-than-solid methodology as well as a number of personal biases. Still it contains a considerable amount of information and so remains an essential work of reference. Rosa Rossi's essay Escuchar a Cervantes (Valladolid, 1988) attempts to do away with the idealized portrait of Cervantes by interpreting his life as the confluence of his supposed Jewish origins and his latent homosexual tendencies. Certain recent biographers--such as Andrés Trapiello (Las vidas de Cervantes, Barcelona, 1993) and, not without a hint of scandal, Fernando Arrabal (Un esclavo llamado Cervantes, Paris and Madrid, 1996)--have revived the tradition of romanticized biographies in which the biographer's personality obliterates that of the writer whose life is the supposed subject.

The biography written by the author of this note (Jean Canavaggio, Cervantès, revised and amplified edition, Paris: Fayard, 1997) differs from its predecessors in its pretensions. Unlike other works, it does not attempt to plumb the depths of the irrational in order to decipher the symbolism that Cervantes's fiction presumably contains. Rather than "explain" Cervantes, a man who disappeared almost four centuries ago and whose creation has taken on a life of its own, this biography aspires to "tell his story" better. We must first establish with all the necessary rigor what is actually known of Cervantes's actions and experiences, and we must exclude the legends, such as his having studied at the Jesuit school in Seville or his having composed the Quixote while in prison. Then Cervantes, who was an obscure participant in a heroic adventure, a lucid observer of a time of doubt and crisis, and a very personal interpreter of Spain at a crucial moment in its history, must be placed in his own milieu and his own time, better known now because of the work of recent historians. We must do our best to find that man. As we trace this life which has become a destiny that we attempt to render comprehensible, the book offers us a likely profile of a figure who is not the same individual that his friends and family knew, nor the "rare genius" whose profile
Cervantes himself created, nor the figure which, since his death, has arisen from a series of myths which some day ought to be looked into. In other words, we are looking for the missing profile which we assign to the secret narrator hidden behind his masks, this absent one who is always present, whose voice is his alone and, through the magic of his writing, is always recognizable even among a thousand others.

No name is more associated with Spanish literature — and perhaps with classic literature in general — than that of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. He was the author of *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha*, which is sometimes referred to as the first European novel and which has been translated into nearly every major language, making it one of the most widely distributed books after the Bible.

Although few people in the English-speaking world have read *Don Quijote* in its original Spanish, it nevertheless has had its impact on the English language, giving us expressions such as "the pot calling the kettle black," "tilting at windmills," "a wild-goose chase" and "the sky's the limit." Also, our word "quixotic" comes from the name of the title character. (*Quijote* is often spelled as *Quixote*.)

Despite his immense contributions to world literature, Cervantes never became wealthy as a result of his work, and not much is known about the early parts of his life. He was born in 1547 as the son of surgeon Rodrigo de Cervantes in Alcalá de Henares, a small town near Madrid; it is believed that his mother, Leonor de Cortinas, was the descendant of Jews who had converted to Christianity.

As a young boy he moved from town to town as his father sought work; later he would study in Madrid under Juan López de Hoyos, a well-known humanist, and in 1570 he went to Rome to study.

Ever loyal to Spain, Cervantes joined a Spanish regiment in Naples and received a wound in a battle at Lepanco that permanently injured his left hand. As a result, he picked up the nickname of *el manco de Lepanto* (the cripple of Lepanco).

His battle injury was only the first of Cervantes' troubles. He and his brother Rodrigo were on a ship that was captured by pirates in 1575. It wasn't until five years later that Cervantes was released — but only after four unsuccessful escape attempts and after his family and friends raised 500 escudos, an enormous sum of money that would drain the family financially, as ransom. Cervantes' first play, *Los tratos de Argel* ("The Treatments of Algiers"), was based on his experiences as a captive, as was the later *"Los baños de Argel"* ("The Baths of Algiers").

In 1584 Cervantes married the much younger Catalina de Salazar y Palacios; they had no children, although he had a daughter from an affair with an actress.

A few years later, Cervantes left his wife, faced severe financial difficulties, and was jailed at least three times (once as a murder suspect, although there was insufficient evidence to try him). He eventually settled in Madrid in 1606, shortly after the first part of "Don Quijote" was published.

Although publication of the novel didn't make Cervantes rich, it eased his financial burden and gave him recognition and the ability to devote more time to writing. He published the second part of *Don Quijote* in 1615 and wrote dozens of other plays, short stories, novels and poems (although many critics have little good to say about his poetry).

Cervantes' final novel was *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* ("The Exploits of Persiles and Sigismunda"), published three days before his death on April 23, 1616. Coincidently, Cervantes' date of death is the same as William Shakespeare's, although in reality Cervantes' death came 10 days sooner because Spain and England used different calendars at the time.
Quick — name a fictional character from a literary work written about 400 years ago.

Since you're reading this page, you probably had little difficulty coming up with Don Quijote, the title character of Miguel de Cervantes' famous novel. But how many others could you name? Except for characters developed by William Shakespeare, probably few or none.

At least in Western cultures, Cervantes' pioneering novel, *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha*, is one of the few that has been popular for so long. It has been translated into nearly every major language, inspired some 40 motion pictures, and added words and phrases to our vocabulary. In the English-speaking world, Quijote is easily the most well-known literary figure who was the product of a non-English-speaking author in the past 500 years.

Clearly, Quijote's character has endured, even if few people today read the entire novel except as a part of college coursework. Why? Perhaps it is because there is something in most of us that, like Quijote, can't always distinguish totally between reality and the imagination. Perhaps it's because of our idealistic ambitions, and we like seeing someone continuing to strive despite the disappointments of reality. Perhaps it's simply because we can laugh at a part of ourselves in the numerous humorous incidents that happen during Quijote's life.

Here is a brief overview of the novel that might give you some idea what to expect if you decide to tackle Cervantes' monumental work:

**Plot summary:** The title character, a middle-aged gentleman from the La Mancha region of Spain, becomes enchanted with the idea of chivalry and decides to seek adventure. Eventually, he is accompanied by a sidekick, Sancho Panza. With a dilapidated horse and equipment, together they seek glory, adventure, often in the honor of Dulcinea, Quijote's love. Quijote doesn't always act honorably, however, and neither do many of the other minor characters in the novel. Eventually Quijote is brought down to reality and dies shortly thereafter.

**Major characters:** The title character, **Don Quijote**, is far from static; indeed, he reinvents himself several times. He often is a victim of his own delusions and undergoes metamorphoses as he gains or loses touch with reality. The sidekick, **Sancho Panza**, may be the most complex figure in the novel. Not particularly sophisticated, Panza struggles with his attitudes toward Quijote and eventually becomes his most loyal companion despite repeated arguments. **Dulcinea** is the character that is never seen, for she was born in Quijote's imagination (although modeled after a real person).

**Novel structure:** Quijote's novel, while not the first novel written, nevertheless had little on which it could be modeled. Modern readers may find the episodic novel too long and redundant as well as inconsistent in style. Some of the novel's quirks are intentional (in fact, some portions of the latter parts of the book were written in response to public comments on the portion that was published first), while others are products of the times.

Cervantes was born in Alcala de Henares, a town 20 miles from Madrid, on September 29, 1547. He was named Miguel for Saint Michael, whose patron day is September 29. Being the son of a barber-surgeon, he traveled around a lot, moving wherever his father's services were needed. His family was large; he was only the fourth son out of what was to become seven children in total. Not much is known about his educational background. It is supposed that he studied under the Jesuits as a child and in his late teens and very early twenties, under the tutelage of the principal of a municipal school in Madrid named Juan Lopez de Hoyos. Unlike most writers of his time, he apparently did not go to university.
In 1570, he left Spain for Italy, a move usually done by the Spaniards of his time to further their careers. Once there he joined the Spanish infantry in Naples. Around this time, the relations between the Ottoman Empire and the countries in the Mediterranean were very much strained. This was due to the fact that the Ottoman Empire was quickly expanding its power over these countries. In 1571, a Turkish fleet invaded Cyprus, an island country near Greece. This move made the confrontation between the Turks and the Spanish infantries located in nearby Italy inevitable. Cervantes valiantly fought in the Gulf of Lepanto, an area near Greece. He was badly wounded in his left hand and thus earned the nickname "Manco de Lepanto" (Maimed of Lepanto). After that, he continued fighting in the Mediterranean.

Something incredible happened when he tried to come back home to Spain in 1575. His ship was captured by pirates and he was taken as a slave to Algiers, a country in northern Africa. It is believed that his life as a slave from 1575 to 1580 became the source of inspiration for some episodes in Don Quixote. In 1580, his family, with the help of the friars of a Trinitarian monastery, was finally able to raise the ransom money necessary to free him.

Spain had changed drastically during Cervantes's absence. Prices had increased dramatically and the standard of living for people like his middle-class family had fallen. As a sad consequence, Cervantes would spend the rest of his life employment-hopping and being continually short of money. But it was his return to Spain which began his career as a major literary figure. In 1585, he published his first long work, La Galatea, a prose pastoral romance. Its publication brought him success with the reading public. After this pastoral romance, Cervantes decided to try his luck as a dramatist. His plays were average in comparison to the Don Quixote which he was to write in 1604.

When the First Part of Don Quixote came out in 1605, it was an immediate success. It was such a success that it was translated into English, French, and Italian within the next twenty years. In 1615, a year before his death, the Second Part came out and was just as successful. It is believed that the Second Part is richer and more profound than the First.

Unfortunately, all of this success resulted in no profit for Cervantes, who had sold the publishing rights of his work. The other major works that he published were 12 Novelas Ejemplares (12 Exemplary Novels, 1613) and Ocho Comedias y Ocho Entremeses (Eight Comedies and Eight Interludes, 1615). In the latter, Cervantes poignantly bids goodbye to the world in the prologue; he obviously foresaw his imminent death.

The influence of Don Quixote on later literature was astounding. The work, which is in essence a parody of the time's popular chivalric romances, had been written in a realistic style. Cervantes' use of irony came to be admired and Don Quixote came to be seen at times as a comic hero and at others as a tragic hero driven by impossible dreams. It is believed that the influence of this work can be seen in such writers as Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, Benito Perez Galdos and in painters like William Hogarth and Pablo Picasso.

A Spanish novelist, playwright, and poet, the creator of Don Quixote, the most famous figure in Spanish literature. He was born at Alcála de Henares, Spain, in 1547. Although Cervantes' reputation rests almost entirely on his portrait of the gaunt country gentleman, El ingenioso hidalgo, his literary production was considerable. Shakespeare, Cervantes's great contemporary, had evidently read Don Quixote, but it is most unlike that Cervantes had ever heard of Shakespeare.

Cervantes lived an unsettled life of hardship and adventure. He was the son of a surgeon who presented himself as a nobleman, although Cervantes's mother seems to have been a descendant of Jewish converts to Christianity. Little is known of his early years, but it seems that Cervantes spent much of is childhood moving from town to town while his father sought work. After studying in Madrid (1568-69), where his teacher was the humanist Juan López de Hoyos, he went to Rome in the service of Guilio Acquavita. Once in Italy he doubtless began straightway to familiarize himself with Italian literature, a knowledge of which is so readily discernible in his own productions. In 1570 he became a soldier and fought bravely on board a vessel in the great battle of Lepanto in 1571, and was shot through the left hand in such a way that he never after had the entire use of it.
When his wound was healed he engaged in another campaign, one directed against the Moslem in Northern Africa, and then after living a while longer in Italy he finally determined to return home in 1575. The ship was captured by the Turks and the brothers were taken to Algiers as slaves. There he spent five years, undergoing great sufferings, some of which seem to be reflected in the episode of the "Captive" in Don Quixote, and in scenes of the play, El trato de Argel, and after four unsuccessful escape attempts, he was ransomed by the Trinitarians and returned to his family in Madrid in 1580. In 1584 he married 22 years younger Catalina de Salazar y Palacios. During the next 20 years he led a nomadic existence, also working as a purchasing agent for the Spanish Armada and a tax collector. He suffered a bankruptcy and was imprisoned at least twice (1597 and 1602) because of irregularities in his accounts, one due rather to some subordinate than to himself. Between the years 1596 and 1600 he lived primarily in Seville. In 1606 Cervantes settled permanently in Madrid, where he remained the rest of his life.

In 1585 Cervantes published his first major work, La Galatea, a pastoral romance, at the same time that some of his plays, now lost except for El trato de Argel (where he dealt with the life of Christian slaves in Algiers) and El cerco de Numancia, were playing on the stages of Madrid. It received little contemporary notice for La Galatea and Cervantes never wrote the continuation for it, which he repeatedly promised. Cervantes next turned his attention to the drama, hoping to derive an income from that source, but the plays which he composed failed to achieve their purpose. Aside from his plays, his most ambitious work in verse was Viaje del Parnaso (1614), an allegory which consists largely of a rather tedious though good-natured reviews of contemporary poets. Cervantes himself realized that he was deficient in poetic gifts.

If a remark which Cervantes himself makes in the prologue of Don Quixote is to be taken literally, the idea of the work, though hardly the writing of its "First Part", as some have maintained, occurred to him in prison at Argamasilla in La Mancha. Cervantes' idea was to give a picture of real life and manners and to express himself in clear language. The intrusion of everyday speech into a literary context was acclaimed by the reading public. The author stayed poor until 1605, when the first part of Don Quixote appeared. Although it did not make Cervantes rich, it brought him international appreciation as a man of letters. Cervantes also wrote many plays, only two of which have survived, short novels, and the vogue obtained by Cervantes's story led to the publication of a continuation of it by an unknown who masquerades under the name of Fernandez Avellaneda. In self-defence Cervantes produced his own continuation, or "Second Part", of Don Quixote, which made its appearance in 1615.

For the world at large interest in Cervantes centres particularly in Don Quixote, and this has been regarded chiefly as a novel of purpose. It is stated again and again that he wrote it in order to ridicule the romances of chivalry and to destroy the popularity of a form of literature which for much more than a century had engrossed the attention of a large proportion of those who could read among his countrymen and which had been communicated by them to the ignorant.

Don Quixote certainly reveals much narrative power, considerable humour, a mastery of dialogue, and a forcible style. Of the two parts written by Cervantes, the first has ever remained the favourite. The second part is inferior to it in humorous effect; but, nevertheless, the second part shows more constructive insight, better delineation of character, an improved style, and more realism and probability in its action.

In 1613 he published a collection of tales, the Exemplary Novels, some of which had been written earlier. On the whole, the Exemplary Novels are worthy of the fame of Cervantes; they bear the same stamp of genius as the Don Quixote. The picaroon strain, already made familiar in Spain by the Lazarillo de Tormes and its successors, appears in one or another of them especially in the Rinconete y Cortadillo, which is the best of all. He also published the Viaje del Parnaso in 1614, and in 1615, the Eight Comedies and Eight New Interludes. At the same time, Cervantes continued working on Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda, a novel of adventurous travel completed just before his death, and which appeared posthumously in January 1617.

Cervantes's influence is seen among others in the works of Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, Gustave Flaubert, Herman Melville, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, also in the works of James Joyce and Jorge Luis Borges.
He died in Madrid on April 23, 1616.