

# Cyrano de Bergerac



## Summer Reading Guide - English 10

Howdy, sophomores!

*Cyrano de Bergerac* is a delightful French play by Edmond Rostand about a swashbuckling hero with a very large nose. It is one of my favorites! Read this entire guide before starting the play. The beginning can be tough to get through because there are many confusing names and characters, but stick with it and you won't be disappointed!

On the first day of class, there will be a Reading Quiz to test your knowledge of this guide and your comprehension of the play's main events and characters. If you are in the honors section, you will also write a Timed Writing essay the first week of school. After school starts, we will analyze the play in class through discussions and various writing assignments. We will conclude the unit by watching a French film adaptation and comparing it to the play.

By the way, my class is a No Spoiler Zone. This means that you may NOT spoil significant plot events to classmates who have not yet read the book. If you have questions about the reading this summer, please email me at [clee@bcseagles.org](mailto:clee@bcseagles.org). I'll see you in the fall!

- Mrs. Lee

# Introduction

*Cyrano de Bergerac* is a 5-act play by French dramatist and poet Edmond Rostand (1868-1918). Our class version was translated into English by Gertrude Hall. Since its 1897 Paris debut, the play has enjoyed numerous productions in multiple countries.



## Cultural & Historical Background

By the end of the 1800s, industrialization was taking place in most of Europe, including France, and with it came a more scientific way of looking at things.

**Realism** in literature and drama emphasizes objective documentation of everyday life, usually working-class life, and rejects idealization or glamor. This movement, particularly in France, developed into naturalism.

**Naturalism** is similar to realism, but also stresses the governing of human life by natural laws. Naturalists argued that the theater should explain the scientific laws of human behavior.

Amidst this social and psychological objectivity, Rostand's new play about romantic heroes, beautiful maidens, sword fights, and the power of poetry and art seemed hopelessly old fashioned.

## Genre

Although *Cyrano de Bergerac* was written during a period of Realism, it has many qualities that are common to the older genre of Romantic plays. Therefore, it is frequently classified as a Romantic work.

Romantic literature often follows a romantic hero who embodies the code of chivalry. He is an idealized figure who is brave, honorable, and devoted to his beloved. Chivalry demands physical strength and prowess, but it also emphasizes intelligence, integrity, and artistic and literary proficiency.

Cyrano serves as an example of the classic romantic hero.

## Production

Before *Cyrano de Bergerac* was ever performed, the directors doubted the success of the play. They decided to slash the budget for sets and costumes, so Rostand had to pay for the lavish costumes himself.

The star was Constant Coquelin, one of France's leading actors. When asked to predict the play's success, he could only shake his head and say, "Dark." Rostand himself apologized to Coquelin. "I beg your forgiveness, my friend," he pleaded. "Pardon me for having involved you in a disastrous adventure."

Therefore, when the curtain rose on *Cyrano de Bergerac* for the first time on December 28, 1897, expectations were low.

# Reception

To everyone's surprise, *Cyrano de Bergerac* was a success. From the hero's first majestic entrance to his last farewell, he transfixed viewers. The audience was still applauding thunderously, well after the curtain fell at the close of the play.

One reason for the success of the play is its Romanticism. *Cyrano de Bergerac's* emphasis on idealism and heroism was a stark contrast to the grimly realistic plays of its day, which often focused on modern society's darkest problems. The swashbuckling Cyrano dueling his way across the stage with his sword and his verbal sharpness took Paris by storm. Audiences were able to retreat temporarily from the grim realities of life.

Another reason for the play's popularity is the cleverness of its writing. Rostand's play includes witty poems, love letters, acerbic retorts and commentaries on a variety of subjects.



Finally, *Cyrano de Bergerac* was successful because Cyrano is an extremely likeable character. Sometimes all bluster, sometimes sad and vulnerable, Cyrano bears the markings of a real human being. Although he possesses great gifts, he also carries a heavy burden that is as plain as the prominent nose on his face. His self-confidence is marred by his belief that his nose makes him unlovable. Cyrano is perhaps loved most for his panache, that is, his flair, individual sense of style, verve, or pizzazz. Throughout the years, it is Cyrano's panache that has kept audiences and readers coming back.

# Setting

Although first performed in the late 1800s, *Cyrano de Bergerac* is set in France during the years 1640 to 1655. At the time, France was fraught with political tension and in conflict with foreign enemies. The majority of *Cyrano* takes place in 1640, when Louis XIII sat on the throne, and Richelieu dominated the political landscape. Richelieu was a Roman Catholic cardinal and the chief minister and advisor to King Louis XIII. (De Guiche, the play's villain, uses his connections with Richelieu to gain power.)

# Summary of Act I

Act I begins in the auditorium of the Hotel de Bourgogne in 1640. Lignière and Christian de Neuvillette, a handsome, aspiring Gascony Cadet, appear. As various guests arrive at the theater, Christian expresses his desire to know the name of the woman he loves.



Meanwhile, Roxane appears alongside Comte de Guiche, and Christian is awestruck by her beauty. He learns that De Guiche, a married man, seeks to arrange a marriage between Roxane and his friend, the Viscount de Valvert, so that De Guiche can make her his mistress. Shortly thereafter, the play *La Clorise* begins.

The actor Montfleury appears on the stage to perform the play *La Clorise*. He is heckled by Cyrano and eventually forced from the stage.

Valvert then challenges Cyrano, and the two duel. Cyrano composes a ballad while he fights, and when he finishes, strikes Valvert. After the duel, Cyrano reveals to his friend Le Bret that he loves Roxane.

Roxane's Duenna arrives and explains that Roxane wishes to meet Cyrano at Ragueneau's shop the following day. Cyrano's elation is short-lived, as he learns that one hundred men seek Lignière's life. The act concludes as a confident Cyrano departs to confront these attackers.

You are now ready to begin reading *Cyrano de Bergerac*!  
You are not required to annotate the play, but you may find it helpful to mark your book to keep track of characters or to jot down questions.

