

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Cyrano de Bergerac

by

### Edmond Rostand

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### Book Information

Edmond Rostand, Cyrano de Bergerac  
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Cyrano de Bergerac falls in love with Roxane but hides his feelings for her, convinced she can never love him because of his large nose.

**Topics:** Arts, Theater/Plays; Emotions, Courage; Emotions, Love; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Romance, Romance (All)

### Main Characters

Carbon de Castel-Jaloux the head of Cyrano's regiment

Christian de Neuville the young cadet who also loves Roxane and for whom Cyrano composes love letters

Count de Guiche an officer higher in rank than Cyrano, who also loves Roxane but is married to someone else

Cyrano de Bergerac a military man with a very large nose, who loves Roxane

Le Bret Cyrano's friend

Ligniere a drunk, whom Cyrano helps to get home safely

Lise Ragueneau's wife

Montfleury an actor whom Cyrano hates

Ragueneau a baker and poet

Roxane Cyrano's cousin, whom Cyrano, Christian, and de Guiche all love

Sister Marthe, Sister Claire, and Mother Marguerite de Jesus nuns from the convent where Roxane lives

The Capuchin the religious man who marries Christian and Roxane

The Duenna Roxane's companion

Viscount de Valvert the man Count de Guiche wishes Roxane to marry

### Vocabulary

**burgher** an inhabitant of a town

**grandiloquent** lofty or pompous speech

**punchinello** a fat, short, humpbacked clown

### Synopsis

This play takes place mostly in Paris in the seventeenth century. Cyrano de Bergerac, a French military man, is in love with his cousin, Roxane, but despairs of her loving him because he has a very large nose.

Roxane tells Cyrano that she loves a new cadet in Cyrano's company, the handsome Christian. Cyrano agrees to protect Christian. Cyrano learns Christian loves Roxane, but is afraid to speak with her because he does not have a flair for words. Cyrano asks Christian to allow him to write love letters to Roxane in Christian's name, saying any poet would find the exercise interesting. Roxane is enamored of the letters.

When Christian attempts to woo Roxane on his own, he is tongue-tied, and she becomes disgusted. The men stand beneath her window and Cyrano, pretending he is Christian, reignites her passion with poetic words of love.

Count de Guiche is also in love with Roxane. Roxane persuades him not to send Christian and Cyrano's regiment to war by convincing him it would be the best way to retaliate against Cyrano for earlier insults. Roxane marries Christian. When de Guiche learns of it, he immediately sends Christian and Cyrano's company to the front.

At the front, Cyrano writes twice a day to Roxane in Christian's name. Roxane comes to the front, saying the letters drew her. She says she loves Christian's soul, not his handsome appearance. Christian, wanting to be loved for himself, insists that Cyrano tell Roxane the truth and let her choose between

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them. Before he can, however, Christian is killed, and Cyrano remains silent.

Roxane enters a nunnery, where Cyrano visits her weekly. One day prior to his usual visit, he is hit on the head by a piece of wood dropped from a window. Knowing he is dying, he asks her if he can read Christian's last letter. He reads it aloud in the darkening evening, and Roxane realizes Cyrano composed it. She says she loves him, but Cyrano dies, calling himself a failure and railing against cowardice, prejudice, and compromise.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Initial Understanding

Why did Cyrano tell Christian that he had told Roxane everything and that Roxane had decided she loved Christian? Was Cyrano's lie consistent with other characteristics of his personality? Why or why not?

*Cyrano lied to Christian while Christian lay dying. He did so because he had compassion for him, knowing that Christian loved Roxane. Apparently, in this circumstance, Cyrano believed compassion was more important than honesty, even though he often railed against falsehood.*

#### Literary Analysis

Identify some of the aspects of Cyrano's character, and provide examples from the play illustrating these characteristics.

*Cyrano was uncompromising and proud, as illustrated by his unwillingness to edit his play in order to have it performed, and his writings against false heroes and others, even when it brought him enemies. He was courageous, as illustrated by his disgust with de Guiche for dropping his white scarf to disguise himself. He was loyal, as illustrated by his long-standing relationship with Roxane.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

To what was de Guiche, then a Duke, referring when he asked Roxane near the end of the play: "Have you forgiven me?" What did Roxane mean when she answered, "Of course, since I'm here"?

*The Duke was asking Roxane if she forgave him for having sent Christian into war and directing the attack toward his regiment, hence killing him. Roxane responded that she had forgiven him, since she lived in a religious convent where forgiveness was taught.*

#### Constructing Meaning

What did Cyrano say to convince Christian to allow him to write letters on Christian's behalf? What were Cyrano's real reasons for wanting to write the letters? Do you find it believable that Cyrano would be willing to help another man gain Roxane's affections?

*Cyrano told Christian that, as a poet, the experiment of his words being spoken by someone else would amuse him. In fact, Cyrano wanted to express his feelings for Roxane, even if he couldn't let her know they came from him.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** The real Cyrano de Bergerac was a French author who lived from 1619-1655. He abandoned a military career to write satirical pieces about contemporary society through fantasies about voyages to the sun and moon. Ask the students to research the real Cyrano's life and works. Instruct them to write a short paper about their findings and the similarities between the real Cyrano de Bergerac and the fictitious one in Rostand's play.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** Read the play aloud as a class. Ask the students to volunteer for the different parts, and change readers for the different acts as appropriate. Encourage the students to read with expression. You could also work with the students to act out one or more scenes from the play.

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**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** The last thing Cyrano said before he died was that the one thing he had intact, without stain, was his white plume. In French, the white plume on a military helmet was called a "panache." "Panache" is the last word in the original French version of the play. Ask the students to look up the other meanings of the word "panache" in the dictionary. As a class, discuss whether, and in what ways, Cyrano had "panache." Ask them what Cyrano meant by saying his "panache" was intact and that he would take it with him in spite of lies, compromise, prejudice, and cowardice.

**Responding to Literature** As he was dying, Cyrano said he had failed in everything—even in his death—because he was hit from behind by a lackey with a log, in his death. (Act 5, Scene VI). The Duke (formerly de Guiche), however, did not think Cyrano was a failure (Act 5, Scene II). Ask the students to re-read Act 5 and come to their own conclusions as to whether or not Cyrano was a failure. Ask them to write a short essay expressing their opinion and to support their opinion with examples from the play.