Symbolism in the Cave of Montesinos

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The episode of the Cave of Montesinos in *Don Quixote* has become one of the most analyzed and interpreted incidents in modern literary history. Most critics agree that it is the crucial moment in the work because, as Gethin Hughes states, “We witness the confrontation of two worlds in Don Quixote’s mind—the chivalric and the real” (112). The novel takes a different direction after Don Quixote resurfaces and tells the story of his “grande aventura de la cueva de Montesinos.” This is the only adventure that Don Quixote faces alone, so it gives us the best opportunity to study his psychological state. By analyzing the dream, we can better understand Don Quixote’s madness. This paper discusses the symbols and their meanings in the dream and the significance of the dream itself.

Sigmund Freud wrote in his book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, that all dreams have meaning. The meaning of a dream can be interpreted through the symbols that appear in the dream itself. The incident in the Cave of Montesinos is rich in symbolism. In the dreamwork Don Quixote descends into a legendary cave and encounters a beautiful landscape and crystal palace. He meets several famous characters, all demonstrating bizarre behavior. Upon seeing his enchanted mistress, the knight is elated but confused by her actions. Finally Don Quixote ascends back into the “real” world only to find his friends criticizing the cave, the adventure, and Don Quixote himself. Analyzing dreams and their significance is part of the psychoanalytic process developed by Freud around the turn of the century. Psychologists today still use the guidelines set down by Freud to analyze dreams. The ideas presented in this paper suggest possible explanations for the dream and even Quixote’s madness by using psychoanalytical theories.

The first symbol we encounter is the cave itself. Don Quixote is familiar with the legend surrounding the cave and insists on stopping at it on his way to Barcelona. He wants to descend into the cavern and see “si eran verdaderas las maravillas que de ella se decían por todos aquellos contornos (if they were true, the wonders that were spoken of the cave in those parts)” (Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 435). Before entering the cave, Don Quixote must chop his way through thick brush to find the entrance and fend off bats, owls, and other nocturnal birds. Quixote has intense drive and needs to experience what the cave holds. He is not afraid of his destiny and is, in this case, actively pursuing his future.

The cave itself is “a maternal symbol that excites curiosity” (Becker, 149). It is a positive symbol because caves were often used as oracles. In the pastoral novel of Spain, the cave was the entrance to the underworld. According to Frederik de Armas, caverns were “the source of power of magicians, wisdom of prophets and inspiration of poets” (Armas, 337). They were used to communicate with the dead. Carl Jung believed the cave represents the unconscious. Cervantes did not use caves in his pastoral novels because of

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their demonic connotations but reversed his fear in Don Quixote and La cueva de Salamanca. The use of a cave by Cervantes signals something very important. In this case, the cave symbolizes a mystical realm in the unconscious mind of Don Quixote where he can come in contact with the souls of his fallen brethren and chivalric heroes from an age regrettably now past.

This magical place where knights live is known to Alonso Quijano only through the books of chivalry that have driven him mad. The old man’s love and belief in the Age of Chivalry, yet total lack of experience in it, mirror in reverse his adventures. In the novels of chivalry, the aspiring knight learned of rules and codes of conduct to be followed by all in order to establish order amidst chaos. But El Caballero de la Triste Figura, upon putting on armor and accepting the charge of knighthood, has come to learn that being a knight is not an easy endeavor. He is battered and trampled, disgraced and dishonored. Needing rest and a return to the code of chivalry, Quixote sets out on a pilgrimage to the cave of Montesinos. But the cave is much more than just another place to explore. He seeks in the maternal symbol a return to his novels, to security, to the womb. This is evident when Don Quixote resurfaces and begins to tell his story. Sancho, solidly fixed in the “real” world of the novel, calls the cave a pit. Don Quixote becomes enraged and demands that Sancho and the scholar not call it a pit. With great emotion, he chastises them saying, “Dios os lo perdone, amigos; que me habéis quitado de la más sabrosa y agradable vida y vista que ningún humano ha visto ni pasado (God forgive you friends because you have taken me from the most pleasurable life that any human has seen or experienced)” (Cervantes, Don Quixote, 438). On the surface Quixote may be defending the honor of his mother since the cave is a maternal symbol. However, I believe he is really defending his entire chivalric world and the fact that it exists. No part of his “world” may be put into question because it is founded on such unsteady ground that it could easily be toppled.

Deeper into the symbolism, we can look at the bell that Don Quixote forgets to put on. The bell is a symbol of reality and his link to the world outside the cave. It is proof that he is moving in the flesh and blood world of reality. If he had been wearing the bell, Sancho and the scholar would surely have yanked him back into reality when it stopped making a sound, thus ending any possible adventure. Without it, however, the knight is free to roam in the unknown and experience all the “maravillas” of the cave. He is free to step out of reality and explore the world of fantasy.

Another symbol that is part of the old knight’s entrance into the cavern is the rope used to lower him. Becker states that a rope represents the sexual act (84). The smooth walls of the cave represent erect bodies according to Freud (109). Therefore, Don Quixote’s descent by means of a rope, past the smooth walls of the cave, symbolizes what Don Quixote knows little about—sex. The effect is to emphasize the fact that Don Quixote is breaking new ground with respect to the world of his heroes and his own sexuality.

Once inside the cave, Don Quixote sees a beautiful place that only nature could create. He is not sure whether he is asleep or awake but soon convinces himself that he has all his faculties. Could the knight be in paradise? I believe so, at least the paradise that the knight Don Quixote de la Mancha has envisioned. The beautiful landscape emphasizes the idyllic nature of the dream. In this ideal land, Quixote spies a crystal castle. Crystal represents the self (Becker, 154), and here Don Quixote is looking into a mirror. He sees himself as a majestic, strong, and royal personage equal to his ideals. He has created in his mind the perfect reincarnation of himself and his beliefs.

Soon after creating his heaven, Quixote meets its first inhabitant, the old Montesinos. The knight describes Montesinos as “vestido
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con un capuz de bayeta morada, que por el suelo le arrastraba, ceñiale la cabeza una gorra milanesa negra, y la barba, canisima, le pasaba la cintura (He was clad in a long mourning cloak of purple baize, which trailed upon the ground; over his shoulders and breast he wore a kind of collegiate tippet of green satin, his hoary beard reaching below his girdle)" (Cervantes, Don Quixote, 439). Is this the image of God in Don Quixote’s mind? Not exactly. Becker says kings or queens represent parents (85); Montesinos represents Don Quixote’s father. Quixote further proves this when he says, “El continente, el paso, la gravedad y la anchisima presencia, cada cosa de por sí y todas juntas, me suspendieron y admiraron (His mien, his gait, his gravity, and his goodly presence each singly and conjointly filled me with surprise and admiration)” (Cervantes, Don Quixote, 439). Just as a child respects his parents, Don Quixote looks up to Montesinos and respects him.

Montesinos has been analyzed by many critics, and all have found different things about him strange. He is a figure from medieval Spanish ballads in the region of La Mancha. Carrol B. Johnson, in his book, Madness and Lust, remarks that although Montesinos is dressed in a scholarly way, he does not know all the answers. He does not know how to disenchant all the people in the cave or whether he used a “daga” (dagger) or a “puñal buido” (dirk) to take out his friend Durandarte’s heart. Even more startling to Quixote is the fact that Montesinos is not familiar with the beautiful Dulcinea (163). Johnson interprets these uncertainties as Don Quixote’s own or, much more likely, as those of his father (163). Just as a rebellious teenager believes that his parents do not know what is best, Don Quixote questions Montesinos.

A theme discussed by E. C. Riley is the absurdity of Montesinos. The picture given us of Montesinos does not fit the image of a great knight. He is holding a rosary with beads the size of chestnuts and ostrich eggs. He does not evoke awe or fear as a great knight of his time would, but rather appears ridiculous. Further highlighting the absurdity of Montesinos is the fact that his best friend, Durandarte, was to have had a heart that weighed two pounds. Riley writes, “These ridiculous details puncture the fabric of his (Don Quixote’s) chivalric vision” (142). He believes these elements are meant to mock Don Quixote and his principles (142). They emphasize the ridiculous nature of the dream and the old knight himself.

Soon after meeting Montesinos, Don Quixote asks the old man if the legend surrounding the removal of his best friend’s heart is true. Montesinos answers “yes,” and the fact that there is a question about the dagger leaves us to wonder about its significance. The knife is a masculine symbol. The appearance of a masculine element within the womb causes much fear in Don Quixote. Johnson believes the dagger symbolizes Quixote’s fear of castration and the castrating female (167). This symbol is a manifestation of his inability to interact with women and probably stems from an unresolved problem in the Oedipal stage of his childhood (Johnson, 167).

Next, Don Quixote meets the zombie Durandarte. Named for Roland’s sword, he is Don Quixote’s image of the ideal knight. Johnson believes Durandarte is identifiable to Don Quixote because they are both knights and both have hairy, bony hands that show great strength. Don Quixote identifies with him but is afraid when he realizes that Durandarte is no longer a powerful knight. Because Durandarte and a sword are so closely related, Johnson associates Durandarte to the phalus through symbolization (164). The fact that Durandarte is a “sword-phalus rendered useless by bloody mutilation” (Johnson, 164) points to impotency. Because Durandarte and Quixote are essentially the same, Durandarte’s impotency points to fears of impotency in Don Quixote. Johnson goes as far as to say that this element of impotency “bring[s] together some of the most pervasive
themes of Don Quixote’s psychic life, with some of the most deep-seated fears about himself and his manhood” (164).

The first female character that the knight encounters is the noble woman, Belerma. Quixote describes Belerma as clad in black, with a slightly up-turned nose and a large mouth with colored lips. Johnson sees three different themes in the character of Belerma. First, he believes that she represents all the older women in Quixote’s life—his mother, his grandmother, and others (165). The allusions to the age and sensuality of Belerma are signs of an Oedipal attraction in the knight’s past. Next, there is a relationship between Belerma and Dulcinea since Belerma is to Durandarte what Dulcinea is to Don Quixote, mainly the object of courtly love (164). Belerma, according to Johnson, represents the reason for his dysfunction, something from his childhood that has forced him to create Dulcinea (167). Finally, because they both have bad teeth and are sexually inoperative, Don Quixote and Belerma are identifiable as one (Johnson, 168). Belerma was a legendary beauty, but when Don Quixote sees her he is disappointed and disillusioned. Hughes sees the symbolism and applies it to Dulcinea. She believes that it means if Belerma can be made ugly, through enchantment, so too can his beautiful Dulcinea (110). It is important to remember that Don Quixote’s picture of the enchanted Dulcinea is the ugly maid Sancho pointed out to him. The image of ugliness through enchantment bolsters Quixote’s belief in the existence of an enchanted world and its need for his help.

Separately, each of these people has major significance. Is there any significance to the three being together? Johnson believes there is. He states, “All three of the chivalric characters are projections of different aspects of our hero himself” (167). This idea fits with Freud’s theory of condensation; that is, many unrelated elements may come together in a dream. All share nearly the same age and the fact that their lives are at a standstill (Johnson, 167). The three inhabitants of the cave are sentenced to live forever in legend, while Don Quixote, although still part of the “real” world, takes time out from the continuing action above ground to join them in fantasy below ground. By joining the three characters into one, we complete the psychic picture of the bent knight. Montesinos, according to Johnson, projects a number of intellectual insecurities. Durandarte projects Quixote’s fear of castration and impotence, and Belerma reflects his fear of aging (167). Throughout the dream, Quixote is analyzing himself and struggling with questions that run deep into his psyche.

Finally, Don Quixote comes face to face with the “incarnation of his chivalric world” (Hughes, 109), Dulcinea. She is with two other damsels and runs away at the sight of the great knight. One of the damsels soon comes back and asks if Don Quixote might lend Dulcinea six reales. He has only four, but gives them to her anyway. Johnson believes the money represents Dulcinea’s sexual needs and Quixote’s prowess (158). The fact that he is unable to give her the total of six reales once again symbolizes his fears of impotency and capability of loving his mistress. Hughes believes the monetary aspect destroys Don Quixote and his chivalric world (112). The money is not part of the chivalric code and thus proves that this world cannot and does not exist. It is this event that later (on his deathbed) permits Don Quixote to accept Sanson Carasco and the priest. Dulcinea’s simple request for money shows him that his ideals are fantasy, and he cannot survive in the current age of realism.

By looking at the entire episode of the Cave of Montesinos, we can get a good look at Don Quixote’s psychological state. Perhaps the best picture comes not from a psychoanalyst, but from one of Spain’s great authors, Miguel de Unamuno. Donald Palmer, in his article entitled, “‘Unamuno, Freud and the Case of Alonso Quijano,’” points to Unamuno’s book Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho⁴ as the first psychoanalytical account of Don Quixote (243). In fact, Unamuno and Freud were contemporaries, and Unamuno’s book was published while Freud was doing
his major work on psychoanalysis. In the book, Unamuno discusses sublimation. Freud defines sublimation as "the sexual trend abandoning its aim of obtaining a component of reproductive pleasure and taking on another which is related genetically to the abandoned one but is itself no longer sexual" (Brill, 179). Palmer reports that Unamuno believed Quixote repressed his amorous feelings for his teenage maid and, after letting the repression boil for twelve years, finally went mad. Claiming that aspects of higher culture come from sublimations of repressed instinctual drives (Brill, 215), Freud does not condemn this sublimation as evil but calls it "a triumph of spirituality over the senses" (Brill, 217). Quixote's quest for the pure, the noble, and the chivalric is the outcome of his sublimation of amorous feelings. His need to contact past heroes is just another manifestation of his repressed desires. Although hiding a dark secret, he retains his honor and dignity (at least in his own eyes). Johnson agrees with this idea, stating that Don Quixote has repressed his feelings for his niece from "just below conscious to deep unconscious level" (156).

Another plausible explanation for the dreamwork in Don Quixote's dream is the theory of wish fulfillment. Freud writes: "A dream is a (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish" (Brill, 57). Quixote has been struggling with the enchantment of his damsel since Book I, Chapter 10, when Sancho invented her. Hughes believes the dream allows him to solve the problem of Dulcinea's enchantment (108) through wish fulfillment. Don Quixote's wish for a land where the laws of chivalry are upheld and adventure involving his damsel is obvious in the dream. He identifies with all the people in the dream world, and his supreme chivalric act would be to disenchant all its inhabitants. This theory rationalizes the dream as merely an escape into fantasy land for the gallant knight, thus having no psychological value other than to manifest his aspirations.

The final explanation for this episode is that it is a look into the psyche of Cervantes himself. Becker states, "The work of art and, even more, dreams in works of art have been considered as confessions of the artist's unconscious personality, his affective conflicts and especially his sexual complexes" (103). He outlines how dreams may be used in literature. First, the author may use the dream explicitly to further the main theme in the work. Second, he may use the dream implicitly as an invisible support system for the structure of the work. Applying this theory to Don Quixote, we might say Cervantes uses Don Quixote's lunacy explicitly to satirize the Chivalric Age. The dream, once again, reinforces the madness of the old knight and the absurdity of the Chivalric novel. Implicitly, however, the dream creates a picture of the reasons for Don Quixote's madness. It subtly shows us that Don Quixote is not just mad but that there are concrete reasons for his condition. He has suppressed his amorous desires for all the women he has ever known and now must deal with all the repercussions. He struggles relentlessly against tremendous obstacles. It is sad that Don Quixote will never know love, but it is noble that he will fight until death to keep the hope for it alive.

Endnotes

*Miguel de Cervantes, "La cueva de Salamanca," in Entremeses de Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, ed. Adolfo Bonilla y San Martín (Madrid: Asociación de la Librería de España, 1963). *The legend of the day stated that the size of a man's heart is directly proportional to his bravery.

*Belurma was postmenopausal and Don Quixote impotent.

*Miguel de Unamuno, Vida de Don Quixote y Sancho Según Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, Explicada y Comentada por Miguel de Unamuno (Madrid: Renacimiento, 1928).

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