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Golden Age

Spanish literature

Also known as: *Siglo de Oro*

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Golden Age, the period of [Spanish literature](#) extending from the early 16th century to the late 17th century, generally considered the high point in [Spain's](#) literary history. The Golden Age began with the partial political unification of Spain about 1500. Its literature is characterized by patriotic and religious fervour, heightened realism, and a new interest in earlier [epics](#) and [ballads](#), together with the somewhat less-pronounced influences of [humanism](#) and [Neoplatonism](#).

During the Golden Age such late [medieval](#) and early [Renaissance](#) forms as the chivalric and pastoral novels underwent their final flowering. They were replaced by the [picaresque novel](#), which usually described the comic adventures of lowborn rogues and which was exemplified by the anonymously written *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) and by the works of [Mateo Alemán](#) and [Francisco de Quevedo](#). [Miguel de Cervantes](#)'s monumental [novel](#) *Don Quixote* (part 1, 1605; part 2, 1615), a satirical treatment of anachronistic chivalric ideals, combined pastoral, picaresque, and [romantic](#) elements in its narrative and remains the single most important literary work produced during the Golden Age.

Spanish [poetry](#) during the period was initially marked by the adoption of Italian metres and verse forms such as those used by [Garcilaso de la Vega](#). It eventually became marked by the elaborate conceits and wordplay of the Baroque movements known as [culteranismo](#) and [conceptismo](#), whose chief practitioners were [Luis de Góngora](#) and Quevedo, respectively.

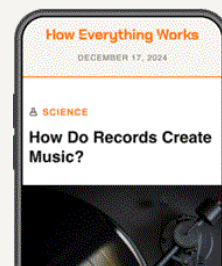
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The Golden Age also witnessed the almost single-handed creation of the Spanish national theatre by the extremely productive playwright [Lope de Vega](#). His establishment of a dramatic tradition using characteristically Spanish themes, values, and subject matter was further developed by [Tirso de Molina](#) and [Pedro Calderón de la Barca](#). Among the highlights of the period's religious literature are the mystical glorifications of spirituality by [St. Teresa of Ávila](#), [Luis de León](#), and [St. John of the Cross](#). The end of the Golden Age is marked by Calderón's death in 1681.

Miguel de Cervantes

Spanish writer

Also known as: *Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra*

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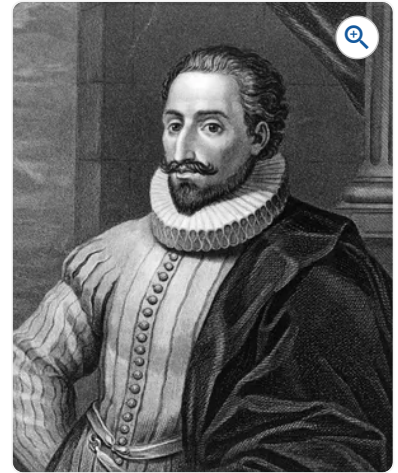
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Top Questions

What is Miguel de Cervantes best known for? 

What was Miguel de Cervantes's early life like? 

What did Miguel de Cervantes do for a living? 



Miguel de Cervantes Miguel de Cervantes, engraving by E. Mackenzie after Gregorio Ferro and Fernando Selma; from *The....*(more)

Miguel de Cervantes (born September 29?, 1547, [Alcalá de Henares](#), Spain—died April 22, 1616, Madrid) was a [Spanish](#) novelist, playwright, and poet, the creator of [Don Quixote](#) (1605, 1615) and the most important and celebrated figure in [Spanish literature](#).

His [novel](#) [Don Quixote](#) has been translated, in full or in part, into more than 60 languages. Editions continue regularly to be printed, and critical discussion of the work has proceeded unabated since the 18th century. At the same time, owing to their [widespread](#) representation in [art](#), [drama](#), and [film](#), the figures of [Don Quixote](#) and [Sancho Panza](#) are probably familiar visually to more people than any other imaginary characters in world [literature](#). Cervantes was a great experimenter. He tried his hand in all the major [literary genres](#) save the [epic](#). He was a notable [short-story](#) writer, and a few of those in his collection of *Novelas exemplares* (1613; *Exemplary Stories*) attain a level close to that of *Don Quixote*, on a miniature scale.

Cervantes was born some 20 miles (32 km) from [Madrid](#), probably on September 29 (the day of San Miguel). He was certainly baptized on October 9. He was the fourth of seven children in a family whose origins were of the minor gentry but which had come down in the world. His father was a barber-surgeon who set bones, performed bloodlettings, and attended lesser medical needs. The family moved from town to town, and little is known of Cervantes's early education. The supposition, based on a passage in one of the *Exemplary Stories*, that he studied for a time under the [Jesuits](#), though not unlikely, remains conjectural. Unlike most Spanish writers of his time, including some of humble origin, he apparently did not go to a university. What is certain is that at some stage he became an [avid](#) reader of books. The head of a municipal school in Madrid, a man with Erasmist [intellectual](#) leanings named Juan López de Hoyos, refers to a Miguel de Cervantes as his “beloved pupil.” This was in 1569, when the future author was 21, so—if this was the same Cervantes—he must either have been a pupil-teacher at the school or have studied earlier under López de Hoyos. His first published poem, on the death of [Philip II](#)'s young queen, Elizabeth of Valois, appeared at this time.

Soldier and slave

That same year he left [Spain](#) for [Italy](#). Whether this was because he was the “student” of the same name wanted by the law for involvement in a [wounding](#) incident is another mystery; the evidence is contradictory. In any event, in going to Italy Cervantes was doing what many young Spaniards of the time did to further their careers in one way or another. It seems that for a time he served as chamberlain in the household of Cardinal Giulio Acquaviva in [Rome](#). However, by 1570 he had enlisted as a soldier in a Spanish infantry regiment stationed in [Naples](#), then a possession of the Spanish crown. He was there for about a year before he saw active service.

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Relations with the [Ottoman Empire](#) under [Selim II](#) were reaching a crisis, and the Turks occupied Cyprus in 1570. A [confrontation](#) between the Turkish fleet and the naval forces of [Venice](#), the [papacy](#), and Spain was inevitable. In mid-September 1571 Cervantes sailed on board the *Marquesa*, part of the large fleet under the command of [Don Juan de Austria](#) that engaged the enemy on October 7 in the Gulf of [Lepanto](#) near Corinth. The fierce battle ended in a crushing defeat for the Turks that was ultimately to break their control of the Mediterranean. There are independent accounts of Cervantes's conduct in the action, and they [concur](#) in testifying to his personal courage. Though stricken with a fever, he refused to stay below and joined the thick of the fighting. He received two gunshot wounds in the chest, and a third rendered his left hand useless for the rest of his life. He always looked back on his conduct in the battle with pride. From 1572 to 1575, based mainly in Naples, he continued his soldier's life; he was at [Navarino](#) and saw action in [Tunis](#) and La Goleta. He must also, when opportunity offered, have been familiarizing himself with [Italian literature](#). Perhaps with a recommendation for promotion to the rank of captain, more likely just leaving the army, he set sail for Spain in September 1575 with letters of commendation to the king from the duque de Sessa and [Don Juan](#) himself.

On this voyage his ship was attacked and captured by [Barbary pirates](#), and Cervantes, together with his brother Rodrigo, was sold into slavery in [Algiers](#), the centre of the Christian slave traffic in the [Muslim world](#). The letters he carried magnified his importance in the eyes of his captors. This had the effect of raising his ransom price, and thus prolonging his captivity, while also, it appears, protecting his person from punishment by death, mutilation, or torture when his four daring bids to escape were frustrated. His masters, the [renegade](#) Dali Mami and later Hasan Paşa, treated him with considerable leniency in the circumstances, whatever the reason. At least two contemporary records of the life led by Christian captives in Algiers at this time mention Cervantes. He clearly made a name for himself for courage and leadership among the captive [community](#). At long last, in September 1580, three years after Rodrigo had earned his freedom, Miguel's family, with the aid and intervention of the [Trinitarian friars](#), raised the 500 gold escudos demanded for his release. It was only just in time, right before Hasan Paşa sailed for Constantinople (now Istanbul), taking his unsold slaves with him. Not surprisingly, this, the most adventurous period of Cervantes's life, supplied subject matter for several of his literary works, notably the Captive's tale in *Don Quixote* and the two Algiers plays, *El trato de Argel* ("The Traffic of Algiers") and *Los baños de Argel* ("The Bagnios [an [obsolete](#) word for "prisons"] of Algiers"), as well as episodes in a number of other writings, although never in straight autobiographical form.



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