Summary:

The honorable cadet of the French Army, Hercule Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac, talented both as a swordsman/fighter and as poet, is madly in love with his cousin, Roxane. Though he loves her he does not believe she could ever love him due to his unsightly, large nose. Roxane confides to him she loves, Christian de Neuvillete, a new cadet in Cyrano’s group of guards. Cyrano promises to watch over Christian and in the process acts as Christian’s spokesman by speaking and writing letters for him to woo Roxane. Cyrano’s love and his honorable character force him to do things to please Roxane at the cost of his own happiness.

Organizational Patterns:


Central Question or Enduring Issue:

Values, Beauty, and Love

1. **What does it mean to be honorable?** Cyrano establishes himself as an honorable man through his speeches, his actions, and his choices. In Act I, he responds to Valvert’s comment on his lack of fancy clothes by stating “I wear my decorations in my mind…What shining gems I own, I wear inside” (20). The speech continues on and he identifies his decorations and gems as independence, sincerity, wit, deeds, and truth. He proves these are indeed _his_ decorations and gems as he helps Roxane and Christian with their relationship at the expense of his own happiness and romantic love for Roxane. On the other hand, characters like the pickpockets, Lise, and Valvert provide a contrast to Cyrano’s honorable character—the man who always puts the happiness of others’ before his own and never deviates from his values.
2. What is beauty? (Is it your character? Your appearance?). *Cyrano de Bergerac* evaluates beauty through its characters. Inner beauty is represented in Cyrano. He is described by himself and many other characters as having a “huge, enormous” nose. His outer appearance prevents him from expressing his love for Roxane. Outer beauty is represented in Christian de Neuvillete, the “handsome” one. Though Christian epitomizes masculine beauty he lacks any grace with how to woo a woman through words. Finally, in Act IV, Roxane serves as the combination of inner and outer beauty. She “loved / Beauty and soul together” though she did not know the beauty to be Christian’s and the soul to be Cyrano’s (102). She appreciates the combination of inner and outer beauty and embodies the combo (she is beautiful and intellectual).

3. What would you do for those you love? (Are your choices logical? Correct? Emotional?)

Each character makes choices based on love. Cyrano chooses to protect Christian and help him woo Roxane because he loves Roxane. Christian chooses to use Cyrano as his spokesman because he loves Roxane but isn’t able to express his love. Roxane chooses to enter the battlefield because she loves Christian and can’t be away from him. These choices can be argued as being charged by emotion, virtue, and/or logic.

**Issues Related to this Study of Literature.**

**THEMES.**

1. **Fighting for Honor/Values.** The values of the characters are revealed through their dialogue and actions. Based on what they value they may or may not be an honorable character. Cyrano is the embodiment of honor and unfailing consistency in his values. In Act I Cyrano reveals he rather clothe himself in high values than the pomp and fashion of the day. His actions match up to his speech. Roxane asks him to protect Christian, a task which he sees through to his dying day because he values sincerity and truth.

2. **Battling between Inner and Outer Beauty.** Inner and outer beauty is constantly clashing to be of most importance. Again, Cyrano exemplifies inner beauty, Christian exemplifies outer beauty, and eventually Roxane exemplifies inner and outer beauty. Neither Cyrano nor Christian appears successful in winning Roxane’s love with one type of beauty. However, Cyrano through his inner beauty wins a variety of battles: battle of words, battle of swords, and ultimately the battle of love. Upon discovering Cyrano as the author of all Christian’s loving words and drawing close to death, Roxane yelps, “I love you! Live!” (123).
3. Exploring Different Types of Love. Various types of love are explored in this play. Love of the arts, food, and people. Each “love” is highly subjective. For example, 3 men “love” Roxane but to varying degrees and for various reasons. De Guiche’s love for Roxane is entirely physical and selfish. Christian’s love is based on Roxane’s outer beauty, but of purer nature than De Guiche. Cyrano, knowing Roxane his entire life, loves her for her intelligence.

Other Themes. What are you willing to Sacrifice, Art and poetry influences society

SETTING. Cyrano de Bergerac takes place from 1640–1655 in Paris and Arras, France. Each Act takes place at a specific location which builds the plotline of the drama: theatre, cook-shop, Roxane’s house/balcony, war torn Arras, and a convent outside of Paris. Understanding that France is involved the Thirty Years’ War from 1618–1648 sheds greater significance on Act IV which takes place in the midst of a major battle at Arras, France.

POINT OF VIEW/NARRATIVE VOICE. In the tradition of drama, Cyrano de Bergerac is told from the third person point of view. Readers do not get a glimpse into the inner thoughts of the characters unless they reveal their thoughts aloud.

IRONY. Cyrano de Bergerac is filled with irony. Students should know the different types and identify them within the text. Such as.

Dramatic Irony. The audience is aware of something while the character is not. For example, Cyrano believes Roxane is coming to profess her love, but during the Act I we already know she is interested in Christian. Another example, we know Cyrano is the writer and at times literal voice for Christian, while Roxane believes it to be solely Christian.

Verbal Irony. Roxane’s dialogue with De Guiche in the opening of Act III is filled with verbal irony. For example, she convinces him to attack Cyrano by not allowing him to fight in the Battle of Arras because Cyrano is fond of fighting. Although she says it’s to help De Guiche get back at Cyrano, in reality it is to keep her love, Christian, from going to battle.

Students should be able to identify the following parts of a drama in Cyrano de Bergerac.

RISING ACTION. Occurs in Act II when Roxane asks Cyrano to guard Christian. Cyrano takes it a step further by helping Christian woo Roxane.

CLIMAX. Roxane comes to be with Christian during the war at Arras and tells him she loves him for his soul (instead of his physical beauty as she did at first). As Christian is dying, Cyrano
tells him even though Roxane knows he (Cyrano) wrote the letters she still chooses Christian as her love. Cyrano decides not tell Roxane he gave Christian his words.

**FALLING ACTION.** Roxane has spent 15 years living at convent in mourning for Christian. While Cyrano is visiting her she discovers he wrote all Christian’s letters and expresses her true love for Cyrano. Earlier in the day a wooden sign struck him in the head, mortally wounding him, so Cyrano dies after Roxane proclaims her love.

**Affective Issues.** Though *Cyrano de Bergerac* is removed from today’s world in many ways, the issues dealt with in the play are highly relatable. First, students will relate to the correlation they feel between outer beauty and self-confidence. Cyrano though confident in his speaking, writing, and sword fighting skills does not feel comfortable with his physical looks to express his love for Roxane. Students will gobble these sentiments up because they are learning to feel comfortable in their own skin and attain self-confidence.

Another relatable issue is how far would you go to maintain your word? Cyrano maintains his word to Christian till his dying day. Keeping his promise requires him to sacrifice his own happiness for the happiness of the woman he loves. Students are forming a variety of relationships which require different levels of commitment. They will be able to relate to Cyrano by connecting the text to their lives as they explore times they’ve kept their word/maintained their commitments in exchange for some degree of personal sacrifice. This could include school commitments, loyalty in friendship, family promises, etc.

Also students will relate to how love affects their choices, thoughts, actions, etc. Cyrano does anything to make Roxane happy, including helping the other man she loves. Have students ever done something that was of no benefit to them but benefited the person they liked? By sacrificing our wants for the needs of others demonstrates an honorable character. Does love sometimes cause us to do rash things—perhaps even incorrect things? Cyrano brashly agrees to help Christian but it is not incorrect. Or is it?

Lastly, each student will (hopefully) connect with one or a combination of the main characters. Cyrano, Roxane, or Christian. Each character exemplifies a type of beauty—inner or outer—and the desire to weld both types. What do students do to weld inner and outer beauty? Is one greater than the other? Does society and/or family influence which is considered great than the other?
**Vocabulary Issues.** Overall *Cyrano de Bergerac* is an easy read. However, problems in vocabulary may arise from lack of background knowledge with French culture. For example, during the scene at cook-shop a variety of delicacies are mentioned and students may not understand the words because they lack prior knowledge with French cuisine. Teachers may find it useful to bring in pictures or a French cookbook so students can at least have a visual of what is being spoken of in the play. If further issues arise with vocabulary I would recommend having students keep a note-card with difficult vocabulary and their definitions—have it worth a few points as incentive.

**Background Knowledge.** Most students could understand the play without background knowledge. However by giving them background knowledge of the historical context and geographical context of France will deeply enrich their reading of *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

Historically students should be aware of two things. First, the play is set in 1640 and 1655. France was involved in the Thirty Years’ War from 1618–1648. The battle at Arras was a key battle of the Thirty Years’ War and the real Cyrano took place in it. Having the war and battle in mind will provide students’ with context as they read Act IV which takes place at the battle in Arras. Secondly, students should know Cyrano the real-life person, who inspired Edmond Rostand. The real Cyrano born in 1619 also had a knack for dueling and had a large nose. He also had a cousin, Madeleine Robineau (married to the Count de Neuvillette), who aided him in becoming a member of Parisian high society. Nothing is known about whether he romantically loved Madeleine. Another historical fact that inspired Rostand: Cyrano taught his fellow Frenchmen at the battle in Arras how to speak and write (focusing on love). At the age of 36 he died of an accident, also a source of inspiration for Rostand’s fictional Cyrano.

In addition to historical context, students will also benefit from geographical context. Although students can understand the language of the text without this geographical context, providing it will again bring the text to a deeper meaning. Some simple ways to accomplish geographical context would be bringing in a map of France and pictures of the specific locations within the text.

**Implications for Student Diversity.** *Cyrano de Bergerac* does not lend itself to much discussion on diversity. Since the play is set in France, the cultural diversity is apparent. More importantly
though is the implications of monetary wealth. Cyrano is not a wealthy man, yet he does not yield to charity or pick-pocketing. For example, the orange girl offers him food from her spread but he takes only a grape, a glass of water, and half a macaroon (23). It is interesting how Cyrano’s lack of monetary wealth is overshadowed by his genuinely honorable character. This has important implications for students’ real lives.

**Gender Issues.** Rostand does not deal with gender issues; his play contains mainly male characters with 3 notable female characters. Lise, Duenna, and Roxane. Neither men nor women are presented as better than the other sex. In fact, Rostand presents both sexes with faults and virtues. For example, Lise is seen having “a tender conversation with the musketeer” and Cyrano reprimands her. De Guiche is married man trying to marry off Roxane to the older Valvert so that he might be able to persuade Roxane to love him (De Guiche) because he assumes Valvert will not notice. On the other spectrum, Cyrano and Roxane are fairly honorable and loving characters. Rostand presents both sexes as capable of misdeed and virtue. Students could be encouraged to look for passages defending their opinion on how Rostand presents genders.

**Research Issues/Project Ideas.**

**Literary Connections**—Ask students to research the topic of romantic love in other literature or provide them with a list. Have the students read one of these other texts and do a compare/contrast sheet that could eventually lead to an essay.

**Further Connections**—Bring in filmed productions and adaptations of *Cyrano de Bergerac.* Such as the 1990 version by director, Jean-Paul Rappeneau, 1950 version by director, Michael Gordon, and/or the 1987 version, Roxanne, by director Fred Schepisi, starring Steve Martin. Either you could select one film to show in class or a specific scene to show from 2 or more of the versions. After viewing the film or scenes have students discuss the similarities and differences between the films and the texts. How do the similarities and differences build on the text and/or take away from the text? From this class discussion, students will need to write a one page paper assessing whether the film enriched the text or took away from the text.

**Acting Groups**—As a class, have students brainstorm their favorite scenes from the play. Depending on the number of favorite scenes, divide students into groups. Each group will put on a production of their scene—this can either be live in class or filmed to be viewed in class.
They are welcome to modernize, adapt the text, bring in props, etc. Modernization and adaptation of the text should be encouraged in order for students to synthesize the various scenes. Students should be able to answer teacher/student questions in regards to production choices.

**Values**—In groups have students select and justify a list of values for Cyrano’s society or specific characters in *Cyrano de Begerac* and today’s society. From these two lists, students should select the most significant values and justify why they chose them. Groups will present their arguments to the class. After as a class discuss what we should value within the classroom. Create a classroom list of values that can be placed within the classroom as an artifact of their learning. Another direction to take this assignment would be to have students create a list of their personal values and defend those values. Creating their personal values should include at least a one page paper with evidence from the text or personal experiences as well as an artifact outlining their values.

**Enrichment Resources.**
A plethora of enrichment resources exists for *Cyrano de Bergerac*.
1. [http://www.glencoe.com/sec/literature/litlibrary/pdf/cyrano.pdf](http://www.glencoe.com/sec/literature/litlibrary/pdf/cyrano.pdf) This website provides background knowledge, before/during/after reading activities, text to text connection activities, etc.
2. [http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/cyrano/](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/cyrano/) I find sparknotes.com to be a useful website, but admonish your students not to abuse this website by reading it in place of the text.
4. [http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/cyranoc/cyranotg.html](http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/cyranoc/cyranotg.html) Although dated this website provides plenty of resources and activities.