The dynamic tension between what humans view as imagination and reality is presented throughout many philosophical and even fictional texts. While imagination is complexly defined as “the power or capacity to form internal images... not actually present to the senses, including... projecting images of previously experienced qualities,” reality is simply stated as “what is real rather than imagined.” By these two definitions, it is clear that imagination and reality are two opposite worlds. In *The Meditations*, Descartes creates a dualistic mindset by separating his imagination from his reality, while in *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, the protagonist, Don Quixote blurs the boundary line between the two worlds, so his imagination fuses into his reality. Both Descartes and Don Quixote recognize their senses as tools in their realities, however in opposition. Descartes distances himself from his senses, forcing himself to think beyond his imagination and into his pure intellect to prove his reality. Don Quixote, on the other hand, replaces his senses with his imagination, and so his imagination becomes his reality.

Each character pursues a certain way of living and thinking that involves both imagination and reality. This quest-like search shows how each man integrates or segregates their respective imagination and reality. Don Quixote’s quest is a tangible one, for one day “he conceived the strangest notion... to become a knight errant, and to travel about the world with his armour and his arms and his horse in search of adventures” (Cervantes 27). This former hidalgo, influenced by the multitude of chivalrous books which he read in his free time, allows himself to get lost in his imagination. By suddenly realizing that he is a knight errant, Don Quixote’s imagination leads him to do knight errantly duties, such as obtain a suit of armor, a squire for companionship, and a lady to be enamored by. It is clear that
Don Quixote’s imagination quickly takes over his reality, for throughout his quest to bestow honor upon himself and justice to the rest of the world, he loses his grasp on the previous reality he had lived.

Unlike Don Quixote’s technique of blending his imagination and reality, Descartes segregates his two worlds. He seeks to prove what he thinks is actually true, and in order to do that, he must have a clear sense of the distinction between imagination and reality. Descartes’ goal becomes evident when he says, “I have realized that if I wished to have any firm and constant knowledge in the sciences, I would have to... set aside all the opinions which I have previously accepted among my beliefs and start again from the very beginning” (Descartes 17). Descartes clearly separates his imagination from his reality, because he thinks in order to turn his beliefs into knowledge, he must justify them with only true information. Since his imagination cannot be defined as entirely true knowledge, he must segregate his imagination into an entirely different world.

There is a certain level of skepticism that arises when talking about imagination. In general, humans share a common concept of the imagination; however, individuals each have their own unique imaginations. There is also a magnificent aspect of belief incorporated into imagination. For Don Quixote, he does not think twice about becoming a knight errant. He says that, “there is no reason why someone with a plebeian name should not be a knight, for every man is the child of his own deeds” (Cervantes 43). This belief that someone can become whoever they desire to be is the driving force behind Don Quixote’s transformation into a knight errant. Since he imagines he is a knight errant, he is one. This concept is difficult to understand for people whom Don Quixote encounters, because they do not have insight into his imagination. On the other hand, Don Quixote disables those skeptics from proving to him that he is not a knight errant, because he incorporates reality into his imagination. For example, when he encounters a quiet, country inn, he takes it for a castle. When he comes across a set of windmills, he believes them to be monsters. Since Don Quixote can incorporate real things into his imagination through belief, the
boundary line between imagination and reality becomes even more blurred in his world.

The level of skepticism in The Meditations is immensely greater than that in Don Quixote. Descartes begins his pursuit by doubting everything he has acquired from his senses because he believes he cannot trust them. He explains that, “everything which I have thus far accepted as entirely true has been acquired from the senses... But I have learned by experience that these senses sometimes mislead me, and it is prudent never to trust wholly those things which have once deceived us” (Descartes 18). He thinks his senses are sometimes unreliable and give false information, such as an evil smile or a happy cry, so he chooses not to trust them at all. Descartes strives to turn his beliefs into knowledge, but in order to do that; he must only use what he knows is absolutely certain which does not include information gained from his senses. The only idea Descartes knows for certain is that he has a mind. This cogito is the foundation for the rest of The Meditations, and Descartes proves it to be true when he states, “I am, I exist, is necessarily true every time that I pronounce it or conceive it in my mind” (24). He knows he has a mind because thinking is a self-evident existence. Although Descartes distinctly separates his imagination from his reality during this skeptical realization, he does recognize both as innate ideas, those which come from within him. His imagination clearly comes from within himself, since he is the only one that can see into his own imagination. He now, however, is including his reality as an innate idea because he is developing his reality from bottom up, only from thought experiments in his mind.

In order to fully separate his imagination from reality, Descartes digs deeper into his mind to differentiate his imagination from his pure intellect. Throughout his thought process, he begins to understand that pure intellect involves a higher understanding and reason while imagination is simply a means to achieve pure intellect. While only using the pure aspect of thought to prove his reality, Descartes explains in the third meditation that “even bodies are not properly known by the senses nor by the faculty of imagination, but by the understanding alone” (33). In the beginning,
Descartes even doubts his own body. He believes humans only know that they have bodies due to sensory perceptions, which he has already doubted. This realization supports Descartes' mission to use only his mind and what he knows is certain to prove our existence in the world, thus further distancing his imagination from his reality.

Don Quixote, on the other hand, does not possess that level of pure intellect that Descartes does. For Don Quixote, his entire imagination takes over his reality, so there is not room left for pure intellect of any kind. If Don Quixote did acquire some level of pure intellect, the higher understanding would demolish the world he has created for himself as being a knight errant. His existence as a knight errant relies on his imagination working through every situation brought upon him, so any intellectual thought would change his view that imagination and reality are one.

In general, Don Quixote displays imagination, while The Meditations tests imagination. Throughout Don Quixote, the knight errant encounters real obstacles and overcomes them in a way in which his imagination has told him. For example, once embarked on his journey, Don Quixote realizes that he has not yet been knighted. Very disturbed by this idea, he pleads the inn-keeper to knight him the following morning. Don Quixote’s imagination leads him to believe that he could not continue on his quest without first being knighted. Anyone, except Don Quixote, would view this act as nothing more than a display of imagination with no thought process behind it. The only difference with Don Quixote is that he views the act as his reality, not imagination. His thought process stops at the belief that he needs to be knighted because his imagination has told him that being knighted is a requirement of a knight errant. Again, imagination and reality collide in the world of Don Quixote.

Descartes tests his imagination through thought experiments. He uses his imagination to create a certain situation in which he can intellectually process to come to a conclusion. For example, Descartes creates his perfect dream analogy. During this thought process, he tries to distinguish a dreaming state from a waking state since he realizes, “there
are no conclusive indications by which waking life can be distinguished from sleep” (19). Descartes believes that dreams include sensory perceptions which he had previously obtained, but since he has already doubted all sensory perceptions, he cannot distinguish dreaming from waking. Because ordinary dreams typically have some clue to indicate a dream state, such as defying gravity or un-sequential events, he creates a “perfect dream,” which is not distinguishable from reality. Through this thought experiment, his general argument is: if one is dreaming, then one’s beliefs are unreliable. He creates the perfect dream so that one cannot tell if they are awake or dreaming, so they cannot trust their beliefs, because if they are in fact dreaming, then their beliefs are unreliable. These thought experiments allow Descartes to isolate his imagination from pure intellect, which he uses to further prove his reality.

Both Descartes and Don Quixote have distinct views on their reality in comparison to their imaginations. Although according to definition, imagination and reality are polar opposites, Don Quixote appears to completely intermingle his imagination into his reality, while Descartes skillfully distances his imagination from his reality until he can prove what he believes is actually true. As much as Don Quixote or Descartes tries to completely integrate or segregate imagination from reality, it seems that there is a balance between the two ideas which cannot be pushed to the extremes of either Don Quixote or Descartes.

Works Referenced
