

# Jean Jacques Rousseau

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*Encyclopedia of World Biography*, December 12, 1998 Updated: October 22, 2012

**Born:** June 28, 1712 in Geneva, Switzerland

**Died:** July 02, 1778 in Ermenonville, France

**Nationality:** French

**Occupation:** Philosopher

The Swiss-born philosopher, author, political theorist, and composer Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) ranks as one of the greatest figures of the French Enlightenment.

Both Jean Jacques Rousseau the man and his writings constituted a problem for anyone who wanted to grasp his thought and to understand his life. He claimed that his work presented a coherent outlook; yet many critics have found only contradictions and passionate outbursts of rhetoric. One interpreter has called Rousseau "an irresponsible writer with a fatal gift for epigram." In the eyes of others, Rousseau was not a "serious thinker" but only a mere feeler who occasionally had a great thought. Still others have found Rousseau a mere juggler of words and definitions. Even those who turn to him as an innovating genius have been at odds concerning what he advocated. Rousseau has been variously applauded or denounced as the founder of the romantic movement in literature, as the intellectual father of the French Revolution, as a passionate defender of individual freedom and private property, as a socialist, as a collectivist totalitarian, as a superb critic of the social order, and as a silly and pernicious utopian. Some few critics notably Gustave Lanson and E. H. Wright--have taken Rousseau at his word and believe that he attempted to answer only one question: how can civilized man recapture the benefits of "natural man" and yet neither return to the state of nature nor renounce the advantages of the social state?

For Rousseau's biographers, the man himself has been as puzzling as his work--a severe moralist who lived a dangerously "relaxed" life, a misanthrope who loved humanity, a cosmopolitan who prided himself on being a "citizen of Geneva," a writer for the stage who condemned the theater, and a man who became famous by writing essays that denounced culture. In addition to these anomalies, his biographers have had to consider his confessed sexual "peculiarities"--his lifelong habit of masturbation, his exhibitionism, his youthful pleasure in being beaten, his 33-year liaison with a virtual illiterate, and his numerous affairs--and, characteristic of his later years, his persecution suspicions that reached neurotic intensity.

Three major periods characterize Rousseau's life. The first (1712-1750) culminated in the succès de scandale of his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*. The second (1750-1762) saw the publication of his closely related major works: *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), *L'Émile* (1762), and *Du contrat social* (1762). The last period (1762-1778) found Rousseau an outcast, hounded from country to country, his books condemned and burned, and a personage, respected and with influential friends. The *Confessions*, *Dialogues*, and *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* date from this period.

## Youth, 1712-1750

Rousseau was the second child of a strange marriage. His mother, Suzanne Bernard, had at the age of 33 married Isaac Rousseau, a man less wellborn than she. Isaac, exhausted perhaps by his frequent quarrels over money with his mother-in-law, left his wife in 1705 for Constantinople. He returned to Suzanne in September of 1711. Jean Jacques was born on June 28, 1712, at Geneva, Switzerland. Nine days later his mother died.

At the age of three, Jean Jacques was reading and weeping over French novels with his father. From Isaac's sister, the boy acquired his passion for music. His father fled Geneva to avoid imprisonment when Jean Jacques was ten. By the time he was 13, his formal education had ended. Apprenticed to a notary public, he was soon dismissed as fit only for watchmaking. Apprenticed again, this time to an engraver, Rousseau spent three wretched years in hateful servitude, which he abandoned when he found himself unexpectedly locked out of the city by its closed gates. He faced the world with no visible assets and no obvious talents.

Rousseau found himself on Palm Sunday, 1728, in Annecy at the house of Louise Eleonore, Baronne de Warens. She sent him to a hospice for catechumens in Turin, where among "the biggest sluts and the most disgusting trollops who ever defiled the fold of the Lord," he embraced the Roman Catholic faith. His return to Madame de Warens in 1729 initiated a strange alliance between a 29-year-old woman of the world and a sensitive 17-year-old youth.

Rousseau lived under her roof off and on for 13 years and was dominated by her influence. He became her *Petit*; she was his *Maman*. Charming and clever, a born speculator, Madame de Warens was a woman who lived by her wits. She supported him; she found him jobs, most of which he regarded as uncongenial. A friend, after examining the lad, informed her that he might aspire to become a village curé but nothing more. Still Rousseau read, studied, and reflected. He pursued music and gave lessons. For a time, he was an unsuccessful tutor.

## First Publications and Operas

In 1733, disturbed by the advances made to Rousseau by the mother of one of his music pupils, Madame de Warens offered herself to him. Rousseau became her lover: "I felt as if I had been guilty of incest." The sojourn with Madame de Warens was over by 1742. Though she had taken other lovers, and he had enjoyed other escapades, Rousseau was still devoted to her. He thought that the scheme of musical notation he had developed would make his fortune in Paris and thus enable him to save her from financial ruin. But his journey to Paris took Rousseau out of her life. He saw her only once again, in 1754. Reduced to begging and the charity of her neighbors, Madame de Warens died destitute in 1762.

Rousseau's scheme for musical notation, published in 1743 as *Dissertation sur la musique moderne*, brought him neither fame nor fortune--only a letter of commendation from the Académie des Sciences. But his interest in music spurred him to write two operas--*Les Muses galantes* (1742) and *Le Devin du village* (1752)--and permitted him to write articles on music for Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie*; the *Lettre sur la musique française*, which embroiled him in a quarrel with the Paris Opéra (1753); and the *Dictionnaire de musique*, published in 1767.

From September 1743 until August 1744, Rousseau served as secretary to the French ambassador to Venice. He experienced at firsthand the stupidity of officialdom and began to see how institutions lend their authority to injustice and oppression in the name of peace and order. Rousseau spent the remaining years before his success with his first *Discours* in Paris, where he lived from hand to mouth the life of a struggling intellectual.

In March 1745, Rousseau began a liaison with Thérèse Le Vasseur. She was 24 years old, a maid at Rousseau's lodgings. She remained with him for the rest of his life--as mistress, housekeeper, mother of his children, and finally, in 1768, as his wife. He portrayed her as devoted and unselfish, although many of his friends saw her as a malevolent gossip and troublemaker who exercised a baleful influence on his suspicions and dislikes. Not an educated woman--Rousseau himself cataloged her malapropisms--she nonetheless possessed the uncommon quality of being able to offer stability to a man of volatile intensity. They had five children--though some biographers have questioned whether any of them were Rousseau's. Apparently he regarded them as his own even though he abandoned them to the foundling hospital. Rousseau had no means to educate them, and he reasoned that they would be better raised as workmen and peasants by the state.

By 1749 Diderot had become a sympathetic friend, and Rousseau regarded him as a kindred spirit. The publication of Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles* had resulted in his imprisonment at Vincennes. While walking to Vincennes to visit Diderot, Rousseau read an announcement of a prize being offered by the Dijon Academy for the best essay on the question: has progress of the arts and sciences contributed more to the corruption or to the purification of morals?

## Years of Fruition, 1750-1762

Rousseau won the prize of the Dijon Academy with his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* and became "l'homme du jour." His famous rhetorical "attack" on civilization called forth 68 articles defending the arts and sciences. Though he himself regarded this essay as "the weakest in argument and the poorest in harmony and proportion" of all his works, he nonetheless believed that it sounded one of his essential themes; the arts and sciences, instead of liberating men and increasing their happiness, have for the most part shackled men further. "Necessity erected thrones; the arts and sciences consolidated them," he wrote.

The *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité des hommes*, written in response to the essay competition proposed by the Dijon Academy in 1753 (but which did not win the prize), elaborated this theme still further. The social order of civilized society, wrote Rousseau, introduced inequality and unhappiness. This social order rests upon private property. The man who first enclosed a tract of land and called it his own was the true founder of civilized society. "Don't listen to that imposture; you are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to everyone and the earth to no one," he wrote. Man's greatest ills, said Rousseau, are not natural but made by man himself; the remedy lies also within man's power. Heretofore, man has used his wit and art not to alter his wretchedness but only to intensify it.

## Three Major Works

Rousseau's novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) attempted to portray in fiction the sufferings and tragedy that foolish education and arbitrary social conventions work among sensitive creatures. Rousseau's two other major treatises--*L'Émile ou de l'éducation* (1762) and *Du contrat social* (1762)--undertook the more difficult task of constructing an education and a social order that would enable men to be natural and free; that is, that would enable men to recognize no bondage except the bondage of natural necessity. To be free in this sense, said Rousseau, was to be happy.

Rousseau brought these three works to completion in somewhat trying circumstances. After having returned to the Protestant fold in 1755 and having regained his citizenship of Geneva that same year, Rousseau accepted the rather insistent offer of Madame Louise d'Épinay to install Thérèse and himself in the Hermitage, a small cottage on the D'Épinay estate at Montmorency. While Rousseau was working on his novel there, its heroine materialized in the person of Sophie, Comtesse d'Houdetot; and he fell passionately in love with her. He was 44 years old; Sophie was 27, married to a dullard, the mistress of the talented and dashing Marquis Saint-Lambert, and the sister-in-law of Rousseau's hostess. Rousseau was swept off his feet. Their relationship apparently was never consummated; Sophie pitied Rousseau and loved Saint-Lambert. But Madame d'Épinay and her paramour, Melchior Grimm, meddled in the affair; Diderot was drawn into the business. Rousseau felt that his reputation had been blackened, and a bitter estrangement resulted. Madame d'Épinay insulted Rousseau until he left the Hermitage in December 1757. However, he remained in Montmorency until 1762, when the condemnation of *L'Émile* forced him to flee from France.

*La Nouvelle Héloïse* appeared in Paris in January 1761. Originally entitled *Lettres de deux amants, habitants d'une petite ville au pied des Alpes*, the work was structurally a novel in letters, after the fashion of the English author Samuel Richardson. The originality of the novel won it hostile reviews, but its romantic eroticism made it immensely popular with the public. It remained a best seller until the French Revolution.

The notoriety of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* was nothing compared to the storm produced by *L'Émile* and *Du contrat social*. Even today the ideas promulgated in these works are revolutionary. Their expression, especially in *L'Émile*, in a style both readable and alluring made them dangerous. *L'Émile* was condemned by the Paris Parlement and denounced by the archbishop of Paris. Both of the books were burned by the authorities in Geneva.

## ***L'Émile* and *Du contrat social***

*L'Émile ou de l'éducation* remains one of the world's greatest speculative treatises on education. However, Rousseau wrote to a correspondent who tried to follow *L'Émile* literally, "so much the worse for you!" The work was intended as illustrative of an educational program rather than prescriptive of every practical detail of a proper education. Its overarching spirit is best sensed in opposition to John Locke's essay on education. Locke taught that man should be educated to the station for which he is intended. There should be one education for a prince, another for a physician, and still another for a farmer. Rousseau advocated one education for all. Man should be educated to be a man, not to be a doctor, lawyer, or priest. Nor is a child merely a little man; he is, rather, a developing creature, with passions and powers that vary according to his stage of development. What must be avoided at all costs is the master-slave mode of instruction, with the pupil as either master or slave, for the medium of instruction is far more influential than any doctrine taught through that medium. Hence, an education resting merely on a play of wills--as when the child learns only to please the instructor or when the teacher "teaches" by threatening the pupil with a future misfortune--produces creatures fit to be only masters or slaves, not free men. Only free men can realize a "natural social order," wherein men can live happily.

A few of the striking doctrines set forth in *L'Émile* are: the importance of training the body before the mind, learning first through "things" and later through words, teaching first only that for which a child feels a need so as to impress upon him that thought is a tool whereby he can effectively manage things, motivating a child by catering to his ruling passion of greed, refraining from moral instruction until the awakening of the sexual urge, and raising the child outside the doctrines of any church until late adolescence and then instructing him in the religion of conscience. Although Rousseau's principles have never been fully put into practice, his influence on educational reformers has been tremendous.

*L'Émile's* companion master work, *Du contrat social*, attempted to spell out the social relation that a properly educated man--a free man--bears to other free men. This treatise is a difficult and subtle work of a penetrating intellect fired by a great passion for humanity. The liberating fervor of the work, however, is easily caught in the key notions of popular sovereignty and general will. Government is not to be confused with sovereignty of the people or with the social order that is created by the social contract. The government is an intermediary set up between the people as law followers and the people as law creators, the sovereignty. Furthermore, the government is an instrument created by the citizens through their collective action expressed in the general will. The purpose of this instrument is to serve the people by seeing to it that laws expressive of the general will of the citizens are in fact executed. In short, the government is the servant of the people, not their master. And further, the sovereignty of the people--the general will of the people--is to be found not merely in the will of the majority or in the will of all but rather in the will as enlightened by right judgment.

As with *L'Émile*, *Du contrat social* is a work best understood as elaborating the principles of the social order rather than schematizing the mechanism for those general principles. Rousseau's political writings more concerned with immediate application include his *Considérations sur le gouvernement de la Pologne* (1772) and his incomplete *Projet de constitution pour la Corse*, published posthumously in 1862.

Other writings from Rousseau's middle period include the *Encyclopédie* article *Économie politique* (1755); *Lettre sur la Providence* (1756), a reply to Voltaire's poem on the Lisbon earthquake; *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758); *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1761); and four autobiographical *Lettres à Malesherbes* (1762).

## **Exile and Apologetics, 1762-1778**

Forced to flee from France, Rousseau sought refuge at Yverdon in the territory of Bern. Expelled by the Bernese authorities, he found asylum in Môtiers, a village in the Prussian principality of Neuchâtel. Here in 1763 he renounced his Genevan citizenship. The publication of his *Lettres écrites de la montagne* (1764), in which he defended *L'Émile* and criticized "established" reformed churches, aroused the wrath of the Neuchâtel clergy. His house was stoned, and Rousseau fled to the isle of St. Pierre in the Lake of Biel, but he was again expelled by the Bernese. Finally, through the good offices of the British philosopher David Hume, he settled at Wotton, Derbyshire,

England, in 1766. Hume managed to obtain from George III a yearly pension for Rousseau. But Rousseau, falsely believing Hume to be in league with his Parisian and Genevan enemies, not only refused the pension but also openly broke with the philosopher. Henceforth, Rousseau's sense of persecution became ever more intense, even at times hysterical.

Rousseau returned to France in June 1767 under the protection of the Prince de Conti. Wandering from place to place, he at last settled in 1770 in Paris. There he made a living, as he often had in the past, by copying music. By December 1770, the *Confessions*, upon which he had been working since 1766, was completed, and he gave readings from this work at various private homes. Madame d'Épinay, fearing an unflattering picture of herself and her friends, intervened; the readings were forbidden by the police. Disturbed by the reaction to his readings and determined to justify himself before the world, Rousseau wrote *Dialogues ou Rousseau, Juge de Jean-Jacques* (1772-1776). Fearful lest the manuscript fall into the hands of his enemies, he attempted to place it on the high altar of Notre Dame. Thwarted in this attempt, he left a copy with the philosopher Étienne Condillac and, not wholly trusting him, with an English acquaintance, Brooke Boothby. Finally, in 1778 Rousseau entrusted copies of both the *Confessions* and the *Dialogues* to his friend Paul Moulto. His last work, *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, begun in 1776 and unfinished at his death, records how Rousseau, an outcast from society, recaptured "serenity, tranquility, peace, even happiness."

In May 1778, Rousseau accepted Marquis de Girardin's hospitality at Ermenonville near Paris. There, with Thérèse at his bedside, he died on July 2, 1778, probably from uremia. From birth he had suffered from a bladder deformation. From 1748 onward his condition had grown worse. His adoption of the Armenian mode of dress was due to the embarrassment caused by this affliction, and it is not unlikely that much of his suspicious irritability can be traced to the same malady. Rousseau was buried on the île des Peupliers at Ermenonville. In October 1794, his remains were transferred to the Panthéon in Paris. Thérèse, surviving him by 22 years, died in 1801 at the age of 80.

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## Further Readings

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- Rousseau himself is the best introduction to his own thought. Everyman's Library offers translations of *Emile* and a volume containing *The Social Contract* and the two *Discourses*. The *Confessions* is available in a Modern Library edition. The most accessible English version of Rousseau's novel is *Julie, or the New Eloise*, translated and abridged by J. H. McDowell (1968). A sampling of Rousseau's letters appears in *Citizen of Geneva: Selections from the Letters of J.-J. Rousseau*, edited by C. W. Hendel (1937). Useful biographies include Matthew Josephson, *J. J. Rousseau* (1931); R. B. Mowat, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (1938); and Lester G. Crocker, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Quest, 1712-1758* (1968).
- The literature on Rousseau is vast. An excellent introduction to his thought as a whole is E. H. Wright, *The Meaning of Rousseau* (1929). A critical study of Rousseau's life and writings is Frederick C. Green, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (1955), valuable for his life but less illuminating on the works. Ronald Grimsley, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Study in Self-awareness* (1961), focuses on Rousseau's attempts to answer the riddle of his personal existence. See also Grimsley's *Rousseau and the Religious Quest* (1968). Ernst Cassirer, *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (1932), presents Rousseau as offering a non-Christian interpretation of the universe; and in his *Kant, Rousseau, Goethe* (1945), Cassirer suggests that Rousseau was a profound influence on Kantian thought. Roger Masters, *Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (1967), examines an important aspect of Rousseau's work. Frederika Macdonald, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: A New Criticism* (2 vols., 1906), presents Rousseau as a victim of Madame d'Épinay's vilification. For a helpful review of fairly recent Rousseau literature see Peter Gay's chapter on Rousseau in his *The Party of Humanity* (1964).

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### Source Citation

"Jean Jacques Rousseau." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Detroit: Gale, 1998. *World History In Context*. Web. 10 May 2013.

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