

## THE VOICE OF MANKIND: JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU

**Dr. S. Mohan**

Associate Professor & Head,  
Department of English,  
Roever Engineering College,  
Perambalur-621212  
Tamilnadu, India

Rousseau was one of those rare individuals who became the voice of mankind at a crucial moment in the literary history. He quite suddenly had an extraordinary inspiration that served to guide him to his triumphs in literature and philosophy. Manners, the role of man, the relation between environment and man's problems came to be reflected in his writings. He describes his inspirations as follows:

All at once I felt myself dazzled by a thousand sparkling lights, crowds of vivid ideas thronged into my head with a force and confusion that threw me into unspeakable agitation. He wrote much of what stemmed from those extraordinary moments of vision. Many of his the basic ideas that are found in the modern society stem from his writings. It was he who generated the modern Romantic Movement in literature, which is still a great living force now. He was able to express certain inner feelings about man and society which corresponded to the feelings of the fellowmen in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

We know much about this man from his *Confessions* some biographers feel that *Confessions* contain an enlargement of the truth. But in the absence of documents no other versions of his early life exist. The incidents he relates do give us a picture of an instable boyhood which foreshadowed the instable life he was to lead.

Rousseau was the son of a Swiss watchmaker and was born in Geneva in 1712. Of French descent, he had a difficult childhood. When he was ten he was placed under the teaching of a clergyman and then apprenticed to an engraver, from whom he ran away. He went to a little Catholic town nearby and there met Madame de Warrens, herself a recent convert to Catholicism, a women of wealth and intellectual pretensions. She sent Rousseau to be converted at Turin. But, in due course, he abandoned the religious circles to become a lackey and then a lamp, wandering in and out of Switzerland and France and residing for a time in Paris. In the intervals between these wanderings he returned to Madame de Warrens and was her ward, her lover and for a while, the manager of her estates. It was she who made him a student of music.

In 1741 he settled in Paris, where he remained, with interruptions, for the next 15 years, composing and teaching music, figuring in the salon of Mme.d'Epinau, and acquiring the friendship of Diderot. While then moving in high circles he conceived an attachment for an ignorant scullery maid where he stayed, Therese le Vasseur. According to his confessions, she bore him five children. All the children were sent to the foundling home. The future author of a major treatise on education never had the problem of the education of his own children.

Although he had excellent opportunities for employment, he chose to continue his desultory life and supported himself by copying music.

For several years he lived with Therese le Vasseur in the Hermitage, a cottage provided by his patroness, Mme.de Epinay. Later, he quarrelled with Diderot and his patroness. He wrote *Emile* and *Eloise* and *The Social Contract*. Accepting an asylum in England offered by the English philosopher, David Hume, he arrived at London in 1766. In England he wrote a great deal of his *Confessions*. He broke his friendship with Hume and returned to France. A new patron installed him in a house at Ermenouville, where he lived until his death in 1778. The ideas he had launched continued to gain force and became the main topic of thinking during the French Revolution.

The *Confessions* were written during the six most agitated years of his life from 1765 to 1770; and his state of health at this time, both physical and mental, may account for some of the peculiarities of the famous work it is famous as a literary expression of a writer's remembrance of things past. The book serves as autobiography only to the extent that it can be checked against other more objective reports. To a great extent Rousseau succeeded in his effort to write an autobiography that he could present himself before "the Sovereign judge with this book in my hand, and loudly proclaim. Thus I have acted; these were my thoughts such was I, with equal freedom and veracity have I related what was laudable or wicked, I have concealed no crimes, added no virtues ...".

Rousseau confesses the fact that his passion for being overpowered by women continued throughout his adult life. "To fall at the feet on an imperious mistress, obey her mandates, or implore pardon, were for me the most exquisite enjoyments; and the more by blood was inflamed by the efforts of a timely imagination, the more i acquired the appearance of a whining lover". His love affairs with Madame de Warrens and his experiences with his mistress and "common – law" wife Therese Le Vasseur are described very frankly.

Rousseau describes his first experiences with reading. He turned to the romances that his mother had loved, and he and his father sometimes spent the entire night reading aloud alternatively. His response to these books was almost entirely emotional but he finally discovered other books in his grandfather's library, which demanded something from the intellect: Plutarch, Ovid, Moliere and others.

Rousseau describes with great affection how his Aunt Susanne, his father's sister, moved him with her singing; and he attributes his interest in music to her influence.

After his stay at Bossey with Pastor Lambercier, Rousseau was apprenticed to an engraver, Abel Ducommun, in the hope that he would succeed better in the engraver's work. Ducommun is described as "a young man of a very violent and boorish character", who was something of a tyrant, punishing Rousseau if he failed to return to the city before the gates were closed. Rousseau was by this time, according to his own account, a liar and a petty thief, and without reluctance he stole his master's tools in order to misplace them. Once Rousseau was not able to reach the city before the gates were closed. Reluctant to be punished by the engraver, he suddenly decided to give up his apprenticeship.

Rousseau's relationship with Madame Louise de Warens is explained in great detail. He makes a plain confession. When he was first introduced to de warrens, he expected to find "a devout, forbidding old woman", instead, he discovered "a face shining with charms, fine blue eyes full of sweetness, a complexion whose witness dazzled the sight, the form of an enchanting neck". He was sixteen, she was twenty-eight. She became something of a mother to him and something of a goddess, but within five years he was her lover, at her instigation. Her motive

was to protect him and to initiate him into the mysteries of love. She explained what she intended and gave him eight days to think it over; her proposal intellectually cool and morally motivated. Since Rousseau had long imagined the delights of making love to her, he spent the eight days enjoying thoughts more lively than ever; but when he finally found himself in her arms, he was miserable. He writes: was i happy? No; I felt I know not what invincible sadness which poisoned my happiness: it seemed that I had committed an incest and two or three times pressing her eagerly in my arms, I deluged her bosom with my tears”. Madame de Warens was at the same time involved with Claude Anet, a young peasant with knowledge of herbs who had become one of her domestics. Before becoming intimate with Rousseau, she had confessed to him that Anet was her lover. However, Madame was no wanton; her behaviour was more a sign of friendship than of passion. He describes other adventures in love. Although some of them gave him extreme pleasure, he never found another motherly women like de Warens.

Later, returning to Paris, Rousseau became involved with the illustrious circle containing the encyclopaedist, Diderot, Friedrich Uilchior Grimm and Madame Louise d’Epinay. Later he quarrelled with most of his associates. His account of the quarrel, together with the letters that marked its progress is one of the liveliest parts of the *confessions*.

Another important episode described in *confessions* is Rousseau’s meeting with Therese Le Vasseur, a middle woman between 22 and 23 years of age, with a “lively yet charming look” Rousseau reports that, “At first, amusement was my only object”, but in making love to her he found that he was happy and that she was a suitable successor to Madame de Warrens. he was satisfied with her as his companion .she bore him for five children who were send to the foundling hospital, against Therese’s will and Rousseau’s subsequent regret.

The *Confessions* gives an account of Rousseau’s life to the point when, having been asked to leave Bern by the ecclesiastical authorities as a result of the uproar over Emile. It offers a personal account of the experiences of a great writer.

In the matter of style, the *Confessions* leave little to be desired, in this respect, surpassing many of Rousseau’s earlier works. It abounds in fine descriptions of nature, in pleasing accounts of rural life and in interesting anecdotes of the peasantry. The influence of the *Confessions*, unlike that of Rousseau’s earlier works, was not political, nor moral, but literary. It is mainly because of his work Rousseau might be called the father of French Romanticism. Among those who acknowledged his influence were Bernardin de St.Pierre, Chateaubriand, George Sand and various authors who themselves indulged in confessions of their own like De Musset, Vigny, Hugo, Lamartine and Madame Stael, as well as many in Germany, England and other countries.

In the *Confessions* Rousseau accomplished what other man had feared to do. He talked of his intimate self of the inner workings of his spirit. He spoke of matters such as his sexual experiences which men had preferred to busy in silence and forgetfulness. Uneducated in any formal sense, he nevertheless wrote a great book on education. Long before our psychologically aware era, Rousseau was a psychologist. A man of paradox, a bundle of contradictions, he nevertheless enunciated a bundle of truths.

His eloquence and his insistence upon the thoughtful man and the man of natural feelings, and upon the importance of the individual influenced the literature of Germany, France and England. His writings not only helped to touch off the French Revolution but led to “that glow of enthusiastic feelings in France”, which brought French aid to the American Revolution. Rousseau was a man who had a sense of his own unusual mind in the society of his time. That is why he wrote some of the most persuasive books ever set down in the Western world.

## Reference

- Lester G. Crocker, 1974 *Jean-Jacques Rousseau-the Quest 1712–1758*, New York: Macmillan.
- Dent, N.J.H, 1988, *Rousseau: An Introduction to his Psychological, Social and Political Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Melzer, Arthur. *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the Systems of Rousseau's Thought*. University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Neuhouser, Frederick. *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Riley, Patrick, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*. Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Wokler, Robert. *Rousseau*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.
- Wokler, Robert, ed. *Rousseau and Liberty*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (June 28, 1712 – July 2, 1778) was a Franco-Swiss philosopher of Enlightenment whose political ideas influenced the French Revolution, the development of socialist theory, and the growth of nationalism. See also: *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750). *Discourse on Inequality* (1754). *The Social Contract* (1762). *Emile, or On Education* (1762). *Confessions* (Rousseau) (1782). Jean-Jacques Rousseau (UK: /ˈrʊːsoʊ/, US: /ruːˈsoʊ/; French: [ʒɑ̃ˈʁak ʁuso]; 28 June 1712 – 2 July 1778) was a Genevan philosopher, writer and composer. His political philosophy influenced the progress of the Enlightenment throughout Europe, as well as aspects of the French Revolution and the development of modern political, economic and educational thought.