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Retournez á la nature

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Abstract

Known as the Father of French Romanticism, JeanJacques Rousseau is noted for contributing much to his time. Not only will he be remembered for being an essayist and novelist, but he is noted as a philosopher and a principal adversary of the characteristics of 18th century philosophy.¹ Rousseau's unique childhood became his own philosophy and in turn the basis of his well known educational theory "retournez , a la nature" the return to nature. Because of this theory and his writings, education as well as literature, were greatly influenced. ²

RETOURNEZ A LA NATURE

A Research Paper

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Mr. Clyde Greve of the Department of Library Science
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Master of Arts

by

Mary Jo Bruett

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RETOURNEZ Á LA NATURE

Known as the Father of French Romanticism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau is noted for contributing much to his time. Not only will he be remembered for being an essayist and novelist, but he is noted as a philosopher and a principal adversary of the characteristics of 18th century philosophy.¹ Rousseau's unique childhood became his own philosophy and in turn the basis of his well known educational theory "retournez á la nature" the return to nature. Because of this theory and his writings, education as well as literature, were greatly influenced.²

Born in 1712 at Geneva, Switzerland, Rousseau has said of himself as being born before his time. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's childhood was the main basis for his actions during later life and the formulation of his educational theories.³ Misfortunes befell him from childbirth. When his mother passed away a few days after Rousseau's birth, he felt that his birth

¹ Sir Paul Harvey and J. E. Heseltine (eds.), Oxford Companion to French Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 643.

² Margaret C. Gillespie, History and Trends (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company, 1970), p. 22.

³ C. H. Dobinson, Jean-Jacques Rousseau His Thought and Its Relevance Today (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1969), p. 4.

was the first of his fates since he had been the cause of her death.⁴ His mother's death was not only a misfortune to Rousseau, but has been thought to be the tragedy of his father's life.⁵

Rousseau's father taught him enough to develop his imagination and sensibility.⁶ It is felt because his father was a restless and unstable character, Rousseau was instilled with the satisfaction of doing as he pleased. Being largely self-taught, with little formal education, and a sensitive temperament, it was not a promising beginning for his youth.⁷ The earliest remembrances of the world were through the readings of his father. Because Rousseau was not allowed outside of the house and unable to associate with other children, he visioned from his father's readings the world in an unrealistic and romantic background.⁸

A most unusual relationship between Rousseau and his father was provided when Jean-Jacques learned to read with ease at the age of six. One author states that the first seven years of his lifewere, "a sort of hot-house development, both

⁴ William Boyd (ed. and tran.), The Educational Theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1963), p. 23.

⁵ Dobbinson, loc. cit.

⁶ Harvey, loc. cit.

⁷ Boyd, The Educational Theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, op. cit., p. 10.

⁸ Dobbinson, op. cit., p. 5.

physical and intellectual."⁹ According to modern theory, one would be lead to believe that Rousseau's early years were most unhealthy.

Being left to his own resources and being able to do as he pleased, Rousseau started his teen years "without ever needing to learn anything he did not want to learn."¹⁰ After many attempts at success, misfortunes were all Rousseau encountered. His last experiment found him bound to the apprentice of an engraver at the age of thirteen or fourteen. During this time, apprenticeship meant living in the master's home and learning a trade. Because he felt he was mistreated by being thrashed for his shortcomings and misdemeanors, Rousseau abandoned the idea of earning a living and ran away. At the age of sixteen he set forth on a career of temporary vagabondage to see if he could find his own way in the world. This lead Rousseau to a series of wanderings and adventure.¹¹

The customs of society in western Europe, because of the distinct differences between the upper class and the middle class, influenced Rousseau during his life of vagabondism. He was looking for a life of livelihood that would fulfill all of his desires. With his moving from place to place, he came in contact with many people. During this time his experiences were

⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁰ Boyd, The Educational Theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, op. cit., p. 14.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 10.

varied: life as a clerk, as secretary to an ambassador, as personal servant, teacher, and tutor. Since Rousseau did not complete his first apprenticeship, he could not enter into another apprenticeship or claim to be a qualified engraver anywhere.¹²

Through Rousseau's wanderings, he was fortunate to become acquainted and engaged with a family who recognized him for his abilities. Plans were being laid and great opportunities awaited Jean-Jacques. Being the unstable person he was, he performed his duties and responsibilities badly and was finally dismissed from his charge. Insecure and unsuccessful, he was not yet considered a man.¹³

During Rousseau's childhood and through adolescence he had little relationship with the opposite sex. Being an only child, never being allowed to play with children of his own age, being in strictly male company with the little formal education he did have, and cut off from all coeducational opportunities he began "to form romantic ideas regarding the beauties and qualities of young members of the other sex."¹⁴ Rousseau's ideas of women and sex, if he were living today, might be called somewhat perverted.

The majority of Rousseau's love affairs were of his own conscious and what he wanted to make and believe of them.

¹² Dobinson, op. cit., p. 16.

¹³ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

In his wanderings, during a time of loneliness and a series of failures and misfortunes, he fell for the consolation of a young servant-maid in Paris. Thinking of himself quite honorably he did make a formal declaration to Thérèse Le Vasseur.¹⁵ The declaration stating that, "I declared to her beforehand that I would never forsake her, but that I would never marry her."¹⁶

Out of this relationship, a most unusual influence is reflected from Rousseau's educational point of view as one will note later. Five children were born much to Rousseau's embarrassment. Even though these infants were born to his wife as a result of giving herself to Jean-Jacques, Rousseau sent them off to a Foundling Hospital. They were sent at birth seemingly in spite of the mother's protests.¹⁷

In Rousseau's writings of his Confessions, he seems to be giving a series of justifications for his actions. This leads one to believe that he feels a need to justify his actions because of his embarrassment. The most influential justification was taken from Plato, the Greek philosopher living from 427 - 347 B. C. and his ideal state:

That the children of the Guardians should be taken from their mothers at birth, suckled by wet nurses and by other Guardian mothers (none of these mothers ever knowing which was their own baby) and brought up in a community of children. Thus they were to

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

grow up free from prejudices which might be imparted by their parents, free from family rivalries or snobbery, having no personal possessions other than necessary clothes, and so, as a result feeling no obligations except to the State and therefore being willing to serve the State wholeheartedly and objectively and with a clear conception of justice and equity.¹⁸

Later, at the age of sixty-four, out of gratitude to Thérèse, under no legal authority and in an unusual ceremony, Rousseau took her to be his wife. Rousseau conducted his own ceremony being not only the bridegroom, but also the priest.

The later years of Rousseau's life were spent in more wanderings. He made many friends with the upper class and in the literary world. His interest in music and literature made Rousseau well known in Paris. Not being accustomed to a settled life and success, weariness set in and Rousseau moved on to Switzerland. Again he did not want to feel dependent on anyone. During this time (1760's), Rousseau spent the most productive years of his life by giving to the world his most famous, influential, and intellectual writings.

Rousseau then proceeded to France where his writings were beginning to appear in print. As soon as his writings appeared before the public, there was an order sent from Parliament asking for the author's arrest. This caused Rousseau to start his wanderings again.

The last years of Rousseau's life were tiring. He was an unhappy man. He suffered much bodily pain from lifelong ill-health. Rousseau had lost many of his friends, but

18

Ibid., pp. 26-27.

refused to accept help from those who still cared. In July of 1778, he took violently ill and died. Today, Rousseau's ashes are in the Pantheon in Paris.¹⁹

One begins to see Rousseau as an individual when the following feature of his philosophy is taken into consideration: "Everything is good when it comes from the hands of the maker of things, everything deteriorates in the hands of man."²⁰

"Sharpening the muscles of the mind and filling it to the brim with all the knowledge in the world that it could absorb,"²¹ was the emphasis on education during the 18th century. Rousseau attaches a meaning to his philosophy and to the word education by relating to the following passage:

We are born feeble and need strength. We are born devoid of everything and need help. We are born stupid and need judgment. All that we lack at birth and need when grown-up is given us by education. . . . The internal development of our faculties and organs is the education of nature. The use we are taught to make of this development is the education of me.²²

Rousseau introduced his plea for education of the child to the educators at this time. Being set in their ways, the educators were astounded by his belief of "retournez à la nature" the return to nature. The return to nature meant simply that

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Thomas Davidson, Rousseau and Education According to Nature (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), pp. 59-71.

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Henri-Frédéric Amiel, Jean Jacques Rousseau (New York: B. W. Huebsch, Inc., 1922), p. 43.

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Gillespie, op. cit., p. 21.

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Boyd, The Educational Theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, op. cit., p. 15.

children should grow naturally according to the developments of nature. This philosophy was of great impact since the educators view of education meant sharpening the muscles and filling to the brim the minds of the young members of the court of France. These members were to be trained in a way that would make them acceptable in court life. Courses in manners and social arts could not be taught by returning the child to nature.²³

With this educational philosophy, Rousseau wanted all to believe that "educational reform was full of social dynamite and urgent concern of every citizen."²⁴ Since Rousseau was convinced that the world of civilization was corrupt and it made those who exist corrupt, his belief of the return to nature was the only answer for reform. "Man is by nature good- only the environment is bad."²⁵ The only solution was the return to nature.

The education of the child should not include formal education or mass education until the age of twelve according to Rousseau.²⁶ This stems from Rousseau's own childhood method of learning in a nonchalant way without really being conscious

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"Rousseau, Jean Jacques," The Lincoln Library of Essential Information (1968), p. 1630.

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Paul Edwards (ed.), The Encyclopedia of Philosophy (1967), VII, p. 90.

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Dobinson, op. cit., p. 90.

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Gillespie, loc. cit.

of the effects.²⁷ Without the formal education approach, the learning the child is receiving thus far is coming from nature, from man or from things.

Positive or in a sense what one might call formal education can begin only when the child is old enough to become aware of the people around him and their relationship to him.²⁸ When the child is filled with an awareness (Rousseau states this as the education that come to us from man)²⁹ this is the only influence over which the individual has any control.

John Locke (1632-1704) a late 17th century English philosopher, influenced the education of children by his philosophy, "children must not be forced but must be guided and invited into learning, with their natural curiosity of mind supplying sufficient motive force to carry them to full education."³⁰ Rousseau disagreed with Locke and his philosophy and made no great resemblance to it, but was inspired by it. Rousseau reflected Locke's theory by expounding upon the following idea:

The child must not be led, but accompanied in that search for knowledge, with the wise preceptor and friend always at hand to supply information when they ask for it, to make things clear at the critical moment when self-

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Boyd, The Educational Theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, op. cit., p. 14.

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Edwards, op. cit., p. 221.

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Boyd, The Educational Theory of Jean Jacques Rousseau, loc. cit.

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Cornelia Meigs and others, A Critical History of Children's Literature (New York: Macmillan Company, 1969), p. 89.

instruction tends to turn into confusion.³¹

In many ways, Rousseau was very much against science and the world of civilization because of its many social restraints. It is fitting to note that the only book he himself would allow children to read was Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. Even though he was a reader of great depth, Rousseau felt children should be allowed only to read Defoe's novel because, "it was a story of an individual who had been reduced to a state of living with nature and of being dependent upon his own ideas and ingenuity to adapt to and cope with his environment."³²

A new educational movement that swept the continent and later developed fame throughout the world in the early 1900's was the Montessori method of education. This system was established in Rome by Dr. Maria Montessori. It is a system of training and teaching young children by emphasizing the development of the senses and aims at self-education through guiding the child rather than controlling his activities.

When one studies Montessori's educational theory, it is evident we see Rousseau's theories appearing time and time again. Characteristics of Rousseau's ideas concerning education are:

- 1) The demand that children should, from birth be allowed complete freedom of movement.
- 2) Children should be educated through direct experience, not from books.

³¹
Ibid.

³²
Gillespie, loc. cit.

- 3) Children should be taught to use their hands in the production of useful articles.³³

Characteristics of the Montessori system are:

- 1) The principle of individuality (following the direction given by his own individual impulse).
- 2) The principle of freedom (the individual in maturing his powers and adapting to social life is done without conventional restrictions).
- 3) The senses as basis of the higher life (requires cultivation in early childhood as the foreground for complete success in later education).³⁴

Both Rousseau and Montessori felt the need for free development, but it is said that Montessori underrates Rousseau. On the other hand there is sufficient evidence to show, aside from the details in method, none of Montessori's principles are in any way more adequate than those of Rousseau's. The impact and influence of Rousseau's Emile shows that Montessori has no new principles.³⁵

Literature written for children was not prevalent in Rousseau's works. This did not keep his influence from existing in other author's works or keep him from writing about children for the adult reader. This might lead one to believe that it was Rousseau's theories of education which shaped children's literature during this period. The content of his works were written showing feeling and sincerity and the fact there was evidence of a humanistic quality made Rousseau's

³³ Davidson, op. cit., p. 237.

³⁴ William Boyd, From Locke to Montessori (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1914), p. 183.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 184-185.

works notable.³⁶

The writing of Emile, Rousseau's main education work, acclaimed universal fame of which we are still hearing the echoes. Although Rousseau felt Emile did not reach the success as his other writing endeavors, it is mentioned to have the greatest impact on children's literature in England. Emile was published in 1762 in France and translated into English the same year. To the 18th century public, the content of Emile presented a challenge to the ruling order, if not a revolution. Applause was heard for Rousseau's writing, but was drowned out by the roars of thunder. Within a short time, Parliament condemned the book. Their orders were to burn the contents in the courtyard of Palais and to seize and apprehend the "obnoxious" author.³⁷

Rousseau, with his book, had placed himself under fire and opposition to two influential parties:

- 1) The orthodox, religious party whose members included the court. The religion advocated set open defiance to the dogma of the church and being well calculated were to become popular and undermine the church's influence.
- 2) The philosophic or rationalistic party who for sometime had been trying to destroy all religion and replace it with Reason. Rousseau not only threatened to defeat their purpose, but to cast their works into the shade.³⁸

³⁶ Gillespie, op. cit., p. 17.

³⁷ Frances Winwar, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 265.

³⁸ Davidson, op. cit., pp. 63-64.

Although Emile was burned in Geneva and Paris, it was being read with honor in London. One book had never created so much controversy and brought so much attention to the men of the country. It not only swayed opinions, but stirred the human soul.³⁹

In sections of Europe, Emile was accepted as a system of education and as a philosophy of life. These sections of people began organizing for their children the free plan of education developed by Rousseau. Because Rousseau's writings emphasized within the school a greater freedom and recognition of natural impulses, children were taken into the woods and open fields- taken back to nature. Adults also accepted Rousseau's doctrine as a philosophy of life and wanted to give themselves a freedom and release from the problems of modern society.⁴⁰

A summary of Rousseau's Emile is taken from Paul Merrill Spurlins: Rousseau in America 1760-1809.

The long ~~treatise~~ is composed of five books, four of which deal with Emile's education, while the fifth is devoted to that of Sophie, his future wife. Emile, the model pupil, is to be a child of good birth, well-formed and in good health, from a temperate zone, preferably France, and rich. The poor have no need of education. Rousseau distinguished four ages in Emile's development to manhood. Emile will be brought up in the country, safe from the baleful influences of city life. His education is to be eminently practical, not bookish

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Gabriel Compayré, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Education From Nature (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., 1907), pp. 100-101.

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Lincoln Library of Essential Information, "Rousseau," p. 1631.

at all. He will be taught to question the utility of all things. Emile must learn how to live. He wanted Emile to become a man of judgment - and free.⁴¹

Gabriel Compayré in his book entitled Jean Jacques Rousseau and Education from Nature gives not the summary but an evaluation:

Emile is a knotty, tangled book, full of matter, and to such an extent is the true mingled with the false, imagination and hazardous dream with keen, accurate observation and reasoning power, that at first a full comprehension of it is impossible. ...it is an intricate composition, half novel, half philosophical treatise.... In short, Emile is a combative book 'full of fire and smoke'.⁴²

Much of Emile has the structure of being a biographical allegory. One author believes Rousseau is making contrast to his actual life. The two main characters of Emile are the boy Emile and his tutor. The boy created is Rousseau at the age of ten, fifteen, or twenty and the tutor is Rousseau at the age of fifty.⁴³

Rousseau felt he had proven to his satisfaction his purpose for writing Emile even though he did not feel it was his best work. His purpose being:

- 1) That his education according to Nature will enable men and women to stand the test of the severest adversity, defying not only suffering, but also public opinion.

⁴¹ Paul Merrill Spurlin, Rousseau in America 1760-1809 (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1969), p. 73.

⁴² Compayré, op. cit., pp. 2-3.

⁴³ Boyd, The Educational Theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, op. cit., p. 12.

- 2) That the life of cities is altogether corrupt and corrupting.⁴⁴

During his lifetime, Rousseau wrote constantly. He often drew from his own experiences for theory and writing materials. Many of his writings were done with charming passages that were romantic and filled with emotion and led straight to the heart. The descriptions were of the country and people Rousseau knew best; Swiss scenery and simple family life. There was an emphasis in his writing on the picturesque, the natural, and the rural.⁴⁵

From Rousseau's own days to today, his influence on literature has been felt in France, Germany, England, Italy, Greece, Scandanavia, and Russia. Perhaps the greatest influence was in French literature. The imprint left was a picturesque element of clear and effective style, form and matter, its morbid way of arousing sympathy or compassion and insincere virtue, and its outspokenness and smoothness. Also felt, was the impact of Rousseau's teachings from beginning to end.⁴⁶

Rousseau's introduction of Emile and the theory of education influenced many aspects of children's literature. Authors of children's literature wrote stories intending to emphasize the idea of learning through experience. Rousseau's influence is felt in their purpose, their techniques of teaching,

⁴⁴ Davidson, op. cit., p. 210.

⁴⁵ Harvey, loc. cit.

⁴⁶ Davidaon, op. cit., p. 228.

their plot, their characters, and subjects. Some of these major writers during 1763 to 1800's wrote, not in addition to Rousseau's beliefs, but in an extension and revision of them.

Maria Edgeworth's major works are The Parent's Assistant, Moral Tales, and Early Lessons. The influence shown here is Rousseau's idea of utility or usefulness and the teaching of morals without any mention of religion.⁴⁷

Thomas Day's major works are The History of Sandford and Merton and History of Little Jack. The influence shown here is Rousseau's idea of providing reading material that is suitable for children. Also, the idea that crime should dictate the punishment is shown. Both Rousseau and Day were intent upon developing the mind and power of reasoning of children.⁴⁸

Anna Leatitia Barbauld's major works are Evenings at Home, Lessons for Children and Hymns in Prose for Children. The influence shown here is the subject of nature and the child discovering nature, but Mrs. Barbauld goes further than Rousseau and shows a relationship between God and nature.⁴⁹

The above authors are only representative of the impact of Rousseau's influence. Besides these ideas which have been

⁴⁷ Sylvia W. Patterson, Rousseau's Emile and Early Children's Literature (Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1971), pp. 79-97.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 62-72.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 40-47.

expressed, Rousseau's love of nature and the virtuous themes are ones which will be emphasized in children's literature today, tomorrow and forever.

Rousseau was a controversial figure all of his life. This controversy continues even today, as many of his biographers disseminate sketches of his life, theories, and works. Much of what is written today seems repetitious, but often contradicts one another. Even with this, one is able to form a conception and estimate Rousseau's character and ideals, which underlie his social and educational theory.

Rousseau's life pattern has given him a range of experiences and contacts that people of today would not dream of experiencing during several lifetimes. To summarize his life briefly one author has stated the following:

It was Rousseau, a man of the French Revolution, who gave tremendous impetus to educational reforms. Man is by nature good-only the environment is bad, said Rousseau the sociologist. Primitive nature and South Sea Island living are innocently virtuous- civilization is corrupt and makes others corrupt, said Rousseau the anthropologist. Reason and logic are less trustworthy than the emotions and intuitive knowledge, said Rousseau the romantic. Religion as taught in the churches should be abolished and replaced by a natural religion enforced by the government, said Rousseau the theologian.⁵⁰

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William H. Lucio (ed.), Readings in American Education (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1963), p. 90.

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