

## **Confession: A Biographical Sketch of Jean Jacques Rousseau**

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### **Abstract:**

*Rousseau's Confessions* is written in the first person and addressed directly to God. Augustine's work is an extended prayer and intimate conversation with a divine beloved. In the 16th century, groups of Christians broke with the Roman Catholic Church to start their Christian movements, but they, too, continued to consult Augustine. Augustine's work, including *The Confessions*, has also contributed significantly to Western philosophy. A few examples include his insights about knowledge and illumination, the importance and centrality of will, subsequently taken up by the likes of Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, and German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the fathers of existentialist philosophy, and his novel ideas about the march of human history. His ruthless self-scrutiny in *The Confessions* reflects a great understanding of the human psyche, while his view that humans are made for love continues to inspire readers.

**Keywords:** Confession, divine, Christian, Catholic, western philosophy, neurology, and the human psyche.

Jean Jacques Rousseau was a man tormented equally by fate and men. He was born in Geneva on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1712 to a spirited but irresponsible watchmaker father named Issac Rousseau and a beautiful mother, Susannah by name. According to Rousseau, his father, and mother loved each other since childhood. Several difficulties came in the way, but the lovers got over them and united themselves in the bonds of marriage. Rousseau was brought up by his father's sister and maid, both of whom Rousseau always had very tender emotions. Rousseau writes, 'I owed my preservation to one of my father's sisters, and amiable and virtuous girl, who took the most tender care of me; she is yet living, nursing at the age of four scores, a husband younger than herself, but worn out with excessive drinking. Dear aunt! I freely forgive you for preserving my life and only lament that it is not in my power to bestow on the decline of your days the tender solicitude and love you lavished on the first dawn of mine.'

Rousseau's name conjures up an image of a man who was denied the care of his parents, the comforts of a home, felicity of schooling, yet he faced all the buffets of life with a firm determination to fight for truth and liberty. The champion of freedom was stoned in the streets and hounded away from the cities he tried to take shelter in, undaunted by the tyrannies; he continues to write about his principles of life.

I spent hours that were not employed in reading or writing with my father or walking with the governess, Jacqueline, with my aunt. Whether seeing her embroiderer or hearing her song, whether sitting, standing, or standing by her side, I was ever happy. Her tenderness and unaffected gaiety, the charms of her figure and countenance have left such indelible impressions on my mind that her manner, look, and attitude is still before my eyes; I recollect a thousand little caressing questions; could describe her clothes, her headdress, nor have the two curls of five black hair which hung on her temples, according to the mode of the time, escaped my memory.

### **Separation from his father**

His father had to flee to escape imprisonment, leaving child Rousseau under the care of his brother, yet his father did not fail to contribute his bit to shaping his son's personality. His father had married again, but he had various problems which prevented him from regarding his son. Young J.J., therefore, has a word of praise for his father. He says, 'The conduct in a father, whose affection and virtue It has taught me this great lesson of morality, perhaps the only one that can have any conspicuous influence on our actions, that we should ever carefully avoid putting our interests in competition with our duty, or promise ourselves felicity from the misfortunes of others, certain that in such circumstances, however sincere our love of virtue may be, sooner or later it will give way, and we shall imperceptibly become unjust and wicked in fact, however upright in our intentions'.

### **Penchant for Woman:**

His physical and moral virtues attracted women of great families to him. Rousseau also had a penchant for women. In his childhood days, he got women, his governess, his aunts, and several other women who gave him motherly love, but as he grew in years, he got many women friends. Rousseau writes, 'I have experienced two kinds of love, equally authentic which have a low affinity, yet each differing materially from tender friendship. My whole life has been divided between these affections, and I have frequently felt the power of both at the same instant. When he was still a boy, he went to see his father at Nion, where one Madam de Vilson loaded him with caresses, and her daughter made him a gallant. He was so firmly attached to her that he would not suffer for anyone of his sex to approach her. Another woman, Mademoiselle Goton, had something in her character that took him a lot of work to remember. If Mademoiselle Vilson was ill, he suffered with her. But his passion for Mademoiselle Goton had acquired a degree of fury.

After getting freedom from the hospital of Catechumens in Turin, he saw a woman named Madam Basile behind a counter, who gave him employment, bade him to be cheerful, and gave him breakfast. But soon, they had solid sentiments for each other. She was only four-five years older than him. Madam Basile's husband, who was considerably older than herself, had left her to the care of a clerk since he was in service at far off place. The beauty of this woman bewitched Rousseau. He recounts that on one particular, her head leaning forward discovered a small circle on her neck; her hair, elegantly dressed, was ornamented

with flowers; her figure was universally charming, and I had an uninterrupted opportunity to admire it. On another occasion, when she kissed his hands, Rousseau writes that he had never enjoyed 'so sweet a moment'.

When he started coaching students in music, he got a scholar named Mademoiselle Lard, who, he found, was the perfect model for a Grecian Statue, whom I should quote for the most handsome girl I have ever seen, if true beauty could exist without life or soul'. Her mother had taken a fancy to him. Rousseau writes, 'While the master was admiring the daughter, the mother was admiring the master'. On his arrival, he was entertained with coffee and cream. In addition, the mother never failed to welcome him with a kiss.

Rousseau went on a journey to Montpellier, hoping to recover his failing health. On the way, he came across a lady called Madam de Larnane, who made advances on him; in the initial stages, he thought she was making a sport of him, but the lady persisted in her caressing behavior. During a walk with the lady, he narrated his history to her. Madam de Carnage threw her arms around his neck, and her lips spoke too plainly on his to be any longer misunderstood. Rousseau also felt that he was really in love with her. He felt so happy in her company that she seemed to have lost himself. He said, 'Adieu to poor Jean Jacques, or rather farewell to fever, vapors, and polypus'. Rousseau was so deeply in love with a lady that he thought he would never forget her if he lived a hundred years or more. He says, 'this happiness lasted four of five days, during which time I was intoxicated with delight, which I I tasted pure and serene and, I may add, it is owing to Adam de Larage that I did not go out of the world without having tasted real pleasure....oh! These three days! What reason have I to regret them? Never and such happiness return again!'

#### **Found a Life Partner**

Then, he met Theresa, a needle-woman in his landlady's house. Her modesty and her charming looks struck Rousseau. He was moved with sympathy when he found he was 'the only person at the table who spoke and behaved with decency'. He openly declared himself her champion. Soon an understanding grew between them- 'she thought she saw in me an honest man, and in this, she was not deceived.

#### **Affair with Madam d'Houdetot**

Even after getting Theresa, Rousseau had a long romantic affair with Madam d'Houdetot, a relative of his benefactor, Madam d'Epinay. Madam d'Houdetot was thirty years of age, having minor pox marks on her face and coarse complexion, but she had an agreeable figure, with black hair hanging down in curls below the waist. She could play the harpsichord, dance well, and write good poetry. Rousseau was deeply impressed by her character. He notes she was married to Comte d'Houdetot, whom she did not love since he was not amiable; on the other hand, she found that St. Lambert was gifted with some good qualities and was her authentic and passionate lover. Rousseau fell victim to her charms instantly. She came; she saw and conquered Rousseau. He writes The love affair continued until it was discovered and contravened by Madam d'Epinay.

#### **Contact with Madam de Warens**

But his luck again came to his help. He was sent to Madam de Warens, who became his guardian angel and Mama. He was then in the middle of his sixteenth year, combining boyhood and youth. He had feelings for sex, but his craving for love was no less intense. At her first sight, he was struck by her beauty- 'I see a face beaming with charms, fine blue eyes,

and full of sweetness, a complexion whose whiteness dazzled the sight, the form of an enchanting neck, nothing escaped the eager eye of a young prose style, for that instant I was her.'

Madam de Warens was a twenty-eight-year-old young woman separated from her husband. She had dedicated her life to the religious cause of converting young souls into pious Catholics. Rousseau, a lad of sixteen, was not handsome, 'but had a good height, a good foot, an animated countenance, a well-proportioned mouth, black hair and eyebrows, and vivacity, darted that innate fire which inflamed my blood; fortunately for me. Perhaps Madam de Warens also had a good view of this innocent youth. Both of them stepped into a heaven of love and sympathy. She almost adopted this youth. Rousseau, or any other young man, would never believe fate could be so kind and benevolent. Rousseau writes about her love and friendliness, 'Let those who deny the existence of the sympathy of souls explain if they know how and why the first glance, the first word of Madam de Warens inspired me,

### **Taste for Music**

Though my taste, or rather a passion for her music, showed itself considerably later, I am fully persuaded it is to her. I am indebted for it. She knew a great number of songs, which she sang with great sweetness and melody.

Would anyone believe that an old dotard like me, worn out with care and infirmity, should sometimes surprise himself weeping like a child and in a voice querulous and broken by age, muttering out one of those airs which were the favorites of my infancy? These childhood impressions were so deep that they remained in his mind to inspire him till the end of his life.

### **Education**

Luck sent him to Monsieur and Madam Lambercier's care to begin his formal education. Monsieur Lambercier was an honest and sincere teacher, a worthy man, never made the acquisition of learning burdensome, while Mademoiselle 'felt a mother's affection, she sometimes exerted a mother's authority,...for benevolence, aided by the passions, made an empire over me which has given law to my heart'. Mademoiselle Lambercier's beauty also made a profound mark on his mind. Whenever Rousseau looked upon any handsome women, he transformed them into so many Mademoiselle Lamberciers.

### **Untoward Incident**

But fate wanted him to taste some better fruits in his boyhood, perhaps to train him to bear the taste of many more in his life. Though Mademoiselle Lambercier was motherly in her treatment of Rousseau, the evidence led her to misbelieve that Rousseau was guilty of breaking the teeth of a comb. Rousseau and his cousin left the precincts of her house. They were sent to Monsieur Dercommon for training in engraving. This engraver was a cruel fellow and gave beaten the children for petty offenses. This engraver forced Rousseau out of the city of Geneva to roam in the wide world alone without a guardian, money, or vocational training, to pass his days in the streets. The engraver also strengthened his sinews to bear buffets of life.

### **Seeds of Virtue and Integrity**

Not only did young Rousseau inherit the integrity of heart from his father, but his steadfast faith in religion was also his father's gift. He remembers with pride that his father

possessed both integrity and deep faith in religion: 'In the world, he appeared a man of pleasure; in his family, he was a Christian, and implanted early in my mind those sentiments he felt the force of.' Thus, the seeds of the virtue of uprightness in morals were sown in his childhood, all gradually and naturally.

### **Social Evolution**

Rousseau was the first social scientist to study the evolution of society or the historical progress of human culture. His main concern was to mark out the stages of social development and bring out the factors he found were crucial for progress. Though several other thinkers were talking about progress, it was Rousseau who thought a well-marked process was behind it. Ironically, he was persecuted for discovering thought-process instead of being praised. Describing the predicaments of Rousseau, Bertrand de Jouvenel writes, 'Rousseau attempting to place the manuscript of the 'Dialogues' on the master-altar of Notre-Dame, because of that then seemed to him the only way of ensuring that his protest against his persecutors should reach posterity. Rousseau balked at his attempt and wandered through the streets of Paris, clutching his justification in despair because there was no one he could trust to procure its posthumous publication. Rousseau is standing at street corners, distributing leaflets copied in his own hand, which passers-by disregard; here are images that move us to pity, yet at the same time, we feel that such conduct is pathological.

Scholars hold that Rousseau was responsible for creating a hostile atmosphere. There was a systematic attempt on the part of the Philosophers to vilify him. A war of sarcastic bon mots was waged against him, which his actions and sensitivity made effective.

### **Gratefulness**

Rousseau was emotional and thankful to those who had done any good to him and regretful if he ever happened to do ill to anybody. He took the opportunity to express his gratitude to his aunt and governess for the love and care he received from them even in his infancy and also to Monsieur and Mademoiselle Lambercier. He did not fail to thank Madam de Warens, whom he called Mama. He has not used words of thanks for her because thanks would have been an abysmal return for the excellent service and protection she had given him, but he has written at length about her generosity and efforts to make him stand on his legs.

### **Love for Nature**

Rousseau was indeed a gifted man. He was a keen observer of life, a love of music, a champion of liberty, and a devotee of truth. All these great qualities of character proceeded from his love of nature he possessed in great measure. When, at an early stage of his life, he went to Bossy to board with Minister Lambercier to learn Latin, he found that nature was not less inspiring than the love of Monsieur and Mademoiselle Lambercier.

### **Conclusion**

Several references to nature's beauty are interspersed in the text of *The Confessions*, revealing Rousseau's abiding love for nature. This short account of Rousseau's character, as given by him, shows that Rousseau began the journey of life as a child deprived of the love and care of his parents, of the formal education, but left to the care of his fate which took him from place to place in search of subsistence. Poor and neglected though he was, God got him in compensation love of an angel like Madam de Warens and the friendship of several other women of position who helped him liberally in finding him asylums and sustained him during

ordeals. The people tormented him for his love of liberty, but the tests had hardened him morally to come out magnificently.

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