

Name _____



Jean-Jacques Rousseau

By Sharon Fabian

Maybe you have read about a young man who had a particular interest when he was growing up and later became a famous leader in the same field. Many famous musicians, scientists, architects, and artists got their start early in life. They found something they were interested in as children and stuck with it.

The story of Jean-Jacques Rousseau is a little different. Early in his life Rousseau took an interest in music, but that is not what he became famous for. As a young man, he trained to become an engraver, but that is not what he became famous for either.

Rousseau became known as a famous thinker. He became famous for his ideas, which people learned about through his writings.

As a young child, Rousseau must have had plenty of time to think. His mother died just after he was born, and later his father abandoned him. After that, he often spent time alone in a garden reading and thinking. He was given classical literature to read at a very early age.

Eventually, Rousseau became one of the most influential thinkers of the Enlightenment, the period of European history that includes the 1600s and 1700s. Sometimes he disagreed with other important Enlightenment thinkers; at other times he agreed with them. He always seemed to be thinking things through, modifying and expanding on his views as he grew older.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is best known for his philosophy as it applies to politics. He also wrote about his ideas on religion and education.



He first became famous for *A Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, a major work of philosophy that he wrote in 1750. In this work, he argued that major accomplishments of his time, like advances in science and the arts, were actually bad for society.

He argued that before societies became so complicated, people lived in a more natural way and got along well with each other. He said that advanced societies brought about problems including superstition, greed, and pride.

According to Rousseau, a series of events led humans from their natural state to where we are now. At first, he says, people lived in nature just as other creatures did. Next, people began to organize into temporary groups for activities like hunting; these early groups used basic language skills like making noises or gestures. In the third stage, people organized into more permanent arrangements including the family as we know it today. The fourth stage occurred when people began to use farming and to make tools from metal. These types of activities required people to have specialized skills, and this led to a division of labor with some people doing the manual work and others being in charge. This, in turn, led to social classes and ownership of property.

Rousseau said that now that people live in more complicated societies, they have an obligation to do certain things. He says that the people who rule should follow the will of all of the people. They should do what is best for everyone, not just what is best for a few or even for the majority.

He believed that people still have a natural sense of caring for others, and that when they are treated right, they will look out for each other.

Some parts of Rousseau's philosophy brought him into conflict with leaders of his own time, especially his views on religion. For instance, his idea that people are naturally good was in conflict with the religious teaching about original sin. Sometimes his views got him into such a controversy that he was forced to move. He went back and forth between France and his home in Geneva, Switzerland.

His views on education might still be popular with students today. He wrote that children should be taught to develop their natural abilities and interests. He did not think that book learning was all that important.

Rousseau's ideas are still studied and debated. It is no wonder



Name _____

that he is remembered, not so much for his music or his engravings, but as a famous thinker.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Questions

- _____ 1. Rousseau was a famous _____.
- A. thinker
 - B. musician
 - C. government official
 - D. engraver
- _____ 2. People learned about Rousseau's ideas through his _____.
- A. TV appearances
 - B. speeches
 - C. writings
 - D. paintings
- _____ 3. Rousseau lived during the age known as the _____.
- A. Stone Age
 - B. Renaissance
 - C. Revolution
 - D. Enlightenment
- _____ 4. Rousseau wrote about _____.
- A. politics
 - B. religion
 - C. education
 - D. all of the above
- _____ 5. Rousseau became famous _____.
- A. before the 17th century
 - B. after the 18th century
 - C. in the middle of the 17th century
 - D. in the middle of the 18th century

- _____ 6. Rousseau argued that advances of his time _____.
- A. showed how far people had progressed
 - B. needed to be speeded up
 - C. were all made by a few individuals
 - D. were not good for people
- _____ 7. Rousseau lived in _____.
- A. France
 - B. Switzerland
 - C. both
 - D. neither
- _____ 8. Rousseau's ideas are _____ today.
- A. believed by no one
 - B. still debated
 - C. old fashioned
 - D. believed by everyone

Suppose that you were beginning a new society. What are the important ideas that your society would be based on? Make a list of the ideas that you consider most important.

Name _____



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