

## MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

**Montaigne the man.** Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) was a French essayist, diplomat, psychologist, and perceptive student of human behavior, and in these roles exercised an unparalleled influence over his Renaissance contemporaries, as well as over thinkers and writers to our own day.

**The background of this essayist.** Michel de Montaigne was born near Bordeaux, of a very rich family. (His great grandfather, a brilliant merchant in herring, had purchased the great estate on which Michel and his father were raised, and with it conspicuous social prominence. In that privileged condition, Montaigne was raised with extraordinary care, and after a design worked out by his father, who remained the most powerful influence in Montaigne's own life. (Father and son both occupied the role of Mayor of Bordeaux.) The pedagogical design, with which Montaigne was raised and to which he referred often in his writings—cf. the renowned essay 'On the Education of Children'—was based both on closeness to the ancient classics, and on practice—learning through doing. The practical side of this pedagogy was in place from early in Montaigne's life, when he was sent to live with a peasant family, so that he would know how the world works and how things are done. As Montaigne developed, his father exposed him, through travel, personal contacts, and techniques of self-examination, to a keen psychological self-awareness. As for the 'higher culture' exposure of Michel, to the classics, to literature and the arts, and to languages, no son has been more specially trained. For education the young man was turned over to a tutor who spoke only German—so that Michel learned perforce, and, in the same vein, all the servants in the Montaigne household spoke only Latin with the young man—with the expected quick learning curve. The young man was waked every morning to the sound of a different instrument—so that he would grow instrumentally sensitive—and was given a rigorous physical training program, to keep body in sync with mind.

**The career and work of Montaigne.** In 1539, when he was six, Montaigne was sent for formal education to the College de Guyenne, where he began his studies with the foremost Hellenist of his age, George Buchanan. Upon graduation he pursued legal studies, served as a courtier in the court of Charles IX, and entered into a pre-arranged marriage—common among the elite of his culture—in which he had little interest, though enough to father six children, all girls. (Throughout his writing he looks down on marriage as a necessary social invention, nothing more.) In 1568 his active writing career assumed form, opening with the extraordinary complex *Apology for Raymond de Sebonde*, a philosophically subtle work, laying the stamp of skepticism firmly on his work and thought. (His famous query, *que-sais je*, *what do I know*, is first enunciated in the *Apology*, and will become a leitmotif of his thinking, as it grows. In the vast body of essays which Montaigne will establish, until his death, he will write—often both skeptically and humanely—of a diverse array of matters: the *noble savage* in the new worlds being discovered at the time; the education of small children, marriage and its uses; the power (and weakness) of memory; the infinite variety of human types on the globe (as Montaigne knew it); the elements of problem solving and of diplomatic objectivity. In dealing with all such themes Montaigne brings to bear his uniquely direct, accessible, modest but strong personality.

### Reading

#### **Primary source reading**

*The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Frame, 1989.

#### **Secondary source reading.**

Hoffman, G., *Montaigne's Career*, 1998.

### **Further Reading**

Hollier, Denis, *A New History of French Literature*, 1995.

### **Original language reading**

Jama, Sophie, *L'histoire juive de Montaigne*, 2001.

### **Suggested paper topics**

Montaigne wishes to write directly about himself, as a distinct but representative human being. That is the foundation of his essay project.

Does he come off as in some sense a 'universal human being?' Or is he a highly distinct, time bound perceiver of the world?

What do you think of Montaigne's pedagogy, based as it is on a strict and extensive use of Latin? Are there merits to that kind of teaching and learning? Is the classical tradition in education solidly founded? Or has it properly yielded to much more pragmatic and psychologically complex views of the way young people learn?

### **Excerpts [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Michel\\_de\\_Montaigne](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Michel_de_Montaigne)**

We are, I [know](#) not how, double in ourselves, so that what we [believe](#) we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we [condemn](#).

Without straining or artifice; for it is myself that I portray...I am myself the matter of my book.

As for extraordinary things, all the provision in the world would not suffice.

In my [opinion](#), every rich man is a miser.

How many we know who have fled the sweetness of a tranquil life in their homes, among the friends, to seek the horror of uninhabitable deserts; who have flung themselves into humiliation, degradation, and the contempt of the world, and have enjoyed these and even sought them out.

Things are not bad in themselves, but our [cowardice](#) makes them so.

The thing I [fear](#) most is fear.

Whatever can be done another day can be done today.