

# **Intellectuals Study Guide**

**Intellectuals by Paul Johnson (writer)**

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# Plot Summary

Intellectuals by Paul Johnson is an interesting book about the individuals who have been dubbed as intellectuals. Johnson looks at a group of people from the eighteenth century on and examines their lifestyles and characteristics. Included in this group of intellectuals are Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Karl Marx, Henrik Ibsen, Leo Tolstoy, Ernest Hemingway, Bertold Brecht, Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre, Edmund Wilson, Victor Gollancz and Lillian Hellman.

The secular intellectuals came into being in the seventeenth century. They all believed that they could change or re-shape the world by the product of their own intellect. They filled the vacuum created by the decline of the clerical scholars. The secular intellectuals had no common religious beliefs. They all felt that they could tell mankind how best to order their society and run their lives. Since they weren't drawing on any system of religious beliefs, they were basically expressing their own opinions.

Johnson examines what he calls the moral and judgmental credentials of this group of people that felt that they were qualified to tell others how to live their lives. What were their own lives and relationships like? What traits or characteristics did they have in common?

Johnson found several interesting things. All of the intellectuals claimed to be searching for the truth, but all, except for Edmund Wilson, had little regard for facts or the truth. Some, like Bertrand Russell, expressed their opinions on just about every subject, without doing research. Others, like Karl Marx, claimed strong support with the workers yet had no contact with them or knew much about their lives. They emphasized concepts and ideas instead of people.

The group of intellectuals had other traits in common. Although they came from varied backgrounds, most of them had financial difficulties and were often in debt. Engels supported Marx and his family for the latter part of his life. Many turned against their parents and some, like Shelley, had no contact with their children. Rousseau gave all of his babies to an orphanage as soon as they were born. Most of the group has loose morals and numerous marriages and affairs. All of them were egotists and sought publicity.

Most people will find Intellectuals and Johnson's conclusions to be interesting reading. The book is not difficult reading and the reader will have a different perspective on intellectuals after reading it.



# Chapter 1, Jean-Jacques Rousseau: An Interesting Madman

## Chapter 1, Jean-Jacques Rousseau: An Interesting Madman Summary and Analysis

Until the eighteenth century, the clerics were the major intellectuals. In the eighteenth century, secular intellectuals came into being. They weren't bound by religious beliefs but only by their own intellects. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was the first of the modern intellectuals. Rousseau is credited with affecting thinking in five areas. He is credited with developing the modern ideas of education. He led the way in the revaluation of nature. Rousseau began the process of looking into the inner self and claimed that man is naturally selfish. This led to his critique of Capitalism which was his fifth great accomplishment. He disliked the concept of private property and competition.

Rousseau first became known when he entered and won an essay competition at the Dijon Academy of Letters in 1749. The essay became the basis for his creed and made him famous at the age of thirty-nine. He became a professional writer and his first novel, *La Nouvelle Heloise*, was a best seller. His second book, *Emile*, was the object of book burning and resulted in a warrant for his arrest. When the government lost interest in him, he lived in France from 1767 until his death in 1778. He gave readings of his works in the fashionable houses of Paris.

Rousseau was victimized by self-pity and sought pity from others, especially aristocratic women. He was highly sought after to visit their salons even though he was unconventional and rather rude. Many of his former friends and benefactors became his enemies and he believed that they were conspiring against him. In spite of his dementia, he became one of the most influential writers.

Rousseau was a selfish man. When he had money he wouldn't help Madame de Carens when she was indigent. He claimed he didn't love Therese but stayed with her for more than thirty years until his death. The five children he had with Therese were left in an orphanage as soon as they were born. This was one of the points that Voltaire attacked him on.

His critique of capitalism calls the aristocracy and the wealthy to be replaced by the state. His states was basically totalitarian and demanded total submission.



# Chapter2, Shelley or the Heartlessness of Ideas

## Chapter2, Shelley or the Heartlessness of Ideas Summary and Analysis

Percy Bysshe Shelley was an heir to an English title. Like Rousseau, Shelley also believed that man had the right to reconstruct society with the use of his intellect. Shelley believed that poets had a special place among legislators and stated his beliefs in an essay entitled a Defence of Poetry. Poetry was the only thing that could fill the moral vacuum.

Shelley was a great English poet and used his poetry to spread his political and moral messages. He had a taste for secret societies and the conspiracy theory of history. Shelley began writing in his teens and his father paid to have the poems published. He developed his anti-religious views as a teen. His father paid to have his poems published so he wouldn't write his anti-religious views. When he did write them at Oxford, he was expelled. This and his marriage to sixteen-year-old Harriet Westbrook caused a riot with his family. They spent the next four years moving around trying to escape the creditors. He left her for another woman and she committed suicide. Shelley was a womanizer. Even though he was heir to a sizable fortune, he had a small allowance from his family and was always in debit. He always borrowed money which he rarely repaid.

Shelley died in a boating accident in Italy. His son Percy would inherit the barony since Charles had died.



# Chapter 3, Karl Marx: 'Howling Gigantic Curses'

## Chapter 3, Karl Marx: 'Howling Gigantic Curses' Summary and Analysis

Karl Marx is the intellectual who has had the most impact on people since his theories became the basis for governments in Russia, China and other country. Marx felt that his theories were scientific. He was part poet, part philosopher and part moralist.

Marx began writing poetry as a child and some of his poems were published and survived. Many of his poems are filled with violence and corruption since he felt that society was on the very edge of collapse. He had a hard time writing his books but his writing was well suited for shorter journalistic articles. Marx worked as the European correspondent for the New York Daily Tribune for over ten years.

Marx's goal was to lay the basis for a new school of philosophy. He believed that he found a fatal flaw in Hegel and that the dialectic was the basis for human understanding. The rich class, or the bourgeois, were the cause of problems in society and he applied Hegel's dialectic to the problems of economics, history and class conflict. The proletariat would clash with the bourgeois. Socialism could not come into being without a revolution.

Marx had very little contact with the working class, preferring to associate with intellectuals and he wasn't interested in investigating the conditions in industry. He developed his theory and then looked for facts to support it. In many cases, his sources were distorted as he sought to make his point.

One of Marx's daughters died a few weeks before Marx. The other two committed suicide.



# Chapter 4, Henrik Ibsen: 'On the Contrary'

## Chapter 4, Henrik Ibsen: 'On the Contrary' Summary and Analysis

Henrik Ibsen is said to have invented modern drama. He affected the social thinking of her generation through his plays. He changed the way of thinking toward inhibitions and prejudices and laid the foundations for a permissive society.

He worked his way through the university and began writing plays, most of which were not produced. His first success was *The Pretenders* in 1864. Like other dramatists of the time, his plays were first published in book form. His first wave of success was with *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* in the 1866-67 period. The second wave began in 1870 with *Brand*, which involved revolutionary ideas. *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* followed, which raised questions about relevant social issues like the oppression of women. His third wave of success was in the 1880s, marked by his emphasis on personal liberation. This phase was characterized by *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*, *Hedda Gabler* and other plays. When he returned to Norway in the 1890s, he was famous.

Ibsen sought to achieve elegance in his appearance but always failed. He liked to receive medals and orders and actively solicited them. He turned his back on his family and had little contact with them. During the last quarter of his life, he made investments. He was a womanizer and liked younger women, which he claimed he needed for his writing.

Ibsen was a constant worrier and had many fears, such as heights and storms. He died on May 23, 1906.



# Chapter 5, Tolstoy: God's Elder Brother

## Chapter 5, Tolstoy: God's Elder Brother Summary and Analysis

Leo Tolstoy believed that he could bring about the moral transformation of society. He believed that was part of a succession of great thinkers which included Buddha, Moses and Socrates. He was a social reformer with a strong belief in God, and felt that he himself was a good and great man. He had a strong desire to rule and an unwillingness to be ruled.

Tolstoy left Kazan University to study on his own. He was particularly influenced by Rousseau. He set high standards for his own writing which is why there were so many drafts of his novels, War and Peace and Anna Karenina.

Tolstoy frequented prostitutes and other women and suffered from several bouts of venereal disease. Several times he writes about how he has been led astray by women. He could not control his philandering. He also had a reputation as a gambler. After his marriage to Sonya Behrs, he had to write to support his family.

Several times he tried reforms for the serfs but failed. He then viewed education as a solution for the serfs and set up schools for them, even teaching the children himself in his younger days. He believed that he could rewrite any discipline he became interested in even though he rarely researched them. In the first decade of the nineteen hundreds when Russia was industrializing Tolstoy turned against the state believing that state power was corrupt.

In his old age, Tolstoy corresponded with various heads of state, offering advice. He had an opinion on almost every subject. The Tolstoy family lived a public life. Tolstoy died on October 7, 1910. Despite a family dispute, he was surrounded by family at the time of his death.





# Chapter 6, The Deep Waters of Ernest Hemingway, pgs. 138-155

## Chapter 6, The Deep Waters of Ernest Hemingway, pgs. 138-155 Summary and Analysis

America developed from a different set of principles than did the European nations. There was no ancient regimen. The first great nineteenth century American intellectual was Ralph Waldo Emerson who founded a movement called Transcendentalism.

Ernest Hemingway had the characteristics of an intellectual and changed the way people expressed themselves. His style embodied America even though it easily transferred to other cultures.

He began his career as a journalist. In 1921, he went to Europe as a foreign correspondent for the Toronto Star and became a novelist. He was based in Paris. In 1923, he worked as a part-time assistant for the Transatlantic Review. He rejected his parents' religious beliefs and sought to replace their system of what he determined were false beliefs with true beliefs. The truth was the truth as he saw it. Hemingway developed his method of writing based on the rules of journalism. He looked for what action gave emotion and excitement and then wrote about it in a simple and clear style.

His first work, Three Stories and Ten Poems, was published in Paris in the early-1920s. His stories were rejected by the big magazines. In 1925, In Our Time was published and Hemingway developed a following. He then went on to write The Sun Also Rises and A Farewell to Arms which were widely read. The characters face tragedy because of mistaken values. Truth was the essential ingredient of his writing. After For Whom the Bell Tolls, he was nicknamed Papa Hemingway and was a very popular figure and had to try to live up to the legend.



## Chapter 6, pgs. 156-172

### Chapter 6, pgs. 156-172 Summary and Analysis

Hemingway was not interested in political loyalties. For him personal loyalties were important. In 1935 he became a supporter of the Communist line. He viewed the Spanish Civil War from this perspective. Hemingway claimed he supported the exploited working people and visited the front four times. This caused a rift in his relationship with Jon Dos Passos. Hemingway supported the party line and felt writers should fight fascism.

In spite of his beliefs in personal loyalties, he had a hard time sustaining friendships. In some ways, Hemingway was jealous of Dos Passos and they fought back and forth through their writing. In his marriages he kept leaving one wife for the next. He liked the attention of women. Hemingway was also an alcoholic. He began drinking as a teenager and started having liver problems in the 1930s. He also suffered from depression. All of this contributed to the decline in his writing by the 1940s.



# Chapter 7, Bertolt Brecht: Heart of Ice

## Chapter 7, Bertolt Brecht: Heart of Ice Summary and Analysis

Bertolt Brecht was a playwright who created the propaganda play for the state-subsidized theaters. He faithfully served the Communist Party. Brecht first became a literary figure in 1919. Spartakus was his first successful play in 1922 winning him the Kleist Prize for the best young dramatist. He brought the sweaty, violent atmosphere of a sport stadium to the stage and wanted the stage to appear crude.

Brecht's first Marxist work was *Die Massnahme* and was produced in 1930. He was involved in other political art forms whose purpose was to educate people. He excelled at staging and developed many stage inventions that passed to the left-wing theater.

Brecht left Germany when Hitler came to power. He traveled to several different countries. In the late-1930s he wrote *The Life of Galileo*, *The Trail of Lucullus*, *The good Women of Setzuan* and *Mother Courage*. When war began in 1936, he moved to Sweden and Finland and then to the United States, where his work was not accepted. After appearing before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, he moved to Switzerland.

The East German regime provided him with a theater, theater company and resources, but he obtained an Austrian passport and dealt with capitalist West German publishing houses. His royalties went into a Swiss account. Brecht functioned as artistic director and his wife, Helene Weigel, was the director. They had a large travel budget.

During Brecht's time, every theater in Europe was state subsidized in addition to receiving private funding. Many were modeled on the structure Brecht had in East Germany.

Brecht was also a womanizer and many of his mistresses worked as his secretary. He had several illegitimate children.

In 1955, Brecht received the Stalin Peace Prize and went to Moscow to accept it. He won other awards also. He died of a heart attack on August 14, 1954.



# Chapter 8, Bertrand Russell: A case of Logical Fiddlesticks

## Chapter 8, Bertrand Russell: A case of Logical Fiddlesticks Summary and Analysis

Bertrand Russell believed in the power of the intellect. He offered advice on just about every subject and wrote sixty-eight books and numerous articles during his lifetime. He was an abstract philosopher and several times faced trial for his views.

In spite of his brilliant writing, he could not operate anything mechanical. He viewed war as being irrational and tried to negotiate peace in 1914. He also felt that the United States should use its power to bring about disarmament and always rejected Marxism and found that Russia would expand to Western Europe. From this respect, he favored a preemptive war against Russia. In the mid-1950s he came out against nuclear weapons.

Russell opposed the Viet Name war and engaged in propaganda against the United States resulting in a mock War Crimes Tribunal held in Stockholm in 1966-67. Russell continued to write and express his opinions on any topic that interested him.

He separated from his first wife Alys in 1911 and began a series of affairs. He married Dora Black several weeks before their child was born. They had two children, John and Kate. They set up a progressive school named Beacon Hill but it eventually became too expensive. They were divorced in 1935. His marriage to third wife, Peter Spence, lasted fifteen years. He married his fourth wife, Edith Finch, when he was in his eighties.

Russell saw nothing wrong in letting others write works and using his name as the author. He was part to do this if he didn't have much interest in a subject. In the the 1960s, he established the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation.

Russell died in 1970.



# Chapter 9, Jean-Paul Sartre: 'A Little Ball of Fur and Ink'

## Chapter 9, Jean-Paul Sartre: 'A Little Ball of Fur and Ink' Summary and Analysis

Jean-Paul Sartre was a professional philosopher. He believed that the way to influence people was through books and plays.

During the war he worked in the meteorological section of the Army and wrote daily five pages of his novel, *Les Chemins de la Liberte* and four pages of his War Diary. He became a POW and after his release in March 1941, secured a teaching position in Paris. Since he was apolitical, he had no problems with the Nazis. He continued to write plays and philosophy.

His play *Huis clos* in 1944 made him famous. His lectures after the war on individualism with man being the mast of the soul game him international fame. He adopted from the press the term existentialism to apply to his philosophy. His philosophy was one of action. Many could only achieve freedom through action. This appealed to the post-World War II population and his public lectures were a media event.

Sartre's works were eventually banned by the Vatican and the Soviet Union. This boosted his popularity in France. In the 1930s he met Simone de Beauvois who became his mistress for the next twenty years. He remained a womanizer despite their relationship. By this agreement, they were both free to have affairs as long as they were open about them.

Sartre's output peaked between 1945 and '55, but he was also using alcohol and drugs. He quarreled with other writers of his time, especially Camus, and he opposed Marxism, even though he never read Marx. This changed in 1952 when Sartre decided to back the Communist Party. This lasted for four years until the invasion of Hungary in 1956.

Sartre and de Beauvois traveled widely in the 1960s, visiting China and the Third World countries. Both were anti-American. He felt that the existent order was violent and that the oppressed had a legal right to overthrow it. This belief fed many terrorist movements as in Cambodia. In his later years, he briefly supported the student revolution and the worker's movement.

Sartre died on April 15, 1980.



# Chapter 10, Edmund Wilson: A Brand from the Burning

## Chapter 10, Edmund Wilson: A Brand from the Burning Summary and Analysis

Edmund Wilson was an American intellectual. He believed that America embodied the noble ideal concepts. He wrote a variety of articles and books. Most of his books are disorganized due to his journalistic style of thinking.

During the Great Depression, he adopted socialist views and promoted a socio-economic revolution. He read Marx, Lenin and Trotsky and hosted cocktail parties for William Z. Foster, the head of the American Communist Party. He traveled around the country looking at working conditions in the different industries. He had a passion for uncovering the truth and an independence in thinking that kept him from becoming a pawn of the Communist. He was exploring communism and published his results in *To the Finland Station* (1940). He learned Russian and obtained a Guggenheim scholarship to study in Russia. Wilson became ill there and spent several weeks in a quarantine hospital, which gave him greater insight into Soviet society and made him skeptical about Stalin and the system.

Wilson did not fit the mold of the secular intellectual because he did not have their disregard for the truth and their preference for ideas over people.

Wilson had four wives, Mary Blair, Margaret Canby, Mary McCarthy and Elena Mumm. He was hostile to other writers. He wrote a variety of other books before dying in 1972.



# Chapter 11, The Troubled Conscience of Victor Gollancz

## Chapter 11, The Troubled Conscience of Victor Gollancz Summary and Analysis

Victor Gollancz is described as an intellectual publicist. Like others, his works are lax concerning the truth and contain deceptions. He taught the Classics at Repton and would talk politics to the students was basically subversive propaganda. He worked at other jobs and then became a publisher at Benn Brothers. He eventually established his own publishing firm.

He rarely put things in writing preferring verbal agreements with authors, after which he would change the terms. Gollancz preferred female workers because they would work for lower wages. He distrusted men. He viewed himself as king and generous when in actuality he was selfish and self-centered. Gollancz wanted to be surrounded by women but only for what they could do for him. He had to be the focal point of attention.

Gollancz believed himself to be a socialist who supported the worker. He used his publishing business to support political propaganda. Many devices of deception were used in the books he published so the public wouldn't know they supported communism. He developed book series and book clubs that supported the left, using many of the tactics that Hitler had used so successfully in Germany. The books themselves were written in such a way as to deceive the reader into reaching conclusions that supported communism.

In 1938, Gollancz broke with the Communists. He admitted his guilt in what he had done and began to support the Labour Party. He died in 1967.



# Chapter 13, Lies, Dammed Lies and Lillian Hellman

## Chapter 13, Lies, Dammed Lies and Lillian Hellman Summary and Analysis

Lillian Hellman was also a part of the leftist conspiracy in the post World War II era, but unlike Gollancz, she never admitted it. She was also a great practitioner of disregarding the truth.

She became a radical when she became involved with trade unions in the motion picture industry. Hellman began to write after beginning her long affair with Dashiell Hammett, the mystery writer. After the success of her play, *The Children's Hour*, she began to write screenplays for Hollywood and Broadway. She became a supporter of the Communist Party in the mid-1930s although she always denies being a Party member, even before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Hellman had quarrels with other writers. Like others who supported the workers' movement, she had little contact with actual workers. Her plays in the post World War II period were not as successful as the earlier ones.

Hellman was blacklisted in Hollywood in 1948 before being called before the House Un-American Activities Committee. She wrote a letter to the Chairman saying that she would plead the Fifth Amendment only to protect other innocent people. Even though she did not go to jail, she was ruined financially by the blacklisting and the hearing but she recovered.

In the 1960s, her play *Toys in the Attic* was a big success. After another trip to Russia after Hammett's death, she wrote her memoirs. She then began to write books that were best sellers, earning awards, honors and movie contracts. She was now wealthy.

Hellman died on July 3, 1984.





## **Chapter 13, The Flight of Reason, pgs. 306-324**

### **Chapter 13, The Flight of Reason, pgs. 306-324 Summary and Analysis**

The emphasis of the secular intellectuals shifted from utopianism to hedonism after World War II. Johnson discusses the shift in terms of three writers. George Orwell represented the Old Intellectual with a belief in utopia. He believed that the world could be re-shaped by the power of the intellect. As such he thought in terms of concepts and ideas. Unlike the other writers, he lived among the working class. Orwell accepted the failure of utopia due to irrationality of human behavior.

Evelyn Waugh believed in the value of personal experience. He also sought for truth in his writings. He had a vision of an ideal society even though he was an anti-intellectual.

Cyril Connolly, unlike Waugh, became involved in politics and worked this into his writings. He was a hedonist who believed that perfection is happiness. It is Connolly who brought about the switch from intellectually trying to achieve utopia to the pursuit of hedonism. He proposed his program in an editorial published in the *Horizon*. This consisted of a list of ten objectives such as prison and social reform, most of which were enacted by the Western democracies in the 1960s.

Even though many intellectuals were pacifists, they appealed to violence, such as the proposals of the Nazis and Communists.

Norman Mailer also had many traits in common with the intellectuals. He had a variety of wives and a need for self-publicity. He promoted himself like Russell and Sartre did. Mailer introduced the language of the street into politics and the literary world, and as other writers did, he quarreled with other authors.



## Chapter 13, pgs. 324 - 342

### Chapter 13, pgs. 324 - 342 Summary and Analysis

Kenneth Peacock Tynan was the leader of the intellectual society at Oxford in the mid-1940s. When the truth became known about his father, they found that he spent half of his week at Oxford and the other half as Sir Peter Peacock, a Justice of the Peace with a wife and children. Kenneth wrote reviews and plays and acted in plays. Tynan became well known in the theater world and linked hedonism with socialism. He helped to diminish the system of censorship. His belief in permissiveness led to his own destruction. His concept of hedonism included sexual permissiveness.

Another believer in permissiveness was Rainer Werner Fassbinder. He was a German film director who believed in a great deal of sexual promiscuousness, with a penchant for men. His works also exemplified violence, as second theme of the new culture along with the third theme, drugs. He was found dead from his use of alcohol and drugs and Johnson suggests that both Tynan and Fassbinder were victims of hedonism.

James Baldwin introduced the element of hatred in his writings in the 1950s and 1960s. He became active in the Civil Rights movement. His hatred was directed at both blacks and whites and he felt that blacks hated whites and were justified in this hatred. Baldwin preached black racism.

Noam Chomsky was a linguistic philosopher who was closer to the utopian intellectuals. He studied the syntax of language and looked for universal syntax in languages. He found a pattern that made him claim that language was genetic. Chomsky then tried to show how this information could be used in geopolitics and how it could prove that United States actions in Viet Nam were immoral. The United States was trying to impose its will on a different culture. He says that this social engineering is the product of intellectuals and that it doesn't work. Innate traits can't be changed.

Johnson feels that today the public is skeptical about intellectuals telling them how to live their lives. He feels that they have caused a lot of problems and should be viewed with suspicion. They have their own patterns of behavior. People are more important than concepts.



# Characters

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was the first of the modern intellectuals. He was born in 1712 and died in 1778. He was born in Switzerland and raised as a Calvinist. Rousseau had an older brother and no younger siblings since his mother died soon after his birth. His brother ran away when he was young and he himself ran away at the age of fifteen and converted to Catholicism. He lived with Madame Francoise-Louis de Warens in Annecy for almost fourteen years. He tried a variety of occupations and failed at all of them. He even worked for eleven months as the secretary to the French Ambassador to Venice and fled rather than be arrested by the Venetian State. He lived off of women until he was in his thirties and even tried his luck as a seminary student.

Rousseau viewed himself as a natural writer, although he did not always have much regard for facts. He took Therese Lavasseur, a young laundress, as his permanent mistress in 1745 and she provided the missing stability to his life. He became famous when he entered and won an essay competition in 1749. After this, he became a professional writer and was accepted as an intellectual by the aristocracy. He spent some time in exile in Britain and lived in France from 1767 until his death.

## Karl Marx

Karl Marx was born in Trier on May 5, 1818. He was one of nine children, and the only son to survive to middle age. He came from a family of scholars since both of his grandfathers were rabbis and Talmudic scholars. His family was middle class. His father was a lawyer who converted to Protestantism when Prussia banned Jews from practicing law. Marx was educated at Bonn University and Berlin University. He was a good classical scholar who was interested in Hegelian philosophy. He received his doctorate from Jena University but was never able to secure an academic position. He became a journalist.

Marx organized the Communist League in 1848 and wrote the Communist Manifesto. He moved from country to country, usually being expelled for his views and revolutionary activities. He settled in London in 1849, where he remained until his death on March 14, 1883. During this time he was gathering information for and working on Capital. The first volume was published while he was still alive. Frederick Engels compiled the second and third volume from his notes and published them after his death. He married Jenny von Westphalen in 1841, and in 1851 became the European correspondent for the New York Daily Tribune. Marx experienced financial problems all of his life.



## **Bertrand Russell**

Bertrand Russell was born in 1872 in England. He was an orphan by the age of four and was raised by his grandfather. He was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge. He was a Fellow at Trinity and taught and lectured at a variety of American universities. He left his first wife Alys in 1911. After a series of affairs he married Dora Black and had two children, John and Kate. They divorced in 1918. His fourth wife was Edith Finch who remained with him until the end of his life. He wrote on any subject and gave advice whether he was knowledgeable about it or not. He was a pacifist and established the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation. He died in 1970.

## **Jean-Paul Sartre**

Jean-Paul Sartre was born to an upper middle class French family. He was an only child that was born on June 21, 1905. His father died when he was a baby. He was educated at the best schools in France and was always an avid reader. He became a teacher at Le Havre. He was a POW in World War II, and when released, secured a teaching position in Paris where he became famous for his plays and philosophy of individualism based on freedom through action. Sartre died on April 15, 1980, leaving his estate to his adopted daughter Arlette and nothing to de Beauvoir.

## **Percy Bysshe Shelley**

Percy Bysshe Shelley was an English poet and heir to a Baronetcy title. He was born on August 4, 1792 in Sussex, England. He had four younger children and was educated for six years at Eton and then attended Oxford but was expelled for his anti-religious beliefs. In August 1811, he married Harriet Westbrook. They had two children, Eliza Ianthe and Charles. Shelley left her in July 1814 and she died the following December. He had a total of seven children by three different women. Shelley died in a boating accident in Italy.

## **Lillian Hellman**

Hellman was born on June 20, 1905 to a middle class Jewish family. She was an only child and attended New York University. She worked for Boni and Liveright publishers until her marriage to theatrical agent Arthur Kober. She had a long affair with Dashiell Hammett, the mystery writer. Hellman was blacklisted in Hollywood for being a Communist and called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. She recovered financially from this and died wealthy on June 3, 1984.



## Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway was born in Oak Park, Illinois in 1899. His father was a physician and the family had a love of the outdoors. His mother was well read and inclined toward the arts. The family were Congregationalists with strong Christian beliefs. Hemingway rejected these beliefs. He was married twice, first to Hadley and then to Pauline and Martha. He grew to hate his mother after his father's death. Hemingway reached his high point in the 1930s. Alcohol and depression led to a decline in his writing in the 1940s.

## Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht was born February 10, 1898 in Augsburg, Germany to a middle-class family. He rejected religion as a child. He studied at Munich University and joined the Communist Party in 1930. He left Germany when Hitler came to power. He became the artistic director to a theater company financed by the East Germans with his wife, Helene Weigel, the director. He had an Austrian passport, a Swiss bank account and a West German publisher. He died of a heart attack on August 14, 1954.

## Leo Tolstoy

Leo Tolstoy was born in 1828 to a ruling class family in Russia. His mother was the daughter of Prince Volkonsky. His parents died when he was young. He attended Kazan University but quit to study on his own. Tolstoy tried various occupations before becoming a writer. He spent five years in the military and fought against the Turks, British and French. He married Sonya Behrs who had twelve pregnancies. He died on October 7, 1910.

## Henrik Ibsen

Henrik Ibsen was born on March 20, 1828 in Skien, Norway. He was born to a poor family and was the oldest of five children. After university, he lived in exile in Rome, Dresden and Munich from 1864-92. His plays addressed social issues and the concept of personal freedom. He died in 1906, survived by one illegitimate son, Hans Jacob, one legitimate son, Sigurd, and his wife Suzannah Thoresen. Ibsen died on May 23, 1906.

## Victor Gollancz

Victor Gollancz was born in 1893 to an Orthodox Jewish family in England. He was married to Ruth who was also an educated woman. Gollancz attended New College, Oxford and graduated with a First in Classics. He taught at Repton. After a series of other jobs, he became a publisher at Benn Brothers. When they refused to make him a



partner, he established his own firm. He supported the Communist Party until 1938. He died in 1967.

## **Edmund Wilson**

Edmund Wilson was born in 1895 in New Jersey. He was educated at Princeton and worked in Intelligence during the war. He was an avid reader and worked as a journalist. He married Mary Blair in 1923 and divorced her in 1925. In 1929 he married Margaret Canby and had two other marriages to Mary McCarthy and Elena Mumm. He died in 1972.



# Objects/Places

## Switzerland

is a European country located between France, Germany, Austria and Italy.

## France

France is a European country next to Switzerland that has coasts on the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.

## England

England is a country in Europe where Shelly was born.

## Italy

Italy is a southern European country where Shelly died.

## Germany

Germany is the European country where Karl Marx was born.

## Norway

Norway is the northern European country where Ibsen was born.

## Sweden

Sweden is a Scandinavian country located next to Norway in Northern European.

## Russia

Russia is the European country where Tolstoy was born with an economy based on serfdom.



## United States

United States is on the North American continent and was the richest nation by the end of the nineteenth century.

## Cuba

Cuba is an island nation ninety miles from Florida where Hemingway from 1941 to the end of his life.





# Themes

## Belief in Changing the World

One dominant theme of the book is man's belief that he could change the world based on his own beliefs. This is pretty much what philosophy and intellectualism are all about. Each of the intellectuals discussed in the book felt that he could change society by the product of their own intellect, whether it was through philosophy, drama, books or publishing. Each felt that their views should be adhered to by other people. They were egotists in that they felt that their views and opinions should be listened to. Most did little research and distorted facts. Some like Bertrand Russell express an opinion and offered advice on just about any subject. Others like Sartre with his belief in individualism and freedom through action find a void created by the atrocities of World War II. Most claimed to support the workers, yet had no contact with the workers. None of them saw anything wrong with this approach. This was even true of Karl Marx. Most of these intellectual had a sense of self-promotion. They knew how to market themselves so their views would be accepted by the public. All of them believed that they and their views were important enough that they could improve the world in some way, even if they had no formal training in the subjects they were addressing. They all had to have a high opinion of themselves in order to have these beliefs.

## Characteristics of Intellectuals

The second dominant theme of the book are the characteristics of intellectuals. Even though the group Johnson considers came from different backgrounds, they had certain common characteristics. First of all, each believed that they could bring about change in society based on their own intellect. They believed that they and their opinions should be listened to. This is a trait that Johnson calls egotism. Some of them felt superior to others and used people, like Victor Gollancz. Most had loose morals with numerous marriages and affairs. Several of them rejected their own parents and children. Only a few of them had strong family lives.

A second characteristic of the intellectual is a disregard for the truth. Most of them distorted facts and did little research. The exception here is Edmund Wilson who spend a great deal of time on research and tried to base his writing on truths. Many of these writers distorted the facts to fit their theories and views. In some cases, such as with Victor Gollancz, this was outright deception as he had writers use various devices to steer them to the conclusion that the Communist Party position was the correct position. They felt that it was more important to draw people to their point of view than to pay strict attention to facts and the truth. Most all of the secular intellectuals had this trait and weren't in any way bothered by it.



## Emphasis on Ideas and Concepts

A third important theme of the book is that these intellectuals emphasized the importance of a concept or idea over people. They dealt more with the theoretical rather than with the practical. The best example of this is that most claimed to support the worker. They deplored the conditions of the worker and the factories. Most proposed ways of improving the life of the worker, yet most of them had no contact with workers. They knew nothing about the factories or the day to day lives of the workers, and they weren't really interested in finding out. This was even true of Karl Marx who despised any contact with workers, preferring to associate with intellectuals. These people wrote an intellectual exercise based on theory rather than on practical experience and knowledge.

Victor Gollancz was another example of this. He believed himself to be a good employer. He felt that he supported women and that he was kind and generous with them. In actuality he was condescending, greedy and self-centered. He was more concerned with the idea of appearing to support women and what they could do for him than he was with the women themselves.

# Style

## Perspective

Intellectuals is written in the third person point of view with the narrator being the author, Paul Johnson. This approach allows Johnson to provide the background information that the reader needs to understand the points that the author is making. This is the only approach that could be used in a book of this nature. It allows the author the greatest amount of flexibility in the amount and kinds of information that the author wants to present and this is the kind of book where the reader requires background information.

The perspective of the book is basically the perspective of the author. He used different sources for each of the intellectuals he examined. He draws together this information from various sources and presents the information in a coherent manner. The reader is allowed to draw his/her own conclusion from the material the author presents. The author does not force his views on the reader but leaves his conclusions to the very end of the book.

The author is qualified to write a book of this kind since he has written other books in a historical perspective. The intended audience can be anyone with an interest in philosophy or history or anyone who is interested in the topic. Most people will find the book to be interesting.

## Tone

Paul Johnson writes in an academic manner. The book is written in an objective fashion with the author saying he strove to make the book objective and factual. He presents the facts as he found them in various sources which he cites. He drew on letters, diaries, speeches and memoirs as well as books about the group of intellectuals he is examining. He presents the facts he obtained from these sources and presents them in an objective manner without any moralizing or personal opinions. There are many places in the book where he could have moralized or interjected comments on the personal lives and morals of the group of intellectuals he examined, but he doesn't. The comments he does make are academic and based on the facts and not his own personal opinions. Johnson does draw conclusions on the value of intellectualism at the very end of the book.

The reader has to appreciate the objectivity of Johnson's writing since the reader is free to draw his/her own conclusions about the group examined. Johnson respects the intelligence of the reader in this respect and this is what the reader appreciates. In this way, the reader also respects Johnson's conclusions and isn't fighting the author while reading the book.

## Structure

The structure of the book is rather simple. There are thirteen chapters, one each of the twelve intellectuals the author examines. Each chapter has a title with the name of the intellectual in it. Each of these people is considered a secular intellectual and Johnson presents the way in which they thought they could change the world as well as the relevant characteristics or traits they possessed. The last chapter discusses some of the more modern intellectuals and their emphasis on hedonism. Johnson explains how they differ from the secular intellectuals.

The book contains a Table of Contents, an extensive Notes section in which Johnson cites the documents and sources that he used. There is an Index which makes it easy for the reader to look up information if he or she so desires. There is also an Acknowledgments section in which Johnson explains the sources he used and why.

There is no Preface or Introduction. The reader might have benefited from one or the other with more information about Johnson's reasons for writing the book. Most of this has to be piece-mealed from the Acknowledgments and first chapter. Pictures or sketches of the intellectuals would have helped the reader associate a name with a face, but there are none. In spite of this, the chosen structure works well for the book and the reader will enjoy the time spent reading the book.



## Quotes

But Rousseau was the first to combine all the salient characteristics of the modern Promethean: the assertion of his right to reject the existing order in its entirety; confidence in his capacity to refashion it from the bottom in accordance with principles of his own devising; belief that this could be achieved by the political process; and not least, recognition of the huge part instinct, intuition and impulse play in human conduct. (Chapter 1, pg. 2)

Like Rousseau, Shelley believed that society was totally rotten and should be transformed, and that enlightened man, through his own unaided intellect, had the moral right and duty to reconstruct it from first principles. But he also argued that intellectuals, and especially poets - whom he saw as the leaders of the intellectual community - occupied a privileged position in this process. In fact, 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.' (Chapter 2, pg. 28)

Karl Marx has had more impact on actual events, as well as on the minds of men and women, than any other intellectual in modern times. The reason for this is not primarily the attraction of his concepts and methodology, though both have a strong appeal to unrigorous minds, but the fact that his philosophy has been institutionalized in two of the world's largest countries, Russia and China, and their many satellites. (Chapter 3, pg. 52)

Whereas Rousseau persuaded men and women to go back to nature and in so doing precipitated a collective revolution, Ibsen preached the revolt of the individual against the ancien regime of inhibitions and prejudices which held sway in every small town, indeed in every family. He taught men, and especially women, that their individual conscience and their personal notions of freedom have moral precedence over the requirements of society. (Chapter 4, pg. 82)

Of all of the intellectuals we are examining, Leo Tolstoy was the most ambitious. His audacity is awe-inspiring, at times terrifying. He came to believe that by the resources of his own intellect, and by virtue of the spiritual force he felt welling within him, he could effect a moral transformation of society. (Chapter 5, pg. 107)

Independent America had never possessed an ancien regime, a privileged establishment based on prescriptive possession rather than natural justice. There was no irrational and inequitable existing order which the new breed of secular intellectual could scheme to replace by millenarian models based on reason and morality. (Chapter 6, pg. 138)

But far more difficulty, as he discovered, was to maintain the high creative standards he had set himself. This became apparent to him in the mid-1930s, and added to his habitual depression. From then on his few successful stories were aberrations in a long downward slide. If Hemingway had been less of an artist, it might not have mattered to



him as a man; he would simply have written and published inferior novels, as many writers do. (Chapter 6, pgs. 171-172)

But it was Ibsen, as we have seen, who first deliberately and systematically, and with stunning success, used the stage to bring about a revolution in social attitudes. Bertolt Brecht, a totally different playwright in most ways, was his natural successor in this one. He created the modern, sophisticated propaganda play, exploiting brilliantly one of the twentieth century's new cultural institutions, the large-scale state-subsidized theater. (Chapter 7, pg. 173)

No intellectual in history offered advice to humanity over so long a period as Bertrand Russell, third Earl Russell. (1872-1970) (Chapter 8, pg. 197)

The essence of Sartre's work was the projection of philosophical activism through fiction and drama. (Chapter 9, pg. 228)

Wilson, in fact, could be described as a man who began his career as a man of letters, became an intellectual looking for millenarian solutions, and then - a sadder and wiser man - reverted to his youthful preoccupation with literature, his true metier. (Chapter 10, pg. 252)

One thing which emerges strongly from any case-by-case study of intellectuals is their scant regard for veracity. Anxious as they are to promote the redeeming, transcending Truth, the establishment of which they see as their mission on behalf of humanity, they have not much patience with the mundane, everyday truths represented by objective facts which get in the way of their arguments. These awkward, minor truths get brushed aside, doctored, reversed or are even deliberately suppressed. (Chapter 11, pg. 269)

If Victor Gollancz was an intellectual who tampered with the truth in the interests of his millenarian aim, Lillian Hellman seems to have been one to whom falsehood came naturally. Like Gollancz she was part of that great intellectual conspiracy in the West to concern the horrors of Stalinsim. (Chapter 12, pg. 288)

At the end of the Second World War, there was a significant change in the predominant aim of secular intellectuals, a shift of emphasis from utopianism to hedonism. The shift began slowly at first, then gathered speed. (Chapter 13, pg. 306)

Taken as a group, they are often ultra-conformist within the circles formed by those whose approval they seek and value. That is what makes them, en masse, so dangerous, for it enables them to create climates of opinion and prevailing orthodoxies, which themselves often generate irrational and destructive courses of action. Above all, we must at all times remember what intellectuals habitually forget: that people matter more than concepts and must come first. The worst of all despotisms is the heartless tyranny of ideas. (Chapter 13, pg. 342)

## Topics for Discussion

What was the difference between the modern intellectuals and those who were considered intellectuals before them?

Marx is said to be the intellectual who influenced the most people. Why? Explain.

Why is Ibsen credited with changing social attitudes and behavior? How did he do this?

How did American intellectuals differ from European intellectuals?

What does Paul Johnson consider to be the characteristics of an intellectual?

In what ways does Edmund Wilson differ from the other secular intellectuals? Why is this important?

Describe the changes in the intellectual movement that occurred in the post World War II years? How did it differ from secular intellectualism?