

French nobility essay



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French Nobility The French Nobility has been around since the beginning of the Roman Empire. Similar to the Romans, the French organized their state around the nobility and the clergy, not taking into account the massive amount of commoners. The Third Estate was finally created centuries later to help bring order and give common people their own place within society.

Charles Loyseau and Isabelle de Charriere are two prime sources that compare French nobility during the 17th and 18th century, leading up to the French Revolution. Charles Loyseau, both a Jurist and legal scholar evaluates French society in his writing *A Treatise on Orders*.

In the writing of his treatise, Loyseau describes the “ social anatomy of France” in an idealized way, which remained precise until the French Revolution (16). Isabelle de Charriere, a noblewoman from Switzerland writes a critical satire about the French nobility through the eyes of the fictitious character Julia. Written a century later than Loyseau in 1763, Charriere brings to light the changing position of the ever-growing nobility class. Through the literature of Loyseau and Charriere the reader is able to gain a better understanding of the progression of change in the French nobility.

Within the two writings of Loyseau and Charriere, they can both be viewed as critical to the French nobility of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. In *A treatise on Orders* Charles Loyseau evaluates France’s political order of the three Estates and how each society functions within itself. From the beginning, Loyseau criticizes that the orders were established purely as customs and are indeed not laws that have been laid out, “ although their order is changeable and subject to vicissitude, on account of the particular

liberty that God has given them for good and for evil, they nevertheless cannot exist without order" (17).

Order gives the whole French population a purpose within society and hierarchical position, which can be broken down simplistically into clergy, nobility, and commoners. Although the three Estates provide an idealistic order, this order does create unity and give every individual a concise place within the French society for the first time. Loyseau also criticizes the third Estate for being considered undignified and merely a definition of heir occupation, although it did give commoners a greater power.

On the other hand, Isabelle de Charriere describes the French nobility in the *Nobleman* with scathing satire. The author uses Julia, the daughter of Baron d' Aronville, as a fictitious weapon to portray the dwindling honor of the noble title. Charriere uses her talented writing to show her frustration in being " confined by the prejudices and lifestyle of her moribund aristocratic family" (36). Charriere depicts the life of Baron d' Aronville as " exceedingly sensible of the value of this ancientry" and having no other values (36).

This short excerpt from the *Nobleman* brings to light the change in attitude on nobility between the different generations through time. Loyseau and Charriere use their writing to depict to the reader that privileged positions in society can be warranted, but also abused and misused at the same time. Loyseau criticizes the order for allowing no social change among estates, and limited mobility within their own hierarchical group. Loyseau does not take a stance between the first two Estates and the third Estate.

With the noble status, the French state gives the nobles privileges based on honorable rank. All nobles must fight in the military and give their lives for the defense of their nation, but in return they do not pay taxes and are seen as the protectors of the people. “ It is certainly a very reasonable privilege that those who contribute their lives for the defense of the state be exempt from contributing their goods” (20). Loyseau shows the privileges of all orders letting the reader understand politics and their society during this time.

In Charriere excerpt from *The Nobleman*, the use of satire helps the audience understand that privileges can allow for a person to take advantage of a situation or of a person who does not hold the same privileges. The Baron d’Aronville is a good example of what happens to privileges when they have been in the family for generations. Old Aristocratic families only hold their ancestry dear to them because it legitimizes their nobility. Julia, unlike her father, never “ consulted Patents of Nobility’ and wants nothing to do with her noble heritage or rank.

She also “ would rather have been thought plebeian than proud” (37). Although ancestry gives people recognition and a title, Charriere reveals that the “ most recent nobility is the best” because he works the hardest to maintain the title he has won (38). By using fiction and satire Charriere is clearly able to show the decay of ancient nobles and the misuse of privileges. When Loyseau discusses the basic orders in society, the only way to improve positions and privileges is through honor and merit. Honor and merit are used in the French state to implore valor, push citizens to act appropriately, and not be corrupt.

Merit can be obtained by showing excellence in battle, politics, or can be given to you by the king or prince. The nobility uses honor to maintain stability and award people for their excellence. In Charriere's *The Nobleman* honor and merit are not brought up, but it is visible to see that it would be similar to that of Loyseau. Charriere uses the Baron d' Aronville and Julia in her book as opposites to show the changing attitude towards nobility. The Baron d' Aronville believes in the honor his ancestors have given him, and that honor was his name.

The Baron has not tried to become honorable for himself, but instead uses his title to stay on top and brings about meaningless lawsuits, like the "right to hang malefactors upon his property" (36). On the other side, Julia rebuffed the Baron's ideas of honor in the family name and tries to create her own honor. After reading and interpreting Loyseau and Charriere books, one can finally appreciate the French nobility during the seventeenth and eighteenth century and understand why the French Revolution began. It is interesting that Loyseau and

Charriere share similar views about the French nobility, even though they are from different centuries. Loyseau evaluates the three orders and shows how they are used in society, whereas Charriere shows how the old nobility lacks honor. The differences in their writing can be accounted by the fact that Charriere is writing from a woman's perspective and one hundred years later than Loyseau. It is not surprising that families who have had generations of noble birth are less active or even corrupt than nobles who are finally granted nobility status.