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Title: “The Role of Revolutionary Rhetoric and Symbolism in the Execution of Louis XVI: The Death of an Era”
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As a university student majoring in the English language, Jessica has long been fascinated with rhetoric and the way in which words influence the actions and lives of people. Angela Carter sums it up expertly by her quote, "Language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation." To achieve a better grasp of language in general, in the fall Jessica plans to study Spanish for a semester in Spain and hence expand her capability to communicate with a larger portion of the world's population. After this, she plans to attend graduate school.

Abstract

Ever since the guillotine struck the fatal blow on January 21, 1793, and severed the head of former monarch Louis XVI from his body, arguments have been made as to how a phenomenon of this magnitude could have occurred. How did the people of France go from cheering at the coronation of Louis to, only a few years later, jeering for his death? The king, not in his character an odious and tyrannical ruler, was a person whose main “sin” was simply to be born in the wrong time in the wrong position. The day of the execution, the blade of the guillotine severed much more than the king’s head from his body, but rather portrayed the radical climax of years of rhetorically and symbolically delegitimizing and dethroning the king who had once ruled unquestionably on the justification of divine appointment. This paper argues that the instance of regicide was made possible through use of revolutionary rhetoric and symbolism.

Some of the instances of rhetoric explored within this paper are examples steeped with verbal agents of legitimization, virtue, unity, and change. These four areas of the revolutionary language were essential in the demolition of a monarchial system as they portrayed a new type of social system, validated its purpose, and united the masses to stand together under the banner of the revolution. Specific examples of revolutionary rhetoric from orators such as Robespierre and Saint-Just are included so support this argument.

Another essential way in which the authority of the king and his regime was weakened was through innovative use of symbolism and nonverbal communication. The clothing of the revolutionaries, such as the tricolored cockade and full-length trousers, showed others a person’s political affiliation and clearly exuded sentiments of anti-monarchy. An additional area that was essential to the bringing down of the monarchy was the festivals of the time. These served as a de facto training ground in which many of the radical and innovative ideas of the French Revolution were developed and rehearsed. Also, these were used as a mechanism for uniting the people and cementing feelings of camaraderie and loyalty to the Republic. Other methods such as collective chanting, revamping of imagery on official decals, etc. were all used by the revolutionaries in order to create the New Republic and bring down the old regime.

Although each influential, the rhetoric and symbolism of the French Revolution, when coupled, served as an unstoppable force that was used to bring down the established order of Louis XVI. This was done by obliterating his legitimacy and creating a completely new social system through both the verbal and nonverbal techniques.