

Rabelais and His World Study Guide

Rabelais and His World by Mikhail Bakhtin

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Plot Summary

This is a work of literary criticism, by Mikhail Bakhtin. There is a note on the back that states that the author accurately represents the change in Russia from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. His work has grown prominent in Russia—both Soviet Russia and Post-Soviet Russia in the second half of the twentieth century. The work is a relatively contemporary analysis of a bygone era of Russia. Not only does this survey the Middle Ages and the Renaissance from the 20th century perspective, but it does something unusual as well; the author analyzes a cultural form—the carnival.

The entire work has been translated for the convenience of English readers throughout the world. There are introductory pieces designed to orient readers to the correct way to understand this piece of literary criticism. There are seven chapters and three forwards with an index for a total of eleven clear sections of the text. These will be covered below in their order. Approximately every 50 pages will be covered by a chapter. For the purposes of elucidating the author's style and technique, there may be some variations in this practice.

The author Bakhtin lived in an age that was post-revolution. Rabelais, 400 years earlier, had lived in a similar epoch. Mikhail is writing a work that is intentionally theoretical and designed to be transcendent. Cultures and historical periods often provide limitations to writers, limitations that Mikhail Bakhtin has transcended. Mikhail was the shadow cultural figure in a world where Maxim Gorky proved prominent in the creation of new official Russian cultural ways. Included in this were some important recommendations made on the basis of awareness of what had fed into conditions that led to a successful revolution. This involved "the folk" and numerous elements of the traditions surrounding satire, plays and other elements of carnivals and humor. Those who have heard of political messages hidden with the folk tales of other European peoples are on track with the kinds of issues involved in being transformed from a largely illiterate, oral society into a literate system with a new order. Between the events that have taken place in and around Russia and their timing, there are a number of circumstances of the author's life and work that will be perceived as extreme and reactive when compared to less heated times in history or in more stable cultures.



Book 1, Rabelais & His World : Chapter 1, Foreward

Book 1, Rabelais & His World : Chapter 1, Foreward Summary and Analysis

The forward introduces readers to primary concepts of Mikhail's thinking and working. These include an interest in the folk culture—the culture of the lower social classes, rather than the high culture of the upper classes. He participates in a cultural tradition that might not make sense to North American contemporary readers because there is not something like it in our society. The tradition involves humor and special ways that it is used in Russia—more so by some classes than others. A key concept is artistic communication; all novels, and all art are forms of communication. All art is communication. The irony of language is that the individual learns to express himself or herself through a medium which consists of composites of the words of others. Due to this, virtually every comment is somehow a quotation. The carnival is the cultural form which is equivalent to the literary form known as the novel. Here, the diversity of what is normal within further cultural or class confinements is reassembled into a unique design and atmosphere. Styles which represent various roles and forms may be found together at the carnival. The Forward is rather brief, and has been written by a Russian woman.

The Prologue begins with an important definition. "In every society there are social groups whose special task is to provide an interpretation of the world for that society. We call these the 'intelligentsia'," (p. xiii). Michael Holquist explains something about the conditions at the beginning of the century. Intellectuals are often gentle people, disinclined from violence. Revolutions tend to create circumstances that caused even this sort of person to participate. The intellectuals are included in the revolutions and political strife of the times. Holquist explains that Mikhail observes that Rabelais, 400 years earlier, lives and works under similar conditions, where there are old ways that have given way and a new order is being created. This is now considered to be a normal trait for post-revolutionary cultures. Both advocates for and resisters of the old order are faced with that of the new and must adjust to or help to create the new order. Included in Mikhail's real life is forced membership into the Russian Union of Writers and involvement with the new official delineation of what a novel is and what it must be like. These decisions are made by the Communist Academy as part of the project to advance Socialist Realism there in Russia. Mikhail is arrested and then exiled to Kazhakstan where he can continue to disagree with Gorky.



Book 1, Rabelais & His World : Chapter 2, Prologue & Introduction

Book 1, Rabelais & His World : Chapter 2, Prologue & Introduction Summary and Analysis

The cultural context in which Mikhail lives and works is very different from that of readers. It is noted that his first book nearly failed to be published altogether. He is arrested and exiled for a crime called "unreliability"—a trait viewed with an intellectual form of hyper-vigilance at a time when Russia was seeking to create new found stability in a post-revolutionary culture. Nevertheless, Mikhail Bakhtin manages to submit his manuscript to the normal authorities for the new Russian State. The review of it is delayed by the entire 2nd World War. Only after the War is his work considered for publication. He is invited to defend it. Contemporary academics may know that the doctoral degree requires an official defense before a group of seniors. In Russia, now Soviet Russia, a different degree called Kandidat is normally awarded. In this case, the author is forewarned that his defense of his manuscript is anything but an empty academic rite of passage. Despite the intimidation and the anxiety he succeeds and they award him the more Western standard degree of Doctor—this was a surprising high compliment from his Soviet Russian comrades.

The Clown and the Fool are simultaneously official and unofficial. Folk humor is traditionally embodied in these roles, but is not limited to functioning through them. It can be argued that the Fool at Court is rather like a congressman in a democracy, representing the constituents before the King. Here is the representative for the common folk. In some situations the high class people will automatically find this funny. Another major concept is that of the co-mingling at the carnival of myth and truth, or fantasy and fact. In the theatre, the actors and the spectators are separated by form and function. At carnival this is not so. Carnival permits people to express aspects of themselves that may not be normally shared. Sexual behavior as well as indulgence in eating and drinking deeply into states of intoxication are normal. There are sociological issues that are put into a basic framework for readers. There are social castes at the time. The folk—meaning the lower classes of people are set against the high class people for the purposes of understanding. The Christian Church is described as having entered society as a high class phenomenon, which is then imposed upon the lower classes as a consequence of the process of leaders implementing changes throughout the culture. The folk are originally pagan, and in many ways, during the 1500s they still are, despite centuries of Christianity. In the Bible the Devil is cast down to Earth when he defends humanity at a time when God wants to simply annihilate the species. God and the Devil disagree about some of God's policies. God remains dominant and casts Satan to Earth as many other powerful subordinates have been sent away in other cases, amongst gods and mortals.



Chapter 3, Intro. cont. & Chapter 1 - Rabelais in the History of Laughter

Chapter 3, Intro. cont. & Chapter 1 - Rabelais in the History of Laughter Summary and Analysis

There is debate about what constitutes a novel in the relatively modern era of literature. This effort to standardize art forms has taken place more than once. There are certain elements of Rabelais' writing that have been referred to as "billingsgate elements." These are apparently indicated by a kind of vulgarity that is very much a part of the folk tradition. These "elements" have made it unusually difficult to read by more modern standards. The literary experts make an extra effort to make some sense of what happened. One of the basic facts is that in the sixteenth century the language of the folk is rather coarse. There is double-sidedness to most humor: it includes both praise and abuse as a regular manner of speaking. This, along with other patterns of the folk-speech of the time are included in a way that makes perfect sense to those who are in the know about it, but remains inconclusive and confusing to others. Historians of literature have written that readers must understand the place this way of speaking held within the culture of the time.

The author begins to express the way excrement is handled and treated, not through the sewage systems of the city but the more public ways that these matters are handled. Elected bishops and their clerics ride through town with carts of feces, which sometimes spill but in other cases are intentionally flung at the gathered crowds. People urinate in strange and bizarre locations. There is a reference to Gargantua, who urinates upon Parisians who have thronged about him. Debasement is the topic of the writing at this time. People seem to instinctively understand what this means whenever people hurl feces, urine or spit at others. The author confirms that this kind of thing is normally recognized as a serious insult; at the same time, Mikhail asserts that everyone also associated it with fertility and with life for the two most obvious reasons. Excrement makes great soil fertilizer: this has not changed; people will pay good money to get horse manure for their small farms or gardens. The other obvious reason is the way that nature designs the human being so that reproductive organs and excretion are located so closely together. The author also touches upon how this type of understanding is also used in the literature as well as showing various ways that it presents itself to the people during the course of life.



Chapter 4, Chapter 2 - The Language of the Marketplace

Chapter 4, Chapter 2 - The Language of the Marketplace Summary and Analysis

Shortly after the author informs readers about billingsgate, he begins to write about the boy. In this case, he means both the image of the boy and the reality of it. There is the boy as a universal as well as a sample character. The author writes briefly of the village boy and his exuberance while playing; here, innocence is attached to hurling excrement and to mudslinging. In this case, the village boy is playfully self-indulgent rather than malicious or cruel. A certain presence or lack of cruelty seems to be innate but people can be trained in either direction—away from it, or to nurture it. Mikhail then writes that Rabelais' image of the village boy is inadequate: he justifies this claim by citing that he is actually working in an urban environment. The implication is that this changes events caused by the boy's inherent and innocent playfulness. The atmosphere of carnival and festival is actually one that forms over centuries: the presence of the boy in this sense is meant to convey a meaning that transcends the individual.

Cynicism, as a specific type of humor and as an attitude, is discussed. The need to use the prevailing form of cynicism also involves a reformulation of the image of the boy. The author describes the initial view as having been inadequate to express what was really going on. Bakhtain differentiates between grotesque debasement and the tamer vision of joyful mudslinging. The author repeats that during the 1500s it was viewed as relatively socially acceptable for people to throw feces at passers by. This is a practice that has three disparate contemporary forms. First, monkeys in captivity and living freely are known to do this in the early 21st century. Second, amongst the Germans, excreting upon sexual partners has become a subcultural practice of the 20th and 21st centuries. Third, the English speaking peoples, especially the Americans have a verbal euphemism that is the same as the more literal forms. "Are you shitting me?" is a common vernacular in some American English, but it exists strictly in the speech of the people, rather than as a literal practice. Normally, it means that someone feels lied to, and is suspicious of being debased with falsehood. Shit, in truth, in the 21st century while often referred to, has the most respect amongst farmers, or those who view it in relation to fertilization and to signs of successful self-cleansing. Contemporary views on this range from group to group. There are people who have lost all capacity to appreciate excrement in relation to the grotesque comic of old whereas there are others who are far more comfortable with shit as a subject matter and as a fact of life than are the others. In fact, this has been known to be used as a gender and as a class distinction at times.



Chapter 5, Chapter 2 - Language of the Marketplace Cont.

Chapter 5, Chapter 2 - Language of the Marketplace Cont. Summary and Analysis

Places of higher education participate extensively in the cultural forms that include comedy and at times, social commentary. In this case, the form is plays. The official and the unofficial are separated by which plays are done on campus and which are performed off campus. The parody and satire are more apt to be performed off campus in order to prevent problems of funding and censorship. Publication of books becomes a matter of some interest and concern during the next phase of Rabelais's life. He lives in Lyon, France where there is a Fair. This is one of the places where people can find the means to get their books published and can market them. This annual Fair runs for two months at a time. There is one other well known center of the book publishing world in Continental Europe at the time, and this is actually Frankfurt, Germany. The author then gives a summary of Rabelais' publishing career. He does acquire his professional writing contacts by attending the Fair in Lyon. He is first able to publish an academic document. After he does this three times, he is then able to generate enough literature to satiate the populace and to make himself one of the main suppliers of novels for the people of the Europe of the time. The author notes that Rabelais behaves like any craftsman, or person with a vested interest in others. He wants to please the people, and with that understanding he pursues their interests in order to involve them in his prose works. Chapbooks are also regularly sold at Fairs. The hawkers are known to use a manner of speaking thick with praise during Fairs. This emerges from the folk tradition of praise and criticism or insult, along with the tradition of praising leaders, and the marketplace custom still found today—that of praising the customer.

There are certain ailments that tend to be linked as a consequence of certain types of behavior. Gout and syphilis are popular diseases because they spring from overindulgence in food and in sexual intercourse—or, rather, excessive wantonness in sexual intercourse if not excess in frequency or amount of it. Mikhail Bakhtain explains that this is indicative of the most popular vices of the era. In addition to this, he informs readers that this tendency to express the whole reality was characteristic of grotesque realism.



Chapter 6, Chapter 2 - Language of the Marketplace Cont.

Chapter 6, Chapter 2 - Language of the Marketplace Cont. Summary and Analysis

Knowledge traditions are brought up once again. There is the culture of the immediate context. For the reader, it is one thing. For the author it is another. The author himself participates in the tradition of knowledge presented through universities as ancient wisdom preserved through the power of the written word for generations. Here, Rabelais makes direct reference to Socrates, and Alcibiades, which has been made possible by Plato's writing and the complex social systems that have carried this forward in time and through changes in the language. The author includes a quotation that uses the praise-abuse combination. He writes truthfully, that Socrates looked like an unappealing simpleton. He adds that this man did not appear to be good for much other than for getting drunk with, for those who were his friends. However, this man is actually the brilliant Socrates, a veritable treasure trove if you can overcome your tendency to insult or dismiss him because of his less than impressive appearance. Often sold are recipe books for cures, sold as chapbooks that were done as humor. Everyone knows the cures are fakes. These coexist along with the problems relating to real cures and "quakes"—fraud medicine.

Rabelais writes a Prologue that is written as an address. The tone is theatrical, creative, dramatic. There is something about it that readers may find familiar in a warm-hearted way. The author and translator have included a colorful quote that communicates the right feeling quite effectively. "Good people, most illustrious toppers, thrice-precious gouty gentlemen, I wonder whether you ever saw Diogenes, the Cynic philosopher?" Soon thereafter, there is another colorful description. Rabelais claims that ecclesiastical censors are like ragamuffins who go around during the cherry season picking the stones of cherries out of children's excrement—and then selling the stones for the following season. The reality that people can be so stricken with terror that they just defecate uncontrollably is shared as part of the relevant discourse during the remainder of this chapter. Rabelais uses the image of taking a drink as communing with the truth of a given situation. Physicians are especially reputed to have this dual connection with both death and life through the way that they work with people. Much of what doctors deal with is commonly referred to as disgusting and vulgar in contemporary language; nevertheless, it somehow still has its place. Bakhtain also refers to the scatophagus—this is an entity that literally eats feces, but is a human.



Chapter 7, Chapter 2, Language of the Marketplace Cont.

Chapter 7, Chapter 2, Language of the Marketplace Cont. Summary and Analysis

There is a charming anecdote about a drop in social status for a King. This brief tale comes from the folk: the vast majority of readers will recognize the image. A King is dethroned. A middle class man, a vendor, decides to help him. So, he gives the ex-King a job. The position is both extremely humble and very important—direct marketing, or hawking at a Fair. The King is not enough of a quick study in this skill to satisfy his new boss. As already mentioned, even though there is something incomplete about this, there is still plenty for everyone. This image is almost a classic of the world's democracies. Closer to the truth, might be when any King who is dethroned without being killed or exiled is liable to become of the highest ranking elected officials in the land (though perhaps this image reflects contemporary political biases in America, as most monarchies of the world also have parliaments).

Rabelais brings to bear the intensity of certain forces. He writes of a case where a man brings forth his penis in a manner that others imagine is sexually motivated: he calls it the man's pleasure-rod, but the situation changes when the man begins pissing all over a crowd. The author claims that this man drowns 260,400 with his own urine. Mikhail Bakhtain reveals the true nature of the carnival world when he explains that Rabelais intentionally writes that story of the man's pissing all over those other men using the exact same formula found in Scripture regarding the sharing out of 5 loaves of bread without running out. Rabelais does this repeatedly, and it is known as the classical use of Scriptural and doctrinal rites put into a radically altered perspective and used by carnival and the associated folk humor.



Chapter 8, Chapter 2 - Language of the Marketplace Concludes & Chapter 3 - Popular & Festive Forms Begins

Chapter 8, Chapter 2 - Language of the Marketplace Concludes & Chapter 3 - Popular & Festive Forms Begins Summary and Analysis

Chapter 3 begins after Friar John has been introduced. Here, Friar John appears again. He uses a Catchpole to release some of his own abusive feelings, fulfilling some kind of need. The Catchpole is literally a person, normally a grown man, who makes money by enduring being abused by anyone who will pay him. Friar John is not above using a Catchpole, and his victim is reasonably content. The other thematic image which emerges is that the battle scenes confronted by men have their parallel counterpoint in the kitchen, where the lives of other species are destroyed, dismembered and put together into the cooking pot where they will serve others as sustenance. From this perspective, which is a very specific train of thinking, it is very well matched by the strong connection between defecating and the new life that comes when the excrement is used for fertilizer, or when digestion is a means to getting at the seeds for next generation of the same plants.

Here, the catchpole is seen as a means for the abuser to alleviate distress towards, not just his own immediate sources of displeasure, but also stress associated with the King and discord that has come down to him through political policies. The author then explains that within the context of this body of literature, which is representative of the actual culture within which it emerged, the King becomes the Clown. Readers will recognize that the essential meaning of this also holds for political democracies where the Head of State, an elected official, is both praised and mocked throughout the time that he or she is in office. This duality is what makes this person the Fool or Clown. Upon reflection, the majority of people will recognize that there is a great tendency for people to criticize leaders, including their own leaders. In many cases, those who criticize are able to do the same work and to do a better job and to enact policies that will please mockers. This is the reason for the mockery. Even though this is true, most of the time, the criticism has the same value as feces.



Chapter 9, Chapter 3 - Popular-Festive Forms

Chapter 9, Chapter 3 - Popular-Festive Forms Summary and Analysis

Next, the author brings up another element for stage, theatre and real life. Here, it is the way contrasts can be used for the sake of enhancing a sense of the comedic. The author remarks on several contrasts, such as tall with short, thin with fat, old with young, and other contrasts.

In the thrashing in the house of Basche, the thrashings offered are actually quite severe. In some cases, a man might be killed. In most cases, he is either very guilty or else is a Catchpole. The similarity between a Catchpole and a Scapegoat is obvious but goes without saying. Rabelais's novel contrasts what happens to the actual victim and what happens to the other participants. The one who is thrashed the most may well be so injured as to be speechless and is apt to be marked with the livery—the well known insignias of the conquerors. The others then either do not mention or belittle the injuries to the actual victim but they parade their own injuries, detailing them to the extreme and complaining about them replete with dramatic posturing and the rest of it. Another symbol of great importance here is the drum. The drum is sexual in its symbology. There is a custom of piercing drums at weddings; this is apparently some allusion to the idea of the breaking of virginity via a woman's hymen, and her being pierced, so-to-speak, by a man's penis. Broken drums are included amongst the injuries discussed during scenes about the kinds of fake weddings used to seduce and to punish slanderers.

At this point, a direct quote will be used to clarify the current situation. "Let us sum up the episode we have been analyzing—the thrashing in the house of Basche. All the events shown in this episode present the character of a popular-festive comic performance: it is a gay and free play, but it is also full of deep meaning. Its hero and author is time itself, which uncrowns, covers with ridicule, kills the old world (the old authority and truth), and at the same time gives birth to the new," (p. 207). Friar John is then depicted as having pummeled over 13,000 men into a submission so real and profound that his defeat of the others was described as cruel and bloody. This is not an episode from real life that has been depicted but may be something true to life devised by Rabelais for his novel. The cause for the Friar's violence was his successful defense of the vineyards and the crops for that year. He has protected his novices, and has guarded the wine! This is something of a triumphant victory. This Catholic image intentionally overlays the more ancient Dionysian rite; both are intimately connected with the successful production of wine.



Chapter 10, Chapter 3 - Popular - Festive Forms

Chapter 10, Chapter 3 - Popular - Festive Forms Summary and Analysis

The main protagonist of this story is a man named Pantagruel. He moves through the events; the next conflict involves another King—this one is called King Anarchus. Here, the protagonist and only two companions together defeat 660 of King Anarchus's Knights by the use of gun powder against their opponents. They have a meal immediately following the victory. At this point the author explains that Rabelais indicates something that proves to be a historic transformation: gun powder succeeding over the armor of bygone days; the overall impression is that wit has become victorious over brute force. This theme also occurs in Scandinavian mythology where the cleverness of Loki is repeatedly contrasted with the straightforward physical dominance of Thor. However, what proves insurmountable in fact, is very often the union of the two; in fact, the ingenuity of the gun powder is a means of producing more force and nothing more. Therefore, the original principle of the domination of force has not be changed. Through this carnivalesque form, the changing times are captured through this sort of incident.

Doubtless, the perception is quite different for those who are already familiar with Rabelais. There is one bizarre reference to a sort of living lifelessness. Anyone who has felt emptied rather than fulfilled or deadened rather than enlivened by their work may understand. Often, it is a simple side effect of sedentary ways. Rabelais writes of how a man is followed by a small group of servile but lifeless Masters of Arts. This may seem like an echo to contemporary people. The students have graduated, but have been hollowed out by the process and there is barely anything left of some of them, in terms of life and soul. *Mardis Gras* has actually been doubled up with a Catholic Holiday—Shrove Tuesday. Mikhail Bakhtain explains that the modern world does suffer very much from one-sided conceptualizations—the back of the hand without the front of it, and as though a separate entity, for example. Likewise, the people of the Renaissance, and in Rabelais's novel confronted eating giblets—the meeting of the digestive organs of the consumed and the consumer; this is the apex of unity of destruction and sustenance and the transformation of one living form into another.



Chapter 11, Chapter 3 - Popular - Festive Forms

Chapter 11, Chapter 3 - Popular - Festive Forms Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4 begins with the author explaining that food either in fact, or as images, occurs on virtually every page of the novels written by Rabelais. Only here does Bakhtain inform readers that Pantagruel was the author's first novel. Gargantua appears again; this time in the form of a successful soldier. Bakhtain resumes his analysis for the greater historical contextualization of Rabelais. Food is the reward of labor in the ancient world and continues to be one form this can take: hence, the giant sandwich served to work colleagues. While indirect, the relationship is still real. Here, he contrasts the ancient rites of carnival and paganism with the popular-festive rituals.

Fighting while drunk is listed as amongst somewhat typical behavior found in Rabelais' novels. This is something which continues to be fairly standard practice for some. The author describes all meals as happy events. He writes that they are victories. Banquets are also often noted as being like sexual intercourse in that they are often viewed as a form of completion. Next he refers to the practices of a Bishop Zeno. He has to do this in order to explain to readers how real life events then lead to a tradition in Medieval literature. There is a certain Cyprian's Supper which becomes a standard reference for many writers. Bakhtain explains that those with sufficient knowledge are able to explain that Pope John VIII wrote a comedic version, or parody of the Cyprian Supper for use as entertainment at Easter festivities. Essential attributes of the grotesque are: exaggeration, hyperbole, and excess. The use of hyperbole is prevalent during the Renaissance era under discussion. A man named Schneegans is the author of *Geschichte der Grotesken Satyre*: this is published in 1894 in German and then later, the English version of *History of Grotesque Satire* was produced. This man Schneegan is viewed as one of the most important scholars to study and to provide critique for Rabelais, according to Mikhail Bakhtain. Soon thereafter, the role of the Harlequin is further explained and expressed. In this case, the Harlequin tricks someone—the result is a cure of stuttering. This type of healing is corroborated by contemporary knowledge which understands that stuttering is normally a purely psychological, nerve disorder.



Chapter 12, Chapter 4 - Banquet Imagery & Chapter 5 - The Grotesque Image of the Body and Its Sources

Chapter 12, Chapter 4 - Banquet Imagery & Chapter 5 - The Grotesque Image of the Body and Its Sources Summary and Analysis

Bakhtain also explains that during clowning around, no one is mocked; the grotesque mocks but the Clown does not. The grotesque is further defined. This is valuable for those who are not used to the theoretical framework. Satire and hyperbole go together by necessity and not merely by personal wish. Extreme exaggeration of anything inappropriate to vast proportions is the true source of satire.

Mikhail Bakhtain writes about "systems of images" in literature. Theater and other forms of living art have lives separate from and intermingled with daily life. Carnival and festivals show one way that the two coincide. Readers may well recognize how the official and the unofficial continue today to support an element of deceptive theatre. To some extent, people may be on their best behavior in the workplace, especially for the office-working types. There are also times when gender difference causes people to modify their behavior in ways that are reminiscent of the theatre.

Chapter 5 runs from page 303 to 368. The author mentions the Friar again; Friar John. He makes an oblique reference to the fact that there have been women who become pregnant as a consequence of their intercourse with a particular priest or priests and that this is part of the shadow of the monastery. The reference to the corruption involved with unmarried women having the offspring of priests reveals the truth about desires. Later in this chapter the author writes about more images of the Devil and the reappearance of the Underworld in the images and literature of the time. Readers may feel confounded since the dominant present day usage of the Underworld has nothing to do with the dead, and everything to do with crime. Even so, readers tend to have been educated in the reality that in the old days the Underworld was the general name for everything that goes on after life, a vestige of pre-Christian pagan societies. The author, after reminding readers of the Underworld, then recounts the story of how King Anarchus was dethroned and turned into a street hawker. Then Bakhtain writes again about Rabelais's first novel. In this case, he writes about the destruction of the Underworld by Pantagruel. A female character called Proserpina is tossed into the Underworld by Pantagruel, as part of a plot, and the Devil is injured as a direct consequence. Pantagruel is written in reaction to the events in France in the 1520s and 1530s AD/CE.



Chapter 13, Chapter 5 - The Grotesque Image of the Body Concludes and Chapter 6 - Images of the Material Bodily Lower Stratum

Chapter 13, Chapter 5 - The Grotesque Image of the Body Concludes and Chapter 6 - Images of the Material Bodily Lower Stratum Summary and Analysis

Chapter 6 begins with the author making at least some effort to explain how well Rabelais' first novel clarifies the Medieval and Renaissance periods of European history. Women are brought up immediately. Women are linked with the Underworld, partly due to the mysteries of the womb and of child birth, and therefore with death. Women are also associated with it in terms of it being a reference to all that is politically subdominant: the farm workers, the playing children, the women tending families are all somehow subjected to the leadership of the society's most dominant figures. In the Christian and patriarchal world these are normally men. However, for all the children and often enough within the pagan realms, the women are equally or even more likely to be the dominant figures. Here, there is a sense of the goddess, whether as the universal woman, or in the sense of the pagan deities, or as an objection to the idea that the one true God could be legitimately claimed to have a gender or that He could actually be more male than female, when in actuality there is a very limited human conceptualization for what is really going on. While such ideas have grown more common in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, they have existed for millenia, and have occurred during the Christian era in unique ways—ways included by Rabelais's novel. Here, he has priestesses, drunken revelry, women and their sexuality functioning to bring in matters of the lower statum. Bakhtain, writing from the male perspective, asserts that the change over from dealing with other men to including women also involves the switch from the urination and defecation to an increased sense of sexuality. Here, the Holy Bottle, and education in pre-Christian pagan knowledge, especially that of the Southern Greeks, has influenced the hearts and minds of the Renaissance people. There is a sense in which this is somehow an undermining diabolical plot.

Finally, the author brings up the swab. This was what it sounds like: a device made up from rags or other partially re-usable material for the purpose of cleaning floors or other areas. Hence, earlier jokes about how highly diverse items might be used as swabs. The ultimate insult is that something might not be able to serve, even as a swab. Hence, use as a swab is virtually universal.



Chapter 15, Chapter 6 - Images of the Material Bodily Lower Stratum

Chapter 15, Chapter 6 - Images of the Material Bodily Lower Stratum Summary and Analysis

The author includes the farcical use of swabs. In this sense, it is quite true that one way the Renaissance people used their references to swabs was as a means of expressing anger or hostility towards someone and as a threat of the best way to utilize that individual. The swab is also described as serving more than one purpose. A swab can be used to wash a floor, but Bakhtain also quotes Rabelais as writing about the kinds of swabs that were used as we now use towels, and others used as we now use toilet paper. The author intentionally uses both sincerity and comedy in describing the uses of swabs and what might serve as swabs, including examples of an "abusive choice of swab." There is another quote from Rabelais and the images are graphic. He reports that the neck of a live goose is the best way to wipe your arse after defecating because not only will it clean your butt, if you hold the goose's head between your legs but you get the added bonus of something that is at least vaguely sexually stimulating. One of the main themes that the author is getting at is that some of the fleshly pleasures, however much associated with the Underworld, really are what make living people happy. As such, these carnal or sensual pleasures seem to lead in fact to heaven rather than being the road to hell at all. At the same time, through comedy, the truth that wretched excess can ruin even the best of things, is acknowledged.

The lower replaces and supplants the higher. For some, this is the catalog of a disgrace. For others, it is the collapse of an artificial superiority into a different manner of accepting life and the world. Resurrection ends up being associated with the anus: the point at which everything that is not who that person has become is released, while everything that proved sustaining has become the individual, suddenly represented by nothing but the anus. Death has once again, been exchanged for life, in the combined sense of having taking food in through the mouth, processed and then shed, a releasing only permitted thanks to the anus. On page 383, Bakhtain quotes Rabelais and shows how great intellectuals and leaders of history have been transformed, reduced perhaps, into day laborers. There is something about this that also suggests what can happen when people live through transformations in which their greatest vigor has been drastically reduced, be it by age or by illness or something else.



Book 1, Rabelais & His World : Chapter 15, Chapter 6 - Images of the Material Bodily Lower Stratum

Book 1, Rabelais & His World : Chapter 15, Chapter 6 - Images of the Material Bodily Lower Stratum Summary and Analysis

The first thing Mikhail Bakhtain does here is to assure readers that Rabelais' novels are characteristic of the time and place which produced them. Bakhtain shows that his intention has been to show how Rabelais' focus upon and use of folk culture within the story-line serve as a counterpoint to the official culture of the Middle Ages. Pantagruel is a novel consisting of 5 Books. It is the author's first novel. Gargantua is another novel by the same author. Bakhtain brings the minds of readers back to the Picrochole war, in part using it to explain the Middle Ages. The war was actually a rather local conflict. The feudal government combined elements that contemporary readers might view as legitimate authorities with illegitimate or illegal activity. If a family was not loyal to the King then, it might well be that their military actions would be illegal and therefore criminal. If the opponent included people known to be loyal to the government then their reactions would be construed as legal and in that sense, right. Rabelais is a strong supporter of a Piedmont in real life. There is a new method of military occupation used. Rabelais means to win over the people of the territory occupied by this Piedmont. What is so distinctive, is that the Army of this group is subjected to strict discipline and are not allowed to torment and oppress the local population. When Rabelais writes the 4th Book of his first novel, France is having its most difficult time with the Catholic Pope.

This is the final chapter of this book. The author covers some additional features of the culture and attitudes from which Rabelais writes. One subject is numbers. Numbers are in fact viewed as sacred. Readers today recognize the tremendous power and usefulness of numbers even though the ethos of seeing them as sacred has shifted. In some respects the culture of Rabelais with its adoration of the numbers, and the acknowledgment of the prior knowledge acquired from the Pythagoreans, may foreshadow the pervasive and extensive use of numbers in the reader's societies. Rabelais uncrowns numbers; Bakhtain explains that this is done in the carnivalesque style. This is to be viewed as an especial form of irreverence which is somehow not the same as true de-valuation. It is, but it is not. Finally, Bakhtain reminds readers that Friar John annihilates 13,622 opponents when he defends the monastery, the vineyard and the novices during Rabelais' novel. Bakhtain remarks that this number should not be viewed as a matter of mere coincidence.



Chapter 16, Chapter 7 - Rabelais' Images & His Time

Chapter 16, Chapter 7 - Rabelais' Images & His Time Summary and Analysis

The final topics in the book is the matter of Latin with the common languages of the people. There is an effort to bring Latin back into full usage during the 16th century but the effort seems to destroy the daily functionality of Latin, while relegating Latin to a special language. Today, Latin is viewed as a dead language with specialist uses and historical importance. Scientific nomenclature and much of the work of the Catholic Church—specialist areas where there is an unusual need to transcend ordinary linguistic boundaries—are the few places where Latin is used today. It is also considered to be "for special purposes" and as such, has developed a special relationship with what is now known as jargon. Bakhtain explains that the changes between the common speech and Latin is worked out and cemented with great effort during the times in which Rabelais is a living man. Mikhail Bakhtain concludes the book by reiterating that the ruling classes and the folk culture continue to have their differences. One arena of difference involves humor. Rabelais honors the folk culture by using it, rather than the comedic style of the ruling classes in his literature. Rabelais brings the common people novels. This being the case, Rabelais' work should be viewed as important, while understanding it within its actual context. Class strife and stratification have not evaporated from culture. Even when great efforts are made to bridge the gap, or to cultivate mutual respect and understandings that run both ways. This is meant to remind Russians and other Europeans of all that is great about the folk and how to form a vision for themselves in the Soviet Union and a futuristic outlook.



Characters

Mikhail Bakhtin

This is the author. His writing has been translated for the edition used to write this summary. As such, only those who read Russian and English will be able to judge the precision with which the translator has performed. The author has had a growing reputation as a great intellectual of 20th century Russia. This work is his great introduction for "Westerners." He conducts a literary research which is simultaneously a historical survey and an analysis of a cultural form during this book.

He is obviously Russian. The author lived his life without fame. He is apparently recognized more posthumously than during his lifetime (1895-1975). There are twinges of regret since scholars and others have since concluded that he was absolutely brilliant and undertaking incredibly valuable work but had ended up somehow going quietly unnoticed by important figures who might have helped him achieve notoriety. As such, still not rich but no longer in need of funding, our hero, in this case, is posthumously famous.

He first wrote this book during the 1930s. He was able to get it published in the 1960s. However, during debates about the new standards for novels, he was arrested and relocated to Kazhakistan, a place Americans have only heard of thanks to map changes after the Iron Curtain came down.

Rabelais

This is a literary figure of the Medieval and Renaissance periods. Rabelais was one of the first people who organized knowledge about carnival well enough in written words for it to be put into the tradition of written history. He wrote literature for the masses. In this respect he worked the same crowd as Shakespeare amongst the English. Rabelais was much loved during his own lifetime. He is considered somewhat separately from the literary greats with respect to perfection of form, but is readily acknowledged as great through popularity.

Rabelais wrote with both creativity and insight. His novels are very much connected to the reality in which he lived. For this reason, even though they are fictional, they are considered for their educational benefits as well as for their entertainment value. He wrote in the common language in an era when there was great debate about whether Latin could hold sway as the language for the educated people or whether that method for transcending international boundaries in Europe would no longer work.

Rabelais had his novels published through attending a Fair in Lyon, France. There were two Fairs in all of Northern Europe where something like this could happen.



Friar John

This man is actually a fictional character who doubles as a universal form of the real life Friar. Friar John runs a monastery. There are novices and there are vineyards at his monastery. During the novel *Patangruel*, Friar John leads his people to defeat 13,622 opponents—all of whom die in their effort to thwart the Friar's monastic endeavors. The aggressive nature of Friar John is treated as being entirely in line with Church practice and politics throughout the novel. Rather than being a problem, his behavior in this case is depicted as responsible. He is dutifully tending his monastery. Friar John is mentioned only a few times, but in a manner that shows his importance.

King Anarchus

This is another fictional character. This is a case in which lower class animosity towards the upper class is shown. King Anarchus is actually defeated, and dethroned. He is turned into an ordinary man. So naturally, he has to get a job. He tries being a hawker in the marketplace but it does not go very well. In fact, he is chastised by his boss for being too slow.

King Anarchus and his fall are described early in the book, and then again near the end. This is a case where Rabelais writes about it because it is relevant in his own lifetime. For Mikhail Bakhtain and the Bolsheviks in Russia and the Soviets of the Union, the story of bringing King Anarchus down has the same meaning but is apt to feel as personal to them as it felt for Rabelais. Readers from countries that have not undergone such a change are not likely to understand what has happened, at least not emotionally.

God

God is not a prominent character in this non-fiction book, but His presence is presented primarily through the Christian Churches, their denominations and priests.

It is also possible that on those occasions when priestesses are mentioned late during Rabelais' first novel, and deep into Mikhail's nonfiction book, that what readers would perceive as God is who/what these priestesses serve. It is, however, debatable that this is the case because of the informal and earthly nature of the descriptions. At the same time God's servants, the priests and friars, are both praised and mocked, in normal carnival fashion as being so corrupt that they do not even really know God yet pretend to be His representatives on Earth, and they are also extolled and exonerated in characters such as Friar John and in the steady force of the Catholic and other churches en masse, as individuals and cultural entities at the same time.



Devil

This is God's subordinate, and expert adversary. In Bakhtain's book, the Devil is quite often a friend of mankind, in a very real way. The Devil is associated with the carnival, with the folk, and with everything unofficial. The Devil is forgiving where public policy, or officialdom, is not. The author explains that during the Medieval period the Devil's reputation amongst people was actually quite good. He was well-liked. He was also associated with all of the so-called pagan behaviors of the folk. This is, upon inspection, however, because the official Church had made compromises with the folk and had created policies that did take them into account.

Piedmont

This was a political leader in the area in which Rabelais lived in real life, during his lifetime. He was viewed in a very good light by Rabelais as he proved able to occupy a region of France without terrorizing the local population. He was able to keep a highly disciplined Army which helped a great deal in preventing them from being a menace to the people of the area. Rabelais was very happy about this, as it meant that there was occupation without oppression.

Michael Holquist

This man is a scholar. He is highly knowledgeable in the history and culture of Russia. He wrote the Prologue for this book, which proves to be very helpful to readers. The book can be read without it, but it really does help to prepare the mind by contextualizing the rest of the book. There is nothing about his life or personality other than his experience in this particular field that you are aware of.

Krystyna Pomorska

This Russian woman has written the Foreward for the book. What she has written appears in English. There is no definitive statement about whether or not she has done the original work in Russian or in English, but her name makes it clear that she is Russian.

Helene Iswolsky

This woman is credited with the translation of the book. Nothing about her life is shared before or during the book. Only those who read this book in both the original Russian and in the English are in a strong position to judge the quality of her work. Her surname suggests that she may be Polish, but she may be Ukrainian or Russian or something else Central or Eastern European.



Harlequin

This is one of the most respected German forms of the Fool, or Clown of the literary and cultural folk traditions. The author actually spends a lot of energy during the book covering the importance of the Fool. The figure was a mainstay of literature and of carnival and of stage theatre for centuries. Most readers have noticed this character in Shakespearean plays, and also in most stories that are actually or pretending to be set in the Medieval or Renaissance periods. Each nation and each stage of culture had its own version of this character.

The Harlequin appeared in German literature near the end of the Renaissance. It was the transition into the Gothic and then Romantic literary movements that radically altered the Fool/Clown. The Harlequin form was individualized and made subjective. It was as if the entity was far too removed from the carnival atmosphere of its origin but still working in the growing literary field. Most recently, there are ways this character continues to turn up, but often enough as a villain—as the original character perhaps was lost through the debates about literature. Readers may be most familiar with 2 villains representing the classic type of this character, but villainized, in mass media: the Joker of Batman, and Harley Quinn, a female villain cartoon character. More common is that journalists and political cartoonists serve the social function of the fool in that they both praise and lambaste the President and other top leaders with their images which are also mass produced and broadcast in ways that only the ancient Fools could have done.

Gargantua

This is a figure who appears in Rabelais novels as a hero. However, this figure is not heroic in the classical sense at all. This is a carnivalesque figure: he is reputed not only to save the day on occasion but also to go so far as to piss all over a large assembly. He is meant to accurately represent grotesque realism within the culture Rabelais wrote in and in which the novels are set. He is mentioned sparingly, but as a major player in diverse locations throughout the book.

Pantagruel

This is the name of a starring character in Rabelais' first novel. Pantagruel is a carnival folk figure. He is presented in multiple ways. He is shown to be a comic figure. He is also presented as a simple character; an individualized fellow who has adventures and experiences of his own. He is also presented as a cosmic man—especially when Rabelais explains that he urinated so much during a stomach sickness that healing springs in France developed as a consequence.



Objects/Places

Carnival

This is an event that, when it is taking place is also a place and an object. This is a special setting; there are contemporary festivals that are a bit along these lines, and Renaissance Faires are modelled in part on the Carnival and the market place. Also, the Mardi Gras festival is modeled on the French carnival. This is folk culture event, which simply means that it is for the common people - the lower and middle classes more so than being an event for those at the top of social hierarchy.

Fool

This is a well known character associated with an earlier period in history. The fool is one of the normative characters of folk culture into the Renaissance, after which there arose some confusion regarding how to deal with him. The Fool sometimes served as a political and social representative of the common people. These characters occurred as part of carnival; they also had a life in theatre. They tended to appear in all the forms of theatre - serious shows, and parody and satire.

The Fool has been known in more than one guise, both in living experiences such as the carnival and in literature such as the plays of Shakespeare which are well known to the English speaking audiences.

Marketplace

The marketplace was a cultural as well as economic center of the European world. While it is mentioned during the introductory material it is the focal point of the second chapter which is named for it. It began as a primarily open space where merchants could safely set up retail locations and be readily accessible to the buying public.

Catholic Church

This organization is mentioned repeatedly throughout the book. It played an important role in the real life France of Rabelais. The Catholic Church was also of great significance in the novels that Rabelais wrote. Many of the characters in the book were Catholics. Much of the politics of France were influenced if not outright controlled by the Catholic Church. This is known to be the oldest and largest Christian denomination in the West. It has its counterpart in the Eastern Orthodox Church. This division of the Christian Church is an accurate if bizarre reflection of the difference between the lands and peoples that for centuries were the Eastern or Western Roman Empire. It isn't always clear why, but for the time being, this is the way it is being handled. The Eastern



Church is not mentioned, but the Catholic Church is set against Protestant Churches during the course of the book.

Lyon, France

In this book, the reason this town is important was that there were publishers there. There was also a Fair. The combination meant that authors who lived in or made their pilgrimage to Lyon had a far better chance of being published than those who did not. Once published, the Fair in Lyon was one of the only markets available to writers who had managed to get published.

The author explains this during the middle of the book.

Frankfurt, Germany

Frankfurt is just like Lyon in terms of its importance for this book. There are publishers there and there is a Fair where for two months of the year, authors can actually sell their books. This is the other location in North Central Europe where someone has anything resembling a reasonable chance of achieving something like this during the Medieval and Renaissance times.

Fake Wedding

There is a fake wedding at the castle of Lord Basche. This is the event arranged so that slanderers can be caught and punished. This occurs as part of the storyline of Rabelais' first novel.

Catchpole

These are actually people who serve as paid masochists. They permit others to beat them up in exchange for pay. These are a culturally accepted role in the time of Rabelais' life. There is the suggestion that Rabelais lives during a time when the level of violence in the culture in general was high. There is one anecdote about a catchpole in the book. It occurs as part of Rabelais's first novel Pantagruel.

Gauntlet

This is a metal glove used as part of a suit of armor. Its main purpose is to protect the hand against the weapon of an opponent. During Rabelais' first novel they prove effective for dishing out a beating severe enough to be called a thrashing. The beating does not involve swords, but many of the men wear their gauntlets to beat up slanderers at a fake wedding.



Colors

In this case, colors are used as the insignia of legal authorities. These are used by prominent personnel, including when dishing out punishments. The example that occurs in the book, is when Bakhtain is describing Rabelais's first novel. After thrashing a slanderer, the victim is marked with ribbons bearing the colors of the political leader who has thrashed him.

Sausages

These are important carnival food that are repeatedly mentioned. They are a sign of abundance. They are used comically and while normally representing food, they also have their double reference as a phallic symbol. They are mentioned most when the author is writing about food in the works of Rabelais.

Monastery

There is one of these mentioned in the book. It is the one that appears in Rabelais's first novel, and it is run by Friar John. It is a home, it has a vineyard and there may be some kind of school there as they have boys living there.

Codspiece

These were found as part of trousers in medieval and Renaissance Europe. A codspiece is the space in trousers for the male genitalia to fit. They are sometimes made with enough space for the man to have an erection without suffering from extreme discomfort.

Swab

This is a cleaning device. These are used both seriously and comically. There are running jokes in Rabelais' novels about swabs. In the most severe example a March cat is used as a swab, but the user ends up with lacerations from the feline's resistance. At times this also served as a threat: someone or someone's precious object might be turned into or used for a swab.

There are diverse uses for swabs; all towels, wash cloths, napkins, facial tissue, toilet tissue, mops, sponges....all of these are forms of the swab. The other most comical description of a swab in the book is the recommendation that a live goose be used as a toilet tissue because if the goose is held correctly, the user gets a clean rear end with some erotic bonus.



Themes

Humor

The role of laughter and humor is incredibly important throughout this book. The author refers to the role of laughter and comedy through changing cultural forms. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the folk culture, the culture of the lower classes, contains much vulgarity. Food, sex and politics are all fair game.

The comedy of the carnival is connected with other comic forms: the parody and the satire. Satire is taken so seriously, that the author describes an incident where there is conflict because someone who is not culturally sanctioned to wield enough power to put together and run a public satire dares to do so anyway.

The author does not explain who organizes carnival, but only informs readers that this is a folk tradition in which comedy and laughter are strongly encouraged and has many forms. The entire ethos is extroverted and life-affirming. There is an irony in that the author explains that carnival allows social classes to mingle more freely with one another and yet he repeatedly asserts that carnival is a social practice that is for the folk rather than for the official leadership. Readers may have heard of or seen the "comic roast" which is a ritual that continues. Carnival is like this in that the Fool or the one crowned King of the carnival is allowed to speak as the folk's representative. Some of what comes across as gibberish, may really be drunkenness or the use of a common speech that the higher classes have trouble understanding. Much of it, however, is also about how public policies and the realities of their circumstances affect the folk in ways that the leadership does not understand very well because of how different their position in society is. This actually runs both ways, and the use of humor can release at least some of the tension such differences really create, especially when the class distinctions cause the conflicts through specific, intentional or unavoidable social practices.

Carnival

Carnival is an incredibly important European tradition which lasts for centuries. Carnival is more than simply an event, although it is also correct to describe Carnival as "a party that went on for days." Festivity and a general loosening up of many societal norms are included as part of the normal carnival atmosphere. There are certain regulations about how members of different social classes are permitted or expected to behave in relationship to one another. These norms are often suspended during Carnival. The present day Mardi Gras, and some festivals throughout the world most closely resemble what actually occurred at Carnival. For those who have experienced them: the Renaissance Faire is a North American phenomenon that at least attempts to capture, express and convey at least some of the true spirit of the Carnival as it really was during Medieval and Renaissance times in Europe.



Carnival is rooted in a variety of things. One of these is the pagan seasonal celebrations—these emerge in what seems to be a natural way. At certain times of year, there is more to eat and this is good cause for celebration. Another factor is class differences. Another is the tension between official regulations—the laws, the religion, the rules of conduct—and the realities of situations. Some of these realities are diverse in themselves: class differences often involve partial realities. One class can be said to be living in an alternate reality from another. Although interconnected, there are sets of common misunderstandings about what happened and why. The lack of understanding in some ways is a source of some strife but also a fantastic resource for one of carnival's most important other features: humor.

Grotesque comedy, parody and satire are all given special space at carnival. These include an acceptance of how death is a part of life, whereas parody and satire give an opportunity for social criticisms but also good humored looks at the circumstances from more of a lower class perspective. These include temporary rulerships—King or Fool of the Carnival. A vestige of this can be found in cases where a school Prom has a King and Queen who are elected by their peers. These tend to be "sanctioned"; legally permitted for the duration of a carnival. Humor is often bawdy, and the life of the flesh is vital to carnival. Food and sex are both repeatedly mentioned by the author as signs of carnival festivities. The Harlequin, the Fool, is integral to a proper understanding of Carnival. A great cultural transformation occurs when carnival fades, and yet another occurs when literature seeks to reformulate comedy and the place of carnival comedy within books.

Reformulating Culture after Revolution

The author begins his work after the Revolution in Russia and the surrounding nations succeeded. As such, he lives and writes during a very special time in history. During the introduction it is revealed that Mikhail Bakhtin discovers that he feels a greater sense of unity whenever he refers to the writings of others who have lived during revolutionary periods in history. There are a number of specific cultural elements that emerge under such conditions. Often enough, old ways fall into disarray. This occurs regardless of whether one likes or dislikes these old structures.

In addition, there is a vast sense of emptiness with respect to cultural forms. There is the pressing need for the establishment of a new order. This means that there is a need for leadership and organization. This type of openness means both that there is great need and amazing opportunity in ways that there has not been in the past, during the previously stable situation. Part of the author's work is to provide some small part of the new structure in a post-revolutionary cultural scenario. The Russian Revolution has been successful, but now the people and the new Soviet Union need new cultural forms—they needed to create a new stability.

Rabelais and His World is one effort, by Mikhail Bakhtin, to bring into awareness the power of the carnival and of the folk. There is some sense in which the Revolution in Russia is a victory of the folk over the former order—or, at least, this is how the



Bolshevik Revolution has been presented to the international community. As such, there is a new question: have the folk triumphed, or will the successful creation of a new establishment simply recreate some of the tensions that are found in the tradition of the carnival. The author certainly wonders this, just as he wonders if he book will be accepted by the new order.

Presently, the author's work has grown in popularity. It has been doing better, the more distance there is from the World Wars which wracked Europe and North America during the first half of the 20th century. The Soviet Union dissolved after about 80 years, but Russia, like always it seems, remains a powerful nation and an enigma. The giant Eurasian nation is somehow a part of the cultures of the more western Northern hemisphere, and yet, because of its own power and the Cyrillic language, Russia has remained very much apart from the adventures of the Europeans of the West.

Style

Perspective

The author writes this book from the perspective of a man who lived 1895-1975, born at the tail end of the 19th century yet living the majority of his life in the 20th century. While this changeover is primarily psychological on the mass scale, it remains an essential factor. The man wrote this book having lived through a major political and cultural revolution within his home nation. Just to add to it, the energies that drove the Revolution were also involved with the factors that caused the first World War.

The author writes the book as a proud Russian. This being the case, when he writes about Rabelais, he is writing from the margins. The Russians are Europeans to a large extent, but are also set apart from the rest of Europe. This is partly due its gigantic size, the Eurasian flavor of it, and its operational reality as the Eastern "pole" of Europe.

The author also writes as a literary historian—an expert, and a theorist, relatively speaking. He does not claim to be the most informed, nor best educated person in this subject matter. At the same time, it is clear that he feels up to the task of providing a historical critique and assessment of the carnivals of Europe. He is clearly making efforts to engage in the cultural and literary traditions of Europe from a perspective that intentionally includes the Western European nations. It may even be for this reason that his work has only grown more popular as Russia has had more interaction with the West since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Tone

The tone of the book is very much that of the educated, professional critics. The work comes across as being directed towards highly educated individuals. The book is classified as literary criticism.

The tone of the work is informative and educational. It appears to be well suited for use at an institution of higher education. The writing is clear enough, however, to serve a more general readership. However, people with more specialized academic training might be able to get more out of the book than the general reader will be able to.

The tone is also hopeful. The work is endeavoring to contribute to the new world order of the 20th century. Mikhail wrote the book during the 1930s but was not able to get it published until the 1960s which is a long time for a manuscript to wait. The author devised this book to serve into post-revolutionary Russia. Amongst other things, the way he has written the book shows that he envisions Russia as a part of Europe, and indicates how themes seen in many of the other countries can also be found in Russia.

Structure

The book is neatly organized. There are 3 introductory pieces, then seven chapters. These are followed by an index. Krystyna Pomorshka writes a Forward for English speaking readers. Particularly in North America, there are some cultural presumptions that do not make sense and the translator kindly explains these.

After Krystyna's Forward, professor Michael Holquist gives further explanation. The situation of Russia during the author's life is complicated and rather exciting. The old gives way to the new, but what the newly forming nation's politics and culture will be like is not entirely clear. Holquist asserts that Bakhtain intends to remind Russians of their roots, and of the roots of the Russian Revolution. These roots are the folk; the descendants of the folk of the carnival. As such, the author's celebration of carnival in literature and cultural history is a reclamation. The book, Michael Holquist explains, is about freedom, as Bakhtain understood the Bolshevik Revolution to be about freedom.

The Introduction takes this a step further.

The book proceeds during the chapters in a primarily chronological manner.



Quotes

"It could acquire this character only because the buds and shoots of new potentialities had been prepared in the Medieval Period," (p. 73).

"Fear, religious awe, humility, these were the overtones of this seriousness," (p. 73).

"In one instance Gargantua used a March cat as a swab and suffered lacerations," (p. 113).

"Let us call these components conditionally and metaphorically the marketplace and billingsgate elements of the novel," (p. 145).

"The last line of the excerpt is no less typical," (p.163).

"The scene of the beaten slanderers grows in impetus: the handkerchief over the black eye, the broken drum," (p. 204).

"Here is another double entendre constructed on the same pattern," (p. 224).

"The midwife who rushes to the rescue uses too strong an astringent," (p. 225).

"This explains the forceful quality and the fascination of this genre in Flemish painting," (p. 302).

"We may ask: whence comes this drunkenness, if something negative and inappropriate is exaggerated?" (p. 307).

"The fifteenth century was an age of considerable freedom in France," (p. 320).

"The body of the new bodily canon is merely one body; no signs of duality have been left," (p. 321).

"Each abusive expression always contains in some topographical and bodily aspect the image of pregnant death," (p. 352).

"In every society there are social groups whose special task is to provide an interpretation of the world for that society. We call these the 'intelligentsia'," (p. xiii).



Topics for Discussion

Why is carnival so important?

Why was Mikhail Bakhtin sent to prison?

If you would not normally socially interact with someone who has been to prison, would you make an exception if the real cause was that his theories about literature were powerful but subversive in post-revolution Russia?

Who is the Harlequin and why does this character matter?

Interpret the phrase, "Parisian women are cheap" in relation to your own contemporary view of your society and sexual behavior amongst your peers in general.

What is a "codpiece"? When were these items normal parts of trousers?

What is a swab and why is it important?

How does the portrayal of the Devil change during this book?

Do you think there is anything like Carnival today, in your culture?