




Contemporary period in American literature

- begins at the end of World War II
- the Modernist period (taking place between the 1920s and 40s) explored the ways that truth is not straight forward, rational or clearly defined, but rather how it is completely influenced by human perception
- the human mind as a means to get at reality
- **Hemingway, Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot,**
- Modernists believed that the characters' thoughts mattered more than the plot, and the way things are said - in terms of the rhythm and imagery - may communicate more about the character than what they are doing.



marker for Modern literature

- Passages may not proceed in an ordered way, but may be more choppy or fragmented
- The shift from working to objectively portray events and experiences in the world to the often nonsensical exploration of human psychology
- a shift in how we see the world - truth is merely a product of human perception - a clear, objective standard for truth isn't quite so clear-cut, and reality is, to some extent, what we make of it.

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- Throughout the end of modernism, people were dealing with the horror of WWII.
 - The bombs dropped on citizens in Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki left the world traumatized, wondering if there was any point to human existence
 - the Contemporary writers following the war struggled to reconcile the irrational and violent actions taken by humans



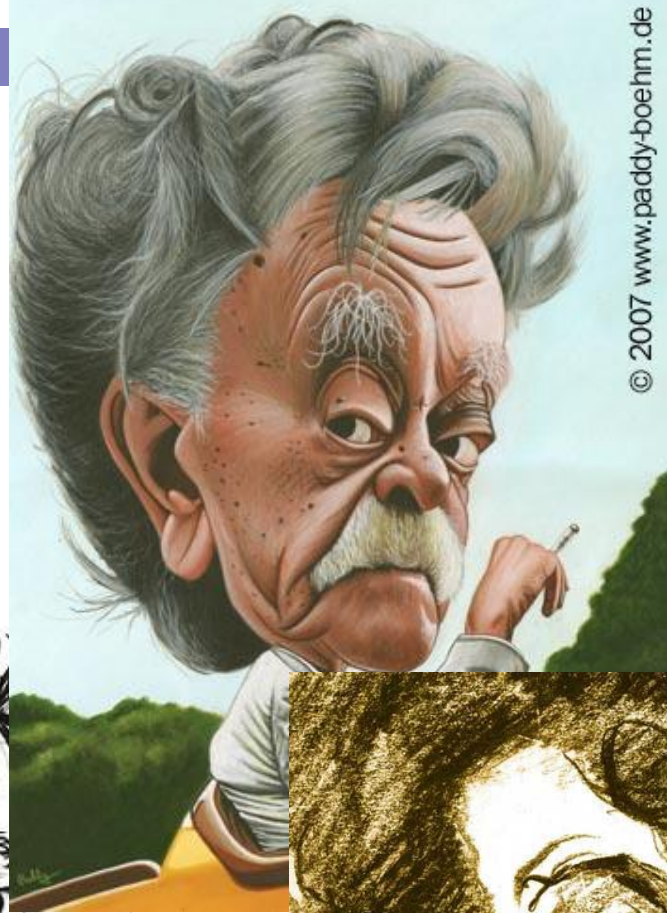
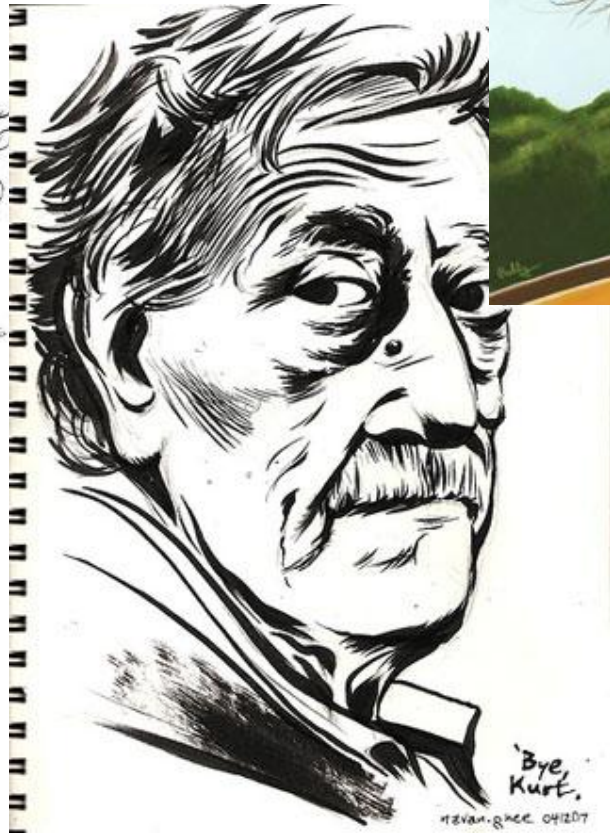
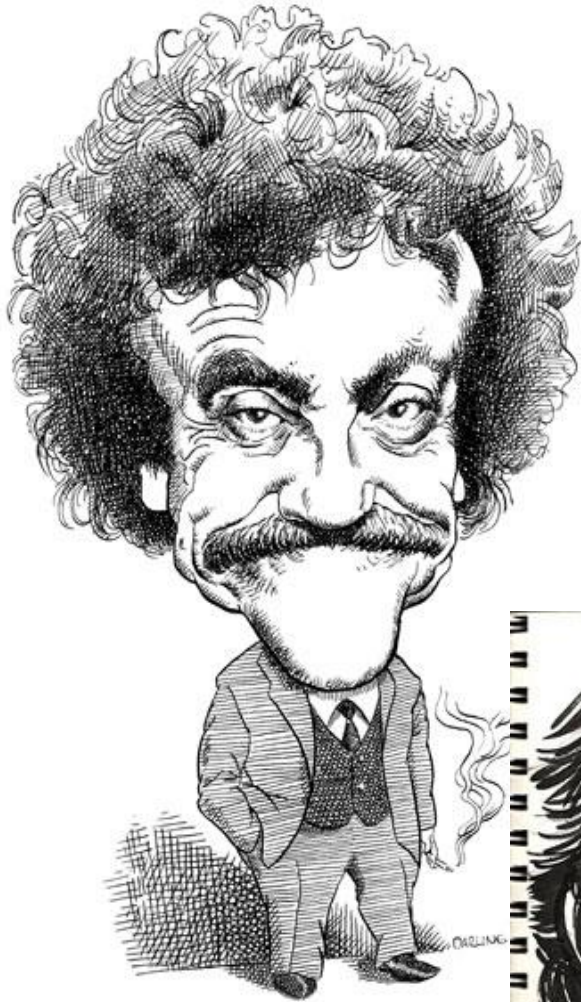
Kurt Vonnegut Jr.
born 1922

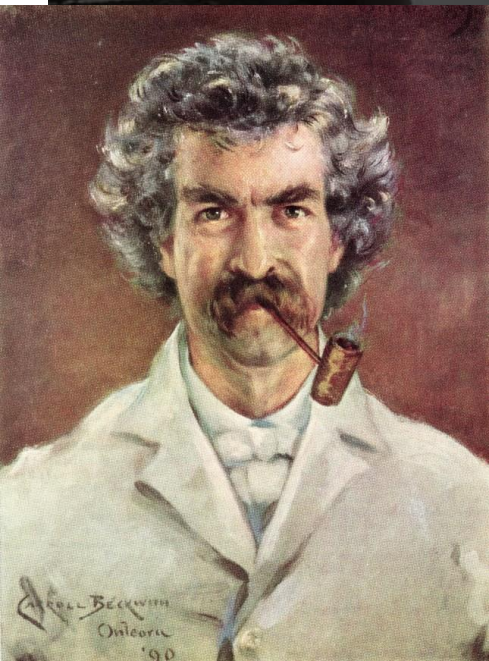


Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

“I tell you, we are here on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you different”

--K.V.







DEAR FUTURE
GENERATIONS:
PLEASE ACCEPT
OUR APOLOGIES.


●

WE WERE
ROARING DRUNK
ON PETROLEUM.

LOVE, 2006 A.D.


W.A.T.





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- most associated with the 1960s, popular with Bohemians and hippies
 - crazy experimental fiction - Satire, black comedy
 - American novelist best known for his works of science fiction
 - When his stories examine the moral implications of technology, they are called science fiction.
 - When they make comedy out of the horrors and absurdities of the human condition, they are called black humor.
 - Short story writer (Adam - Mr. Knechtmann, holocaust survivor)

The Early Years

- Born - November 11, 1922, Indianapolis, Indiana
- Grandfather- first licensed architect in Indiana
- Father- wealthy architect
- Family's wealth diminished when the Great Depression hit and Kurt Sr. couldn't find work
 - Parents had trouble accepting the fact that they were no longer wealthy
 - Mother committed suicide on May 14, 1944 (Mother's Day) (he was away at war)
 - Father retreated into his own little world until his death in 1957

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- owes his scientific bent to his father, a true believer in technology who insisted that his sons study “something useful.”
 - went to Cornell University
 - served as assistant managing editor and associate editor for the student newspaper, the Cornell Daily Sun, and majored in chemistry
 - the war
 - during his third year Vonnegut decided to quit college and join the army.

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- an infantry combat scout in World War II,
 - was captured by German soldiers during the Battle of the Bulge in 1944. Held as a prisoner of war in Dresden, Germany
 - survived the 1945 Allied bombing of Dresden (classified top-secret for years) because the American prisoners took shelter in a meat locker three stories below the ground. (Slaughterhouse-Five).

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- The Sirens of Titan (1959),
 - Mother Night (1961),
 - Cat's Cradle (1963),
 - God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (1965),
 - Breakfast of Champions (1973)

Writing Style

- Long sentences
- Little punctuation
 - “Do not use semicolons. They stand for absolutely nothing.”
- Humanist point of view
- As described by Kurt Vonnegut himself, “being a Humanist means trying to behave decently without expectation of rewards or punishment after you are dead”
- Nonlinear Chronology - events are out of order

Writing Style

- Satire - the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues
 - “Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion. I myself prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning up to do afterward.”
- “It is a very mixed blessing to be brought back from the dead.”



Writing Style

- Repetition
- Allusions (religious, literary, classical)
- Use of an alter-ego
- “Combination of simplicity, irony, and rue”
- Blended literature with science fiction and humor, the absurd with pointed social commentary



Slaughterhouse-Five, or the Children's Crusade

- came out in 1969, 25 years after the Dresden firebombing
- the anti-war movement really started to intensify in the U.S.
- Billy Pilgrim



Cremation on Altmarkt, 1945





Response To Conformity


- confront absolute and unquestioned patriotism - americans were the good guys, and they could do no wrong
- socially oppressive: super traditional American values - included support for things like free market capitalism, traditional courtship (no sex without marriage), sobriety (no drugs or alcohol), a woman's place in the world was at home
- counter culture, **the underground**, spoke out against the mass conformity (**Arthur Miller** and J.D. Salinger's ***Catcher in the Rye***).
- Harlan Ellison I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

the contemporary period

- a marked shift from stories that showed realistic events and situations to portraying the inner experiences and sometimes irrational psychology of human beings.
- two main qualities that mark this shift:
 - *the quest for identity*
 - *Expressionism*

a quest for identity

- searching for who they are and struggling to find their place in the modern world
- Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, (racial prejudice).
- Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (Willy Loman, in a never-ending quest to buy more).
- the most classic example of a hero on a quest to find himself is Holden Caulfield from J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*

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- rebellious social outcast
 - *At the end of the first act we went out with all the other jerks for a cigarette. What a deal that was. You never saw so many phonies in all your life, everybody smoking their ears off and talking about the play so that everybody could hear and know how sharp they were.*
 - he talks openly about his internal struggle to find his place in what he sees as a world of jerks

Expressionism

- Making personal psychological experience visible to the reader is another major element of contemporary literature, a trend known in literary circles as **Expressionism**.
- to bring internal feelings and experiences to the surface,
- a character's inner life is just as important, if not more important, than the external events taking place.
- Expressionism is the attempt to show the character's inner struggles

Expressionism

- *When I really worry about something, I don't just fool around. I even have to go to the bathroom when I worry about something. Only, I don't go. I'm too worried to go. I don't want to interrupt my worrying to go.*

Holden Caulfield


Expressionism

- expression of emotional experience can take place not only in what is said but also in the rhythm
- E.g. rhythm and tone in *The Death of a Salesman* - Willy Loman's experience: *Sh! He turns around as if to find his way; sounds, faces, voices, seem to be swarming in upon him and he flicks at them, crying, Sh! Sh!*



Sandra Cisneros

- Cisneros was born in Chicago, Illinois, to a Mexican American mother and a Mexican father.
- the only girl in a family of seven children, she often felt like she had “seven fathers”
- worked on the school literary magazine
- father encouraged her to go to college ... to find a husband
- enrolled in the prestigious graduate writing program at the University of Iowa - felt isolated
- *“It was not until this moment when I separated myself, when I considered myself truly distinct, that my writing acquired a voice. I knew I was a Mexican woman, but I didn’t think it had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it! My race, my gender, my class! That’s when I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn’t write about.”*

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- First prose work, *The House on Mango Street*, (twenty-nine) - awarded the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1985
 - books of poetry, a children's book, and a short-story collection
 - “To me, the definition of a story is something that someone wants to listen to. If someone doesn't want to listen to you, then it's not a story.”
—Cisneros




contemporary literature:

Juxtaposition

- a definite shift from accurately portraying events in the physical world to accurately portraying the inner reality of humans
- In order to show the complexity of human experience, writers will blend and mix up events out of order, juxtaposing images from different times or spaces together, in order to create a sense or feeling.

Juxtaposition

- **juxtaposition** means placing images that normally aren't seen together,
- the clash between these images highlights their differences.
- **Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*** (Willy Loman having a regular conversation with his wife Linda about his day at work, and then ... the sound of a woman laughing and talking to Willy)

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- Writers of this period experiment with forms and topics, many insisting that no fixed standard exists for contemporary literature. This trend—questioning an ordered view of the world—becomes known as Postmodernism.
 - topics such as personal change, generational change, and cultural identity
 - Anne Sexton, John Updike, Simon J. Ortiz, Julia Alvarez, Maxine Hong Kingston