

Postmodernism



Postmodernism

- ❖ Literally, after modernism
- ❖ Term first used in architecture



Modern Architecture

- ❖ Removed traditional forms of building and decoration from architecture
- ❖ Used cubiform buildings with flat roofs to replace pillars and gables.
- ❖ Rejected history



Postmodern Architecture

- ❖ Disliked standardized approach of modern architecture
- ❖ Saw modern architecture as boring
- ❖ Took a renewed interest in historical form



Features of Postmodern Architecture



- ❖ Deliberate placement of incompatible geometries

Features of Postmodern Architecture



- ❖ Outgoing and colorful character

Features of Postmodern Architecture



- ❖ References to older styles of architecture

Porch of the Erechthium, Athens



Features of Postmodern Architecture



- ❖ Traditional and modern construction styles and techniques juxtaposed for effect

Georges Pompidou Centre, Paris



Pompidou Centre (2)



Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota



Disney Hall, Los Angeles



Urban Cactus Building, Rotterdam



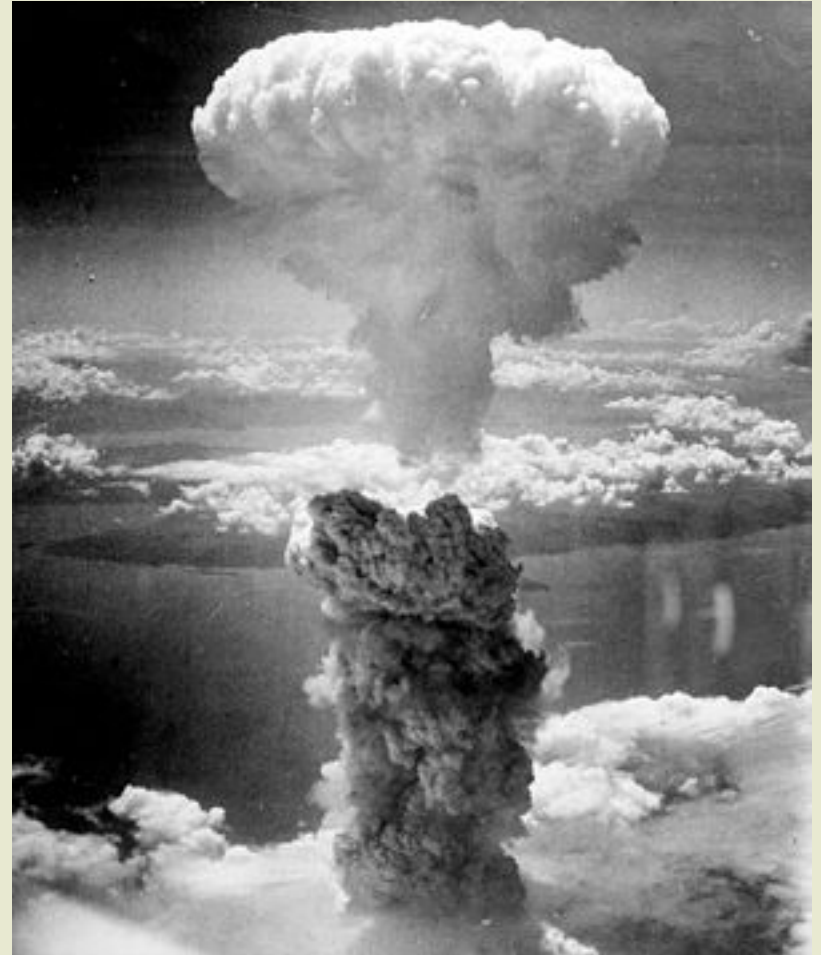
The Sage Gateshead, England



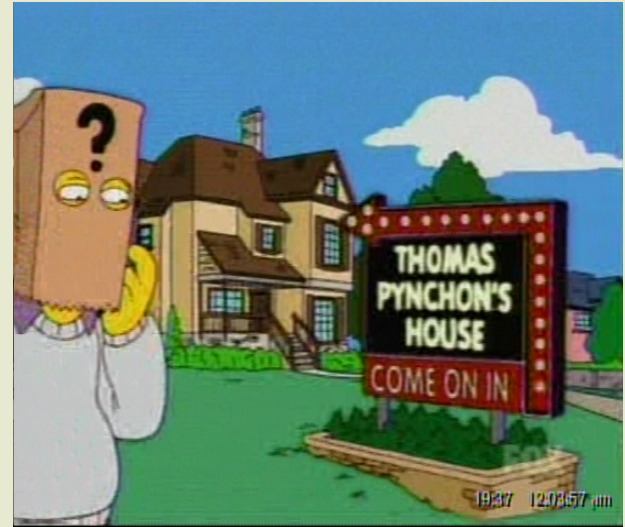
Literary Postmodernism

Postmodern literature responds to and engages with postmodern culture:

- ❖ Digital or information age
- ❖ Rejection of a homogenous American culture; valuing of diversity and multiculturalism
- ❖ Recognition of dangers of nuclear/environmental devastation
- ❖ Multi-national or consumer capitalism

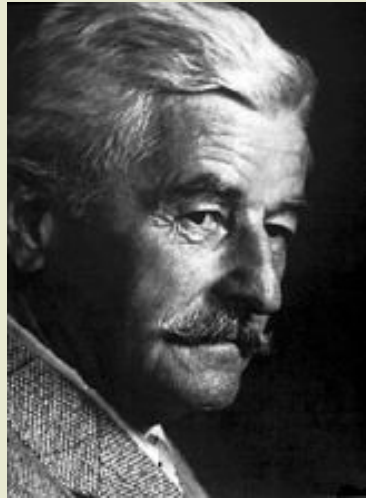


Literary Postmodernism



- ❖ Again, “After Modernism”
- ❖ In literature, Modernism a between-the-wars movement (approximately 1910-1945)

Modernism



- ❖ Writers such as Woolf, Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Hemingway, Faulkner
- ❖ Experimental style (Ezra Pound: “Make it new”)
- ❖ Stream-of-consciousness
- ❖ Focus on interior rather than exterior reality
- ❖ Emphasis on point-of-view

Differences From Modernism

- ❖ In Modernism, “Things fall apart,” “The center cannot hold” (Yeats)
- ❖ Usually cause for lament (think of Hemingway—impotence; longing for religion)

**Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned...
~W.B. Yeats**

Differences: Modernism/Postmodernism



- ❖ Centers not holding, things falling apart, not necessarily a cause for lament in postmodernism
- ❖ Old ideas about Truth, Tradition lies anyway
- ❖ Good to be free of them

Differences:

Modernism/Postmodernism



- ❖ Modernists retreat to individual consciousness to find truth (thus emphasis on stream-of-consciousness style, point-of-view)
- ❖ Retained a belief in the authentic, individual self. Hemingway said one of the biggest challenges for a young writer was “knowing truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel.”

Differences: Modernism/Postmodernism



❖ In Postmodernism, individuality itself is often undermined.

- We're all social constructs; we are the roles we play? ("We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.")
- We're prisoners of forces larger than ourselves?
- Or maybe we're simply made up of neuro-chemical impulses? (As the patrolman in *Mother Night* suggests?)

Characters in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*



“There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters” (164).

Differences: Modernism/Postmodernism

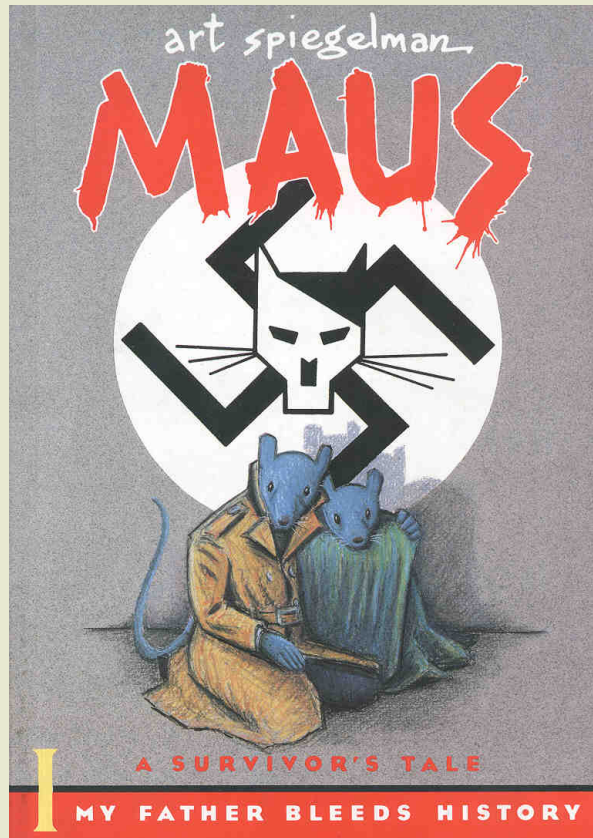


- ❖ In Modernism, art often replaces religion
 - American poet Wallace Stevens: ““In an age of disbelief...it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief in his measure and style.”
- ❖ Not possible in Postmodern view which tends to be very irreverent
- ❖ Postmodernism often debunks notion of “high art”

Characteristics of Postmodernism

Decanonization

- What's considered “literature” or “art” open (the “canon” exploded)
- Blurs the line between “high art” and “low art”



High Art vs. Low Art in Vonnegut



- Limericks in opening chapter of *Sl-5*
- Simple, child-like prose
- Irreverence: “The gun made a ripping sound like opening the zipper on the fly of God Almighty” (*Sl-5* 34).
- Drawings
- Science fiction elements

Characteristics of Postmodernism

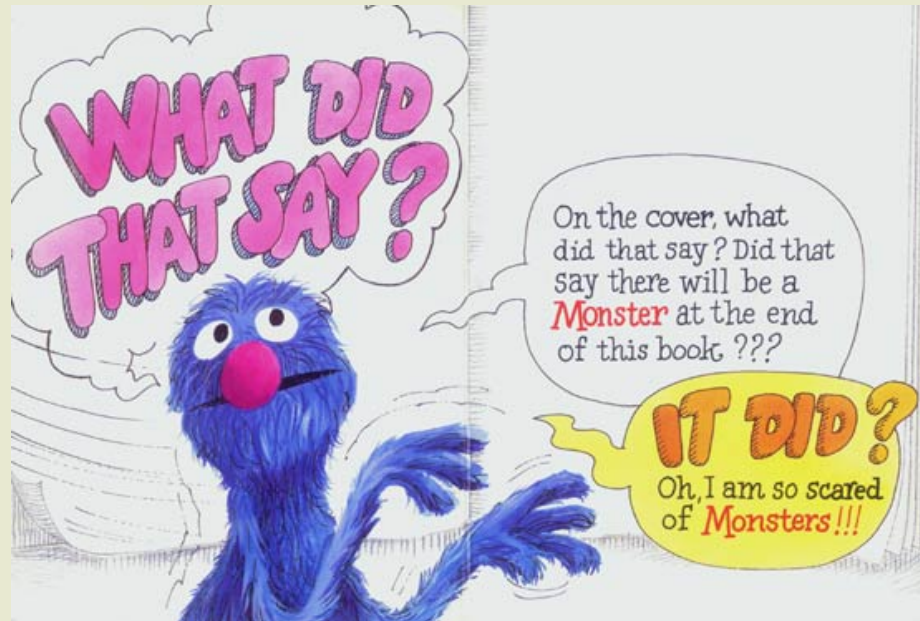
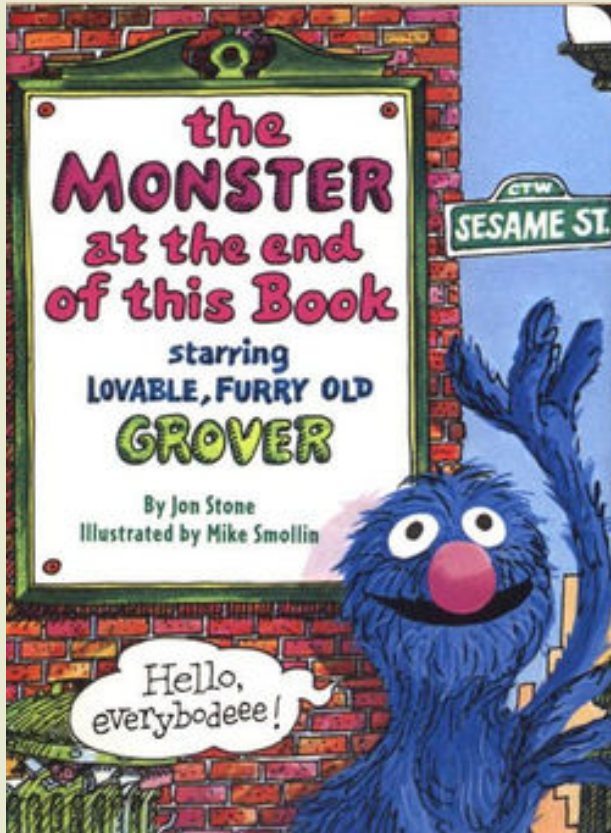


Who broke the vase?

Reality as Linguistically Constructed

- ❖ Idea that we can't get at reality without language
- ❖ Postmodernist idea that language doesn't merely describe reality, but SHAPES reality
- ❖ New cognitive research that suggests language profoundly shapes the way people think and perceive the world

Characteristics of Postmodernism



Metafiction

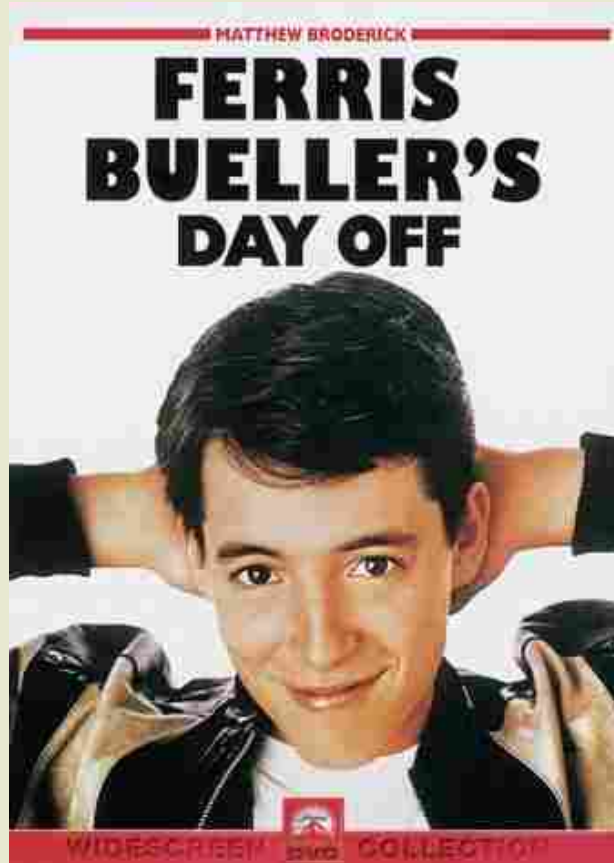
- Because reality itself often seen as linguistically determined, language becomes extremely important
- Thus, often books *about* books, about language, about how language shapes and interacts with reality

Metafiction

“Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.”

--From Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*

Characteristics of Postmodernism



Self-Reflexivity

- ❖ Literature, then, often calls attention to its own artificiality, its own status as fiction
- ❖ Often breaks the “fourth wall”

Metafiction in *Slaughterhouse-Five*



- Self-reflexive opening and closing chapters in which Vonnegut discusses his own attempts to write the book.
- Appears occasionally in the novel. “That was me.”
- Doesn’t let us forget we’re reading a novel.
- Pp. 108-109: “The Gospel from Outer Space”--what “slipshod storytelling can do.”

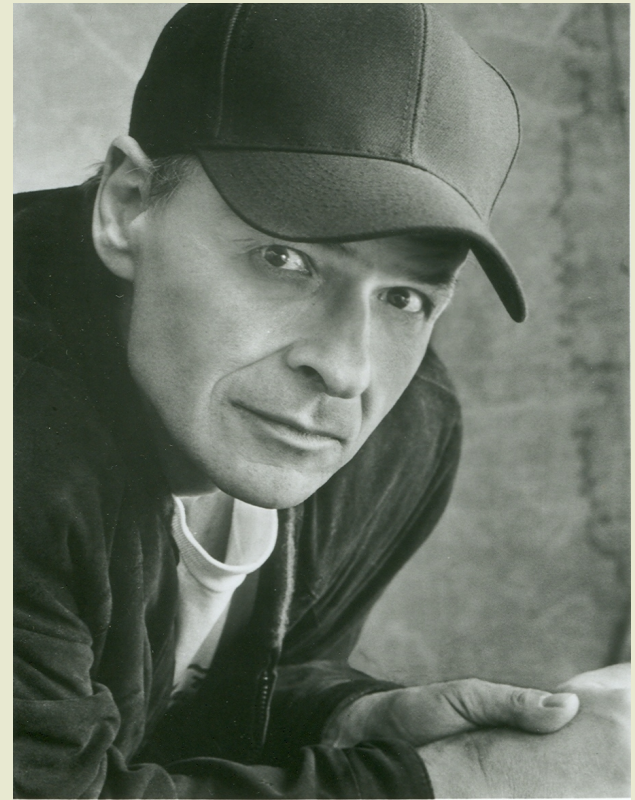
Georges Pompidou Centre, Paris



Characteristics of Postmodernism

Indeterminacy.

- No TRUTH, only truths
- Suspicion of history as TRUTH--history becomes “story”



photograph by Marion Ettlinger

Tim O'Brien, from *The Things They Carried*:

“Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth”
(from “How to Tell a True War Story”)

“Story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (from “Good Form”)

Characteristics of Postmodernism

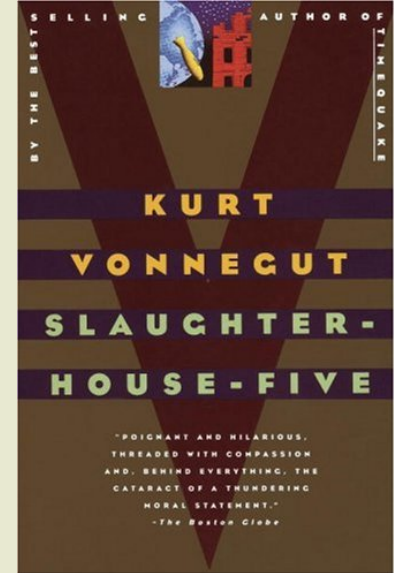
Fragmentation

- ❖ Synthesis impossible
- ❖ Suspicious of “grand narratives”—totalizing narratives that try to create an orderly understanding of human history or culture
 - Marxism
 - Enlightenment idea of progress



Tralfamadorian Novels

In Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*



“Billy couldn’t read Tralfamadorian, of course, but he could at least see how the books were laid out - in brief clumps of symbols separated by stars. Billy commented that the clumps might be telegrams.

“Exactly,” said the voice.

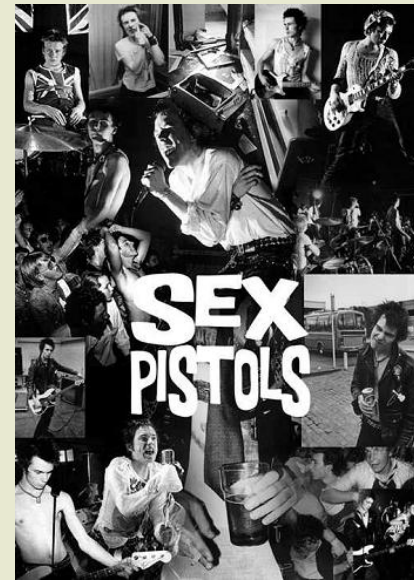
“They *are* telegrams?”

“There are no telegrams on Tralfamadore. But you’re right: each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message - describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn’t any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time” (88).

Characteristics of Postmodernism

Collage Style /Pastiche

- ❖ Rather than linear narratives with a beginning, middle and end, often juxtaposition of images
- ❖ Readers supply narrative thread
- ❖ Like music videos
- ❖ Pastiche is the technique of combining various forms and styles in a single artwork



Elements of Collage in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

- Jumble of texts in opening chapter including postcard from Gerhard Müller, limericks, Yon Yonson song, quotes from books such as *Extraordinary Popular Delusions*, book about Dresden, Roethke poem, passages from Celine and the Gideon Bible
- Similar to the numerous texts in *Cat's Cradle* (The Books of Bokonon, *The Day the World Ended*, Phillip Castle's history of San Lorenzo, etc.)
- Non-linear plot: "Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time."

Characteristics of Postmodernism



Self-less-ness, Depth-less-ness

- ❖ Flatness of characters (again, Postmodernists skeptical about individuality)
- ❖ Cartoon-like characters in Vonnegut?

Characteristics of Postmodernism



Self-less-ness, Depth-less-ness

- Focus on surfaces, images over reality
- Bobbie Ann Mason: “I think the surface *is* the reality. . . . My characters live in a world in which television and popular music are an intimate part of their lives, and I take that seriously.”
- Often, lots of pop culture references

Characteristics of Postmodernism

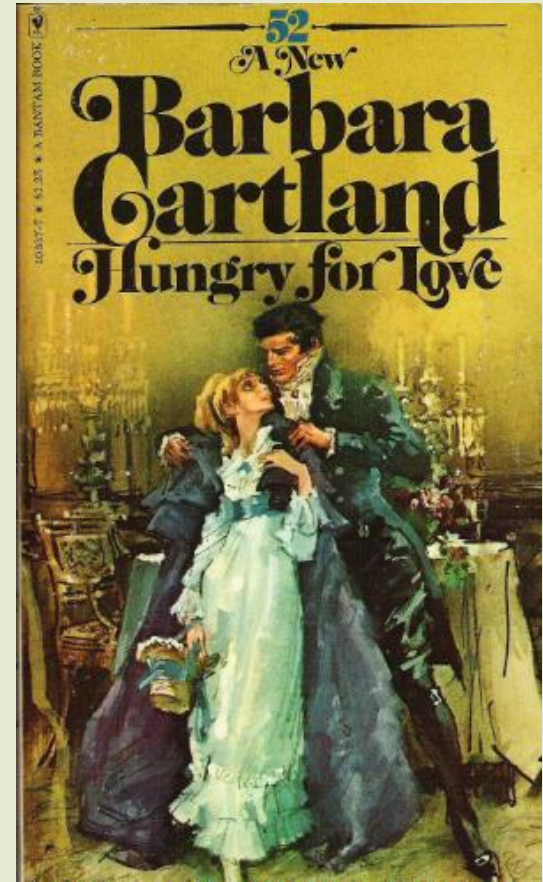


Irony

- ❖ The dominant mode is the ironic

Umberto Eco and the Ironic

“The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed... must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, “I love you madly,” because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, ‘As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.’ At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this she will have received a declaration of love all the same.”



Irony and Revisiting the Past in Vonnegut



- Terrible irony that we can't learn from the past, we turn into “pillars of salt” when we look back
- Yet, as humans, we *must* revisit the past and make the attempt to learn? (Like Lot's wife, like humans in Bokkononist vision, like Campbell looking back over his life in *Mother Night*?)
- Still, Vonnegut's “famous Dresden novel” gets its message across nonetheless?

Characteristics of Postmodernism



Apocalyptic

- Second half of 20th C:
Millennium drawing to a close
- Humans, with invention of atomic weapons, for first time have capacity to completely destroy ourselves
- Holocaust in *Mother Night*
- Ice-nine disaster and invention of atom bomb in *Cat's Cradle*
- Moon-like landscape after the bombing of Dresden in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Characteristics of Postmodernism



- Yet, also sense of Carnivalization
- Celebration of disorder, laughter before period of atonement (Carnival as a prelude to Lent).
- Wild time--chaos, disorder, but promises eventual renewal (Carnival--Lent--Easter)
- In Vonnegut, the spirit of carnival comes out in black humor, laughter? Possibility of renewal at end of *S/5*?

Summary

Characteristics of Postmodern Literature

- ❖ Decanonization; blurs line between high and low art
- ❖ Emphasis on language; reality as linguistically constructed
- ❖ Metafictional; self-reflexive
- ❖ Indeterminacy
- ❖ Fragmentation
- ❖ Collage Style/Pastiche
- ❖ Surface/images over reality; simulacra
- ❖ Irony
- ❖ Apocalypse/Carnival