

## Lecture 15: Intro to Literature & the Environment, *Rachel Carson*

“The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe around us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.”

### Background on Rachel Carson 1907-1964

Carson was a journalist, not a scientist:

Although Carson received an MA in zoology from Johns Hopkins in 1932, she worked as a writer for the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries producing pamphlets and articles aimed at the general public. In 1952, after writing three award winning books on the ocean, she gave up her job with the Bureau.

Carson’s lack of a PhD and the fact that she was a woman haunted her career: In an effort to discredit "Silent Spring", which became an enormously popular and influential book nearly overnight, the chemical industry personally attacked Carson by repeatedly questioning her scientific credentials, her use of facts, her credibility as a woman, and even her sexuality.

This personal campaign against Carson has continued into the 21st century: In 2002, chemical industry spokesman Robert White-Stevens argued that, “If man were to follow the teachings of Miss Carson, we would return to the Dark Ages, and the insects and diseases and vermin would once again inherit the earth.” (Carson, incidentally, died of cancer in 1964.)

### “Silent Spring”

"Silent Spring" (1962) helped spawn the modern environmental movement: As we know from our readings, human beings have been preoccupied with environmental issues for thousands of years; however, in the second half of the 20th century this became a widespread movement, especially in Santa Barbara after one of the worst oil spills in U.S. history in 1969.

In some sense, "Silent Spring" represents a profound paradigm shift: While poets had (as we have seen) been somewhat skeptical of science for centuries, prior to Silent Spring the public generally embraced scientific “breakthroughs,” especially in the new chemistry. Carson, however, showed the dark, indeed disastrous, underside of such blind acceptance.

Consequently, Carson influenced a range of other environmental movements: The grass-root protesting of the nuclear power industry in the 1970s, for example, owes much to the skepticism that Carson fostered. Similarly, Carson influenced the

radical reevaluation of chemical additives to food products in the 1960s and '70s--and even today.

### Carson as a Communicator

Carson's great strength was her ability to communicate difficult ideas well: Because of her decades of experience writing for the public, Carson was well positioned to explain, in simple and understandable terms, the complex scientific and cultural problems in the U.S. behind the use of pesticides. Carson disseminated the work of others; she did not do scientific research.

Consequently, Carson is similar to successful contemporary eco-journalists: A 21st-century parallel to Carson would be eco-journalist Michael Pollan, whose background is in publishing, not science. Nonetheless, Pollan is extremely effective at communicating difficult environmental ideas. Al Gore is another example of a highly effective activist/communicator.

Carson at once romanticizes the environment and sees it as an object of study: Unlike the Romantics, Carson does not just romanticize the environment (something she unabashedly does at times), but rather sees it like a cool, detached scientist would: as an object of inquiry. Later in his life Thoreau interestingly began moving in this direction in his personal journals.

In an effort to bolster her credibility (which sometimes backfired), Carson cultivated an image as scientist and naturalist.

Following Carson, many writers have made similar appeals to heart and head: Gore, Pollan, and many other environmentalists have followed Carson's formula in both Romantically tugging at our heartstrings to get us to care, and carefully laying out scientific arguments that make the situation understandable. Carson's detractors attacked this rhetorical approach.

Although her approach is at times scientific, Carson carefully avoids jargon: Carson's considerable experience in making difficult scientific concepts understandable, interesting, and jargon free was a key to making the above approach possible. Without its powerful, but accessible, scientific arguments and graphs, *An Inconvenient Truth* would not be effective.

Carson and Gore make clear the enormous power of rhetoric and language: As we have seen throughout this term, effective writing, such as Virgil's *Eclogue I*, Jonson's "To Penshurst," or Thoreau's *Walden*, can profoundly shape ideas, and even help bring about an environmental consciousness. Carson and Gore bring such effective rhetoric to a mass market.

"Silent Spring" is filled with examples of Carson's considerable rhetorical skill.

The best example may in fact be her title, "Silent Spring."

When wanting to really tug at the heartstrings, Carson wisely lets other speak for her, such as a "housewife" who wrote "It is hard to explain to the children that the birds have been killed off...Is there anything being done? Can anything be done? Can I do anything?" (SS 103, emphasis by Carson)

Carson also astutely and effectively rejects loaded terms. These chemicals "should not be called 'insecticides,' but 'biocides'" (SS 8), as they not only kill insects, but all forms of plant and animal life, including human beings.

Carson also cleverly underscores the dangers of insecticides by connecting them with chemical weapons: "In the course of developing agents of chemical warfare, some of the chemicals developed in the laboratory were found to be lethal to insects. The discovery did not come by chance: insects were widely used to test chemicals as agents of death for man" (SS 16).

"As the habit of killing grows--the resort to 'eradicating' any creature that may annoy or inconvenience us" grows with it (SS 126).

"Who has made the decision that sets into motion these chains of poisoning, this ever-widening wave of death that spreads out, like ripples when a pebble is dropped into a still pond?" (127).

"As man proceeds toward his announced goal of the conquest of nature, he has written a depressing record of destruction, directed not only against the earth he inhabits but against the life that shares it with him" (85).

"The fact that every meal that we eat carries its load of chlorinated hydrocarbons is the inevitable consequences is the almost universal spraying or dusting of agricultural crops with these poisons" (180).

"Our line of defense against invading poisons or poisons from within is now weakened and crumbling" (192).

Carson effectively employed inherited ideas, such as our notion of "natural.": Because we in the West, from at least as early as The Myth of Gilgamesh, have made a distinction between the "natural" and the "un-natural," and began privileging the "natural" as early as Theocritus, Carson was able to turn public opinion against chemicals by casting them as "unnatural."

Thus Carson inherited, then popularized, the “natural/unnatural” dyad: While other writers had propounded the distinction between the “natural / unnatural,” Carson was highly effective at doing so in the 20th century. In fact, Carson and others were so effective that we might get the impression that prior the 20th century everything was largely “natural.”

Silent Spring shifted environmental interest toward toxicity: While human beings have been interested in issues like deforestation and urban growth for thousands of years, Carson made the public aware of an entirely new type of environmental problem, the widespread use of toxic chemicals, which is for the most part a 20th-century phenomenon.

Carson cleverly kept her focus tightly on one particular problem: Like Al Gore, Rachel Carson does not overwhelm her audience with the frightening range of environmental problems threatening us; rather, each focuses on one particular problem, which they carefully explore in detail.

Consequently, neither Carson nor Gore write about pollution in general: For example, neither writer addresses industrial runoff into rivers and aquifers; or the release of chemicals, such as sulfur dioxide, into the atmosphere by burning fossil fuels (and its byproduct, acid rain); or solid-waste pollution in landfills; or the pollution of our oceans, and so forth.

Such a rhetorical approach necessarily ignores a range of important issues: Following Carson’s rhetorical strategy, which was highly effective in motivating public action against “biocides,” Al Gore is keeping a laser-like focus in one issue, global warming. However, this is done at a great cost: ignoring other environmental problems of profound importance.

### "Silent Spring" as Pastoral

Carson (and Gore) draws on the pastoral idea of the locus amoenus: Whether or not they themselves believed that human beings once lived in a perfect relationship with the earth, both Carson and Gore exploit the fact that we, their readers, do. Both argue that paradise, now lost, can be regained if we heed their warnings and act responsibly toward the planet.

There was once a town in the heart of rural America where all life seemed to live at harmony with its surroundings...even in winter the roadsides were places of beauty, where countless birds came to feed” (opening to SS).

“Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change...Everywhere was a shadow of death...On the mornings that had once

throbbled with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices, there was now no sound; only silence" (2).

Al Gore similarly opens *An Inconvenient Truth* with the image of a locus amoenus, a wilderness stream, unspoiled and uncorrupted by human beings.

Carson and Gore employ anti-pastoral far more frequently than pastoral: While Carson and Gore open with an appeal to our inherited belief in a pleasant pastoral past, both writers (like Edward Burtynsky) quickly set their focus on environmental devastation, which they hold without blinking.

Hence, Carson and Gore are radically different than Thoreau: If there is a danger with Thoreau's thinking, it is that we risk fetishizing and seeking out wilderness; in the process ignoring environmental devastation. Carson and Gore do not run away from such problems, they unflinchingly face them--and encourage us to do the same.

Carson and Gore are therefore of interest to a whole new wave of ecocritics: First-wave environmental critics metaphorically followed Thoreau and similar romantics "into the wild." Second-wave ecocritics, careful not to overly romanticize wilderness (as did many of their predecessors), are more likely to direct themselves to sites of environmental devastation and texts that do the same, such as Carson's *Silent Spring*.