

Lecture 16: Intro to Literature & the Environment, *Rachel Carson Conclusion*

"If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow."

"Silent Spring" (and "biocides")

Unlike Thoreau, Carson is not suggesting radical lifestyle changes: Because Carson was aware that radical suggestions, such as calling for a complete ban on all pesticide use, would likely not be well received, she wisely drew attention to its widespread indiscriminate use, such as DDT being sprayed on millions of inhabited acres to kill gypsy moths (158-59).

Consequently, Carson, unlike Thoreau, prompted direct and widespread action: While Carson might seem too conservative to environmentalists in the mold of Thoreau (something she was rarely accused of in her time), her strategy nonetheless effected radical change very quickly. More than any other person, Carson was responsible for the EPA being created in 1970.

Thus, Carson has shaped modern environmental discourse more than Thoreau: Carson has been so influential because both she unflinchingly looked at environmental devastation and proposed practical courses of action.

Carson's primary objection was to DDT's widespread use, and the notion that it was harmless to human beings.

"Silent Spring" and Ecology

Carson's particular approach to environmental devastation centers on ecology: "For each of us, as for the robin in Michigan, or the salmon in the Miramichi, this is a problem of ecology, of interrelationships, of interdependence. We poison the caddis flies in the stream and the salmon runs dwindle and die. . . We spray our elms and following springs are silent of robin song, not because we sprayed the robins directly but because the poison traveled, step by step, through the now familiar elm-leaf-earthworm-robin cycle. These are matters of record, observable, part of the visible world around us. They reflect the web of life--or death--that scientists know as ecology." (189)

In a powerful rhetorical move, Carson speaks about our own, personal, ecology: "There is also an ecology of the world within our bodies. In this unseen world minute causes produce mighty effects. . . To discover the agent of disease and death

depends on a patient piecing together of many seemingly distinct and unrelated facts.” (189)

Carson is in part responsible for popularizing the notion of “ecology”:
While thinkers like Haeckel had been dealing with the concept of ecology since 1866, Carson helped make the public aware of the idea, as well as to shift focus to how ecological systems (“ecosystems”) can be disrupted.

Carson made clear that seemingly minor changes can disrupt an ecosystem:
While poisoning a single variety of insect may seem of little consequence, it initiates a series of events that can cause problems for surprisingly long periods, as biocides and other chemicals accumulate over time in the bodies of animals. An example of this today is mercury in salmon and other fish.

The difficulty with understanding ecosystems is that they are so complex:
Writing at roughly the same time as Carson, Edward Lorenz, one of the originators of chaos theory, argued that large-scale environmental systems (his examples involved weather) are so complex and chaotic that they will never effectively be modeled or predicted. Thus, according to Lorenz, even a single butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil will alter weather in the U.S.

"Silent" (Reception)

Silent Spring was in part influential because it was exceptionally well promoted:
In addition to its regular publication, Silent Spring was serialized in its entirety in The New Yorker, serially excerpted in Audubon Magazine, and picked up by the enormously popular Book-of-the-Month Club.

The chemical industry attacked Silent Spring even before its publication:
Suspecting that Silent Spring would be a bombshell, the chemical company Velsicol threatened legal action against Silent Spring’s publisher, as well as The New Yorker and Audubon Magazine. These attacks continue today.

These chemical companies argued that their products did more good than harm:
Especially in the case of the developing world, where DDT was used to help suppress the spread of malaria, the chemical industry argued that the value of human lives far outweighed any environmental fallout.

“Silent Spring”

Debate over the arguments of Silent Spring fiercely continue today:

In a 2005 essay, "The Harm That Pressure Groups Can Do," British politician Dick Taverne essentially compared Carson to Adolph Hitler:

"Carson didn't seem to take into account the vital role it [DDT] played in controlling the transmission of malaria by killing the mosquitoes that carry the parasite...It is the single most effective agent ever developed for saving human life...Rachel Carson is a warning to us all of the dangers of neglecting the evidence-based approach and the need to weight potential risk against benefit: it can be argued that the anti-DDT campaign she inspired was responsible for almost as many deaths as some of the worst dictators of the last century."

Although Taverne was intentionally inflammatory, in 2007 Robert Gwadz, speaking for an agency of the U.S. Department of Health, noted that "The ban on DDT may have killed 20 million children." This raises the age-old debate, which appears as early as the Myth of Gilgamesh, of how human interests should be weighed against the planet's.

In some sense, *Silent Spring* is the work of a genius loci:

Silent Spring is in many ways the logical conclusion of the early modern suggestion (made by Jonson, Lanyer, and others) that human beings should protect the places that we inhabit from ourselves. Even more than Thoreau, Carson suggests that environmentalists are the new genius loci.

With *Silent Spring* our course has come full circle from the Myth of Gilgamesh: Those individuals, like Gilgamesh, who would endanger and recklessly exploit the environment are no longer the heroes of our texts, but rather are cast as monstrous. Moreover, we readers are ourselves now encouraged to become genius loci, fighting off the ambitious "habit of killing" (SS 126).

With Gore the place protected is now the planet itself, not just a specific locale: As environmental problems are no longer local, being spread globally by our oceans and atmosphere, a new type of protector is needed, one who acts locally in protecting place, which in turn has consequences that are global. Gore thus still echoes Lanyer, Thoreau, and other proto-environmentalists.

Environmentalists are now less likely to look to the past, but rather to the future: Like Carson and Gore, environmentalists may be aware of our belief in a past locus amoenus, but they are less concerned with an imagined lost paradise, than with halting the planet's degeneration at our hands--perhaps even bringing about significant regeneration, and with it a brighter future.

Finally, *Silent Spring* also addresses one of the opening questions of the course: Why approach environmental issues from a literary perspective? Non-scientific writers are often well positioned to disseminate environmental information to a

broad audience, as they may most clearly understand how the ideas that we have inherited historically emerged over time.