Literature's Impact on Environmental Policy: Rachel Carson's Silent Spring

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Abstract:

Traditionally, when scholars discuss the efforts to change environmental policy, their chief consideration is the work of natural scientists and social scientists researchers who measure the impact of pollution and other destructive forces on the environment. However, in this paper I propose that a more literary work, such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) has an equally important impact on changing policy. Carson wrote her cross-disciplinary book in response to the virtually unregulated yet widespread use of pesticides in the 1960s. *Silent Spring*, in its combination of research, case study and literary writing, went on to affect and initiate change in the regulation of chemical insect control and the banning of the synthetic pesticide DDT. Carson was writing against an orthodoxy which placed man as master and controller of nature, and through her book's policy-changing and research-inspiring results, Carson showed the excessive use of pesticides not only to be hazardous, but also immoral. Her book serves as a pioneering text of the modern environmental movement. Using *Silent Spring* as an exemplary case of a literary text with the power to influence environmental policy, I ultimately ask in this paper what it means to consider the environment from a cross-disciplinary approach—both in the academy and more importantly still, in the world at large.

Key Words: Insecticides, Human Environment, Hazards, Pesticides, DDT, Inhabitants.

When Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962, there was little public discourse on the hazards facing the environment. However, when excerpts from the book appeared in *The New Yorker* and when *CBS Reports* broadcast a 60-minute program on the author and her book, intense debate sparked from both the public and those companies profiting from the virtually unregulated manufacture and application of pesticides. President John F. Kennedy discussed *Silent Spring* at a press conference, noting that “Miss Carson's book” the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Public Health Service launched an investigation into the effects. *Silent Spring* is now widely credited within the scientific community and beyond for the ultimate banning of DDT and the stricter regulations placed on pesticides.

In *Silent Spring*, Carson purports to have wished not to “burden the text with footnotes” of her citations. The public awareness of pesticides' hazards arose largely from the easily digestible format of the book. In taking a discussion that was before held nearly exclusively in scientific circles and crafting it into

an argument founded in literature, Carson created an easily understood text that, through the author's prowess in storytelling—which contributes largely to the sympathy and compassion the text elicits—could better invite the reader to share in and sympathize with its environmental message.

Rachel Carson's career would have gained neither the notoriety nor success it did without her self-conscious attempt to breach the disciplines to deliver her message. She bridged nature writing, which before had been largely kept to the social sphere, with the realm of scientific fact, and in doing so fused an emotionally charged argument with an objective, fact-based one. In her hybrid disciplined approach, an approach that reveals how all aspects of the environment are intrinsically linked and equally affected by an overrun system of pesticide use, Carson further shows through her writing that science and literature, when linked, can provide a compelling public argument. In providing explanations of the complexities of science in a language that the public could easily understand, Carson set the stage for a grass-roots movement demanding the regulation of pesticides.

In his 1994 introduction to *Silent Spring*, former Vice President Al Gore notes that Carson "gave a human face to an already dominant national concern". The 1962 public was ready to launch into an environmental movement, and *Silent Spring*'s personification, a literary strategy of giving human attributes to inanimate objects and holding the power to sentimentalize the problem, served as the bridge that was needed to deliver science's message and the subsequent catalyst to the American public. *Silent Spring*'s title itself evokes sadness and demands action, as a silent and lifeless season in which no birds or other creatures sing is what Carson shows may occur if pesticide use is allowed to continue unregulated.

While speaking of the literary style of Realism, in which authors shy away from sentimentalizing in favor of a more descriptive and observation-based "accurate representation of reality," Lawrence Buell asserts that in keeping too close to an objective viewing of nature (and its destruction) we lose the emotional impact of the scene: "Realism's denseness can indeed be tedious and distracting as well as superficial. Realism can heighten the divide between narrative consciousness and the text's represented world even as it purports to serve as bridge" (Childers 255; Buell 40). In taking a more sentimental or Romantic view of nature, Carson invites the reader not to view nature as a series of facts, but as a vital aspect of our growth. In her earlier book, *The Sea Around Us* (1951), Carson uses her literary-granted license to describe this: "each of us begins his individual life in a miniature ocean within his mother's womb, and in the stages of his embryonic development repeats the stages by which his race evolved, from gill-breathing inhabitants of a water world to creatures able to live on land" (14). Here, Carson links the ocean with humanity and the individual's birth, impelling readers to *feel* for the ocean and its vital connections.

In a further compelling fusion of scientific and literary licenses, Carson quotes from a scientist's observations of ground squirrels that had ingested insecticides: "'[They] exhibited a characteristic attitude in death. The back was bowed, and the forelegs with the toes of the feet tightly clenched were drawn close to the thorax…The head and neck were outstretched and the mouth often contained dirt, suggesting that the

dying animals had been biting at the ground'" (99-100). Carson calls this description a "mute testimony" for "the dead ground squirrels" due to the passage's objective and Realist style of scientific recording. The passage is as dead and void of emotional charge as are the squirrels it describes. In another case study on the effects of direct contact with the pesticide *parathion*, Carson describes how "two small boys in Wisconsin, cousins, died on the same night" (28). Carson uses her literary exposition to emotionally charge and personalize the otherwise flat report of events. The victims of pesticide usage are enlivened through the hybrid-style narration—children become "playmates" and pesticide-laden trees have a "deformed, weeping effect" (28, 71). Even such small interjections as the apparently gratuitous note that the boys are "small" and "cousins" helps build on the account's tragic telling. The qualitative case studies as presented in *Silent Spring* allow Carson to reject the emotionless (Realist) facts of science and statistics in favor of impassioned retellings of the everyday stories of victims of environmental maltreatment.

Carson uses her literary style not simply to recount these scenes, but to extrapolate on them as well. In one chapter's closing note, Carson asks, "By acquiescing in an act that can cause such suffering to a living creature, who among us is not diminished as a human being?" (100). Carson pushes the reader to take personal responsibility for humanity's destruction of the environment, bringing her argument from a scientific basis in factual observation to a magnitude of moral importance. Throughout the novel, Carson continually uses her more literary voice to address social and environmental issues, moralizing on such questions as "whether any civilization can wage relentless war on life without destroying itself" and discussing the extremes that mankind takes, such as concentrating varying aspects of nature (for example, Uranium to make the atomic bomb) or the rapid pace in which man deforests and destroys (99).

Carson begins *Silent Spring* not with scientific data, but with a worst-case scenario chapter titled "A Fable for Tomorrow." This fully literary chapter places the reader in the fabled environment of "a town in the heart of America" that has been so polluted by pesticides that the animal and plant life has withered and died (1). "No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world," writes Carson. "The people had done it themselves (3)." Carson does not provide a dystopic view of the future here, but rather presents a compilation within one town of many of the then present environmental atrocities brought about by man. She ends her introductory chapter with a call for the reader to take responsibility for humanity's destruction of the environment—what Carson implies is tearing at the very "heart" of American society. Carson exaggerates this fabled town of course, and yet as she notes, "every one of these disasters has actually happened somewhere" (3). Beginning her book with this literary approach to scientific fact, she then similarly proceeds to discuss the scientific findings through literary means.

At a conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Carson acknowledged the emotional aspect to her literary works of science for which she was often criticized: "I am not afraid of being thought a sentimentalist when I stand here tonight and tell you that I believe natural beauty has a necessary place in the spiritual development of any individual or any society" (qtd. in Levine 130). Carson

instilled emotion in objective science, for she viewed nature as something more vital than the scientific reams of data alone could project. She wanted to develop and ameliorate the society that she believed deteriorated as it destroyed the environment, and the public rose to this newborn fusion bringing the affective dimension of literary language to the more objective approach of science.

Lynn White, Jr. writes in her article "Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," that "More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one" (12). Carson knew that solely presenting the public with objective data on the use of pesticides was not likely to stir up a revolution or even a moderate protest. Rather, she had to write against and subvert what White refers to as the Christian orthodoxy of society that accepts man's dominance of nature as religiously bestowed and rightful (14). As Robert White Stevens, biochemist and a contemporary critic and adversary of Carson, stated, "Miss Carson maintains that the balance of nature is a major force in the survival of man, whereas the modern chemist, the modern biologist and scientist, believes that man is steadily controlling nature" (Clinton xvii). The scientific community, and indeed the community at large, viewed man as superior to his surrounding environment. Carson's compiled data on the effects of pesticides thus needed to be delivered in a manner that refuted this socially embedded value system and showed man as an equal player in the expansive ecosystem.

One of Carson's methods for attempting to change the social mindset in regards to the environment (and particularly vegetation) is to first make explicit the existing social value system and then expose its faults. "Our attitude toward plants is a singularly narrow one," she writes. "If we see any immediate utility in a plant we foster it" (63). Carson strives to show how all of the environment is interconnected, and she proceeds to demonstrate that, in affecting one aspect of it, we affect the whole system. She places man *within* the environment, disavowing his position as an all-powerful, outside controller. She writes that "The earth's vegetation is part of a web of life in which there are intimate and essential relations between plants and the earth, between plants and other plants, between plants and animals" and proceeds to highlight some "of the most tragic examples of our unthinking bludgeoning of the landscape" (64). In beating down the environment, Carson shows that we are in fact harming ourselves. Although Carson's language is similarly heavy-handed throughout her book, it serviceably casts a grave shadow that, through the embedded emotions in the diction, pushes readers to rise up in action and defense of their environment.

"When will the public become sufficiently aware of the facts to demand such action?" asks Carson, ending a chapter of her hybrid text with a rhetorical question to further chide the reader to think for himself on the state of society's relationship with its environment (152). And yet *Silent Spring* is itself an answer to this question. The public response to the book shows that society will become aware of issues when presented with an easily digestible and emotionally prodding format. In taking data gleaned from scientific studies and presenting it in an emotionally gripping tale of the environment, Carson did just that. When Carson died of breast cancer a mere eighteen months after the publication of *Silent Spring*, she had already

brought about significant change in society's view of the environment (Lear x; Gore xvi). The repercussions of her work can still be felt today, both in the social view as well as in environmental policy. Through her book's widespread impact, Rachel Carson shows that inspiring the public to take action often requires more than a one-disciplined approach.

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