



2018

Rachel Carson: Giving a Voice to the Earth

Katherine Cavender

Illinois Wesleyan University, kcavende@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/gateway>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cavender, Katherine, "Rachel Carson: Giving a Voice to the Earth" (2018). *Outstanding Gateway Papers*. 18.

<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/gateway/18>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by the Writing Program Committee at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Rachel Carson: Giving a Voice to the Earth
Katherine Cavender
Illinois Wesleyan University

When Rachel Carson was a little girl growing up in Springdale, Pennsylvania, she fell in love with the wilderness. While all around her, factory after factory was beginning to spew toxic waste, Carson loved to get away from it all by venturing into the “deep woods” to observe birds. From a very young age, Carson was able to articulate her thoughts eloquently, giving her the opportunity to be published several times in *St. Nicholas Magazine*. When she was 15, she wrote her first article about her enchantment with nature, foreshadowing her future as a nature writer, and it was later republished in a book called *Lost Woods: The Discovered Writing of Rachel Carson*. In it, she wrote about “a gently sloping hill... the sort of place that awes you by its majestic silence, interrupted only by the rustling breeze and the distant tinkle of water” (p. 13). This love of nature was something she called her “favorite recreation”-- which also happened to be the title of her article. Carson’s love of the escape into nature can be likened to that of Thoreau. Much like a transcendentalist, Carson in her early days used nature to get away from everyday stresses, and she idealized it as something separate from man and beautiful in its own way. Her love of nature blossomed and she soon developed an interest in the study of biology,

transforming her romanticized love of nature into a scientific understanding of the way man interacts with the natural world.

Carson was so enamored with writing that when she began her undergraduate education at the Pennsylvania College for Women at Pittsburgh, she originally intended to study communications. According to a short biography of Carson written by John Jungck and Rodger Bybee, she soon fell in love with biology and changed her major. She completed her undergraduate degree and continued on to receive a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University, one of the most prestigious institutions in the country. While completing her graduate school education, she worked at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole Massachusetts before getting a job at the Bureau of Fisheries, soon to become the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. It was during her employment at the Fish and Wildlife Service that Carson published her first two books, *Under the Sea Wind* in 1941, and its sequel, *The Sea Around Us* in 1951. In 1952, after becoming interested in pesticides and deciding to devote all of her time to writing, she resigned from her position. In 1956 she published *The Edge of the Sea*, where she was one of the first to suggest the idea that all ecosystems are connected. Finally, in 1962, Carson published her most groundbreaking work, *Silent Spring*. In it, she described the consequences of indiscriminate pesticide use, arguing that stronger regulations should be put in place to avoid unintentional poisoning of animals and humans.

Jungck and Bybee claim that because Carson never received a PhD in biology, she was often discredited by opponents of her ideas. They state that in a *Time* magazine article published in 1962, shortly after *Silent Spring* was released, an anonymous writer was able to “reduce her to diminutive status and an overly emotional woman” (p. 302). This claim against Carson's credibility, however, can be dismissed as simple sexism and ignorance. Despite critics who came

forward to respond to the controversial nature of *Silent Spring*, Carson's credibility with regards to scientific fact is undeniable. Prior to *Silent Spring*, Carson had already received a National Book Award for Nonfiction for her novel *The Sea Around Us*, making her an acclaimed author. Her bibliography for *Silent Spring* was a full fifty-five pages long. Because Carson knew that her work was likely to be controversial in the eyes of the public and the pesticides industry, she took extreme care to ensure that all of the information in her book was presented clearly and factually in order to minimize opportunities for criticism.

While today we look back at Carson as the inspiration for the modern environmental movement, she did not intend to be, according to Shirley A. Briggs,. She wrote *Silent Spring* and challenged the public opinion of pesticides "because she was first of all a scientist and a writer, and she became a crusader on one particular occasion because she felt she had to" (p. 6). It is important to understand that Carson did not seek to become a controversial public figure, but rather her ethics and morals drove her to bring public attention to the issue of pesticides and the publicity came as a result. Carson's love and knowledge of nature paired with her writing expertise set her up to effectively appeal to the public's emotions. She wrote about DDT because she knew it well, Briggs cited from Carson's biographer Paul Brooks, and the way she expanded from the specific study of DDT to the effects of industrialization in general caused the outcry that put *Silent Spring* on the map. Carson challenged industry because she knew it was unlikely that anyone else would, and therefore it became her responsibility. Carson's appeal to the public was effective in its time for several different reasons, making her wide-reaching argument a platform for modern environmentalists to build off of. She is now known as a founder of the environmental movement, and her work is a huge inspiration to environmentalists today.

Carson's responsibility and moral duty is reflected in her writing, according to Philip Cafaro. Carson considers the moral implications of people who call themselves civilized but destroy the lives of unintelligent beings. Cafaro says that in his interpretation, Carson believes that "a true civilization does not dominate or destroy the non-human world; it protects it and seeks to understand it" (p. 60). However, critics of Carson argue that the use of pesticides has brought only progress and positivity to the human race. These criticisms mostly came from the pesticides industry, who had the most to lose as a result of Carson's research. According to an article published in *The New York Times* by John M. Lee in July 1962, "the industry feels that [Carson] has presented a one-sided case and has chosen to ignore the enormous benefits in increased food production and decreased incidence of disease that have accrued from the development and use of modern pesticides" (p. 11). This argument, however, is purely defensive. When reading *Silent Spring*, it is clear to see that Carson believes that the benefits of pesticides are implicit and already understood by society. She does not explicitly acknowledge that side of the debate because she assumes that the reader already believes it, since the majority of the information released to the public by the pesticides industry at the time reflected pesticide use as positive societal progress. In the third chapter of *Silent Spring*, Carson refers to the assumed harmlessness of DDT as an "understandable misconception" (p. 21). She acknowledges the roots of its use and that the public sees it as useful, but her goal is to point out the problematic assumption that DDT and other pesticides come without consequences. Carson discusses animals exposed to Aldrin whose offspring suffered as a result, and she says "No one knows whether the same effect will be seen in human beings" (p. 26). The quote ends here in the version published in *The New Yorker*, but in Carson's full published work she continues, "yet this chemical has been sprayed from airplanes over suburban areas" (p. 26). It can be assumed that this omission in

The New Yorker was a result of an editor's attempt to reduce the shock value of Carson's claims. Perhaps there was not enough evidence to prove that the chemical was sprayed over suburbs at the time this excerpt was published. However, in the full published *Silent Spring*, Carson does not hold back. She wants her audience to understand the full scope of the dangers that pesticides present to the public.

At the time that Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring* she was suffering from breast cancer. This fact is reflected in the book, though not explicitly. In her chapter "The Human Price," Carson reflects on our inability to definitively identify causes of disease and claims that while we cannot necessarily see the negative effects of pesticides in the short term, there may be long term effects on humans that we cannot predict. She highlights several specific cases where the short-term effects of pesticide poisoning can be seen, and these descriptions are vivid and horrifying. Carson's eloquence throughout the novel, but in this chapter specifically, demonstrates the way that her background as a writer influenced her ability to make an emotional appeal to her audience. Undoubtedly, because Carson was ill herself, adverse health impacts were close to her heart. This adds to her urgency throughout this chapter, where she insists that: "The sudden illness or death of farmers, spraymen, pilots, and others exposed to appreciable quantities of pesticides are tragic and should not occur. For the population as a whole, we must be more concerned with the delayed effects of absorbing small amounts of the pesticides that invisibly contaminate our world" (p. 188). While the descriptions throughout this chapter can be interpreted as shock value in some ways, based on Carson's background, they are meant as genuine appeals to the sympathies of her audience in order to stress the importance of human health consequences in the conversation about pesticide use. She may not address the advantages of pesticide use on overall crop yields in this section, but she does so intentionally because

addressing those arguments in favor of pesticide use would detract from the urgency of the public health concerns she presents.

While Carson's emotional appeals and shocking imagery added important, meaningful rhetoric to *Silent Spring*, part of what helped put the book in the spotlight and earn it serious consideration were efforts on the part of Carson's agent and her publisher, Houghton Mifflin. According to Michelle Mart in her book *Pesticides, a Love Story*, advertisements for *Silent Spring*'s release included praise from scientific experts as well as Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. Carson herself believed that after the publication of her book, it was up to the public to interpret the facts she had presented and decide what to do from there. The biggest difference between Carson's work and the work of others that came before her, according to Mart, was that her book was so prevalent in the public eye that she incited the conversation about pesticides to occur in the mainstream. Previously, advocates for environmental issues were on the "fringe," small groups of activists who did not have a particularly influential voice. One of the ways that this happened, besides Carson's emotional appeal to the public, was the fact that she did not argue radically for the abandonment of pest control, says Mart. Instead, Carson argued that these chemical pesticides be used with greater caution and regulation in order to prevent the types of ecological and human consequences that she describes throughout *Silent Spring*. According to Cafaro, Carson's work led to expansion of the U.S. Clean Water Act as well as the banning of DDT in several countries. These small victories were signs of progress for environmentalism, but much more significant changes needed to be made with regards to industry in general to truly change the state of our environment.

While Carson's advocacy for pesticide regulation was radical at the time, there is now a much more mainstream belief in the necessity to change human habits of pollution and resource

use. This is due to recent evidence of climate change. This environmental movement, kickstarted largely by *Silent Spring* and the emotional reactions it created in the public, is a great start to fixing our environmental predicament. However, it is clearly not enough. Since the 1960s, our situation has gotten steadily worse. Carson helped us to realize the impact humans can have on the environment through introducing new chemicals into ecosystems. However, because her argument was focused on the pesticides industry, other industries that perpetuated different types of pollution were able to continue their own harmful practices without significant criticism. Carson was just one woman, and her work was extremely significant. But modern environmentalists must pick up where she left off in order to make a real difference. According to an article by Rebecca Lindsey on climate.gov, our current atmospheric carbon concentration is 405 parts per million, when in 1970 it was 325 parts per million. While Carson highlighted the fact that pesticides were just one aspect of the larger trend of ecological damage due to modernization, this was not taken seriously enough to cause regulations on industry to increase, or for people to step back and consider the consequences of their increasingly consumerist mindset. Modern environmentalists respect and admire Carson for what she did. Her words and her message reached millions of people whether it was through her full length book or serial published in *The New Yorker*. She did wonders for eliminating the effects of DDT on ecosystems. But what made her crusade less effective than it should have been was western culture's inability to understand the larger problem: that a capitalist economy focused on short-term profit would create long-term damage to the Earth. And as modernization increased, so would pollution.

The consequences of the American lifestyle are heavy. Our consumer culture has created a nearly irreversible pattern of pollution, deforestation, habitat destruction and unsustainable

resource use. The western world's focus on economic growth over resource sustainability, according to Peter Victor and Tim Jackson, is of increasing concern to global leaders. The modern environmental movement is no longer as concerned about pesticides as Carson was, because pesticide use is just one piece of a larger puzzle. Pesticides were used to increase crop yields, thereby increasing food production and agricultural profit. Therefore, the widespread use of pesticides was an endeavor fueled by a desire for economic growth. This ties back directly to Carson's argument because she encourages Americans to look at the consequences of their lifestyle. According to Victor and Jackson, while economic growth has stimulated higher standards of living for industrialized countries, it has come at the cost of depleted soil and forests, and contaminated water supplies. As our desire for growth pushes us to consume more and more resources at a faster rate, we bring ourselves closer and closer to our own destruction.

The path we continue down today is evidence that while Carson's work was greatly acknowledged and made a difference in one small way, it did not make a real lasting impression on Americans. Had it done so, we would have looked outside the context of pesticides at other aspects of our lifestyle and made changes. We would have learned that sometimes considering the future is more important than maximizing profit. Carson opened the floodgates for hundreds more voices to speak out against our environmental policies. Following her, we have heard from sustainability leaders such as Al Gore, Elon Musk, and even Leonardo DiCaprio suggesting ways in which we may change our culture in order to achieve balance with our environment. These advocates along with many others have introduced climate change into the political sphere, driving bipartisan debate on how to handle our environmental impact. While Carson was the first to bring environmental issues into the mainstream, they are perhaps discussed so often nowadays that we do not take them as seriously as Carson urged us to. If we are to imagine a world where

our children and grandchildren may breathe clean air and enjoy the wonders of nature, we must begin to take these voices seriously. We must acknowledge where we went wrong, and begin to correct our errors.

References

- Briggs, S. A. (n.d.). Rachel Carson: Her Vision and Her Legacy. In *Silent Spring Revisited* (pp. 3-11). Washington, DC: American Chemical Society.
- Cafaro, P. (2002). Rachel Carson's Environmental Ethics. *Worldviews*, 6(1), 58-80. Retrieved December 5, 2017 from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43809205>
- Carson, R., & Lear, L. J. (1998). My Favorite Recreation. In *Lost woods: the discovered writing of Rachel Carson* (pp. 12-13). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Carson, R. (1962). *Silent Spring*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Jungck, J., & Bybee, R. (1984). Rachel Carson Human Ecologist. *The American Biology Teacher*, 46(6), 302-303. Retrieved December 8, 2017, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4447854>
- Lee, J. M. (1962, July 22). 'Silent Spring' Is Now Noisy Summer. *New York Times*, pp. 1, 11.
- Mart, M., & Mart, M. (2015). Breakup?: The Cultural Impact of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring. In *Pesticides, A Love Story: America's Enduring Embrace of Dangerous Chemicals* (pp. 57-82). University Press of Kansas.
- Victor, P. A., & Jackson, T. (2015). *State of the World 2015: Confronting Hidden Threats to Sustainability* (pp. 37-49). Washington, DC: Island Press.