

Silent Spring

Silent Spring began with a “fable for tomorrow” – a true story using a composite of examples drawn from many real communities where the use of DDT had caused damage to wildlife, birds, bees, agricultural animals, domestic pets, and even humans. Carson used it as an introduction to a very scientifically complicated and already controversial subject. This “fable” made an indelible impression on readers and was used by critics to charge that Carson was a fiction writer and not a scientist.

Serialized in three parts in *The New Yorker*, where President John F. Kennedy read it in the summer of 1962, ***Silent Spring*** was published in August and became an instant best-seller and the most talked about book in decades. Utilizing her many sources in federal science and in private research, Carson spent over six years documenting her analysis that humans were misusing powerful, persistent, chemical pesticides before knowing the full extent of their potential harm to the whole biota.

Carson’s passionate concern in ***Silent Spring*** is with the future of the planet and all life on Earth. She calls for humans to act responsibly, carefully, and as stewards of the living earth.

Additionally ***Silent Spring*** suggested a needed change in how democracies and liberal societies operated so that individuals and groups could question what their governments allowed others to put into the environment. Far from calling for sweeping changes in government policy, Carson believed the federal government was part of the problem. She admonished her readers and audiences to ask “Who Speaks, And Why?” and therein to set the seeds of social revolution. She identified human hubris and financial self-interest as the crux of the problem and asked if we could master ourselves and our appetites to live as though we humans are an equal part of the earth’s systems and not the master of them.

Carson expected criticism, but she did not expect to be personally vilified by the chemical industry and its allies in and out of government. She spent her last years courageously defending the truth of her conclusions until her untimely death in 1964.

Silent Spring inspired the modern environmental movement, which began in earnest a decade later. It is recognized as the environmental text that “changed the world.” She aimed at igniting a democratic activist movement that would not only question the direction of science and technology but would also demand answers and accountability. Rachel Carson was a prophetic voice and her “witness for nature” is even more relevant and needed if our planet is to survive into a 22nd century.

Source: <http://www.rachelcarson.org/SilentSpring.aspx>

Instructions: Read the attached passage from ***Silent Spring*** and answer the questions that follow.

(1) There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with the surroundings. The town in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the fall mornings.

(2) Along the roads, laurel, viburnum and alder, great ferns and wildflowers delighted the traveler's eye through much of the year. Even in winter the roadsides were places of beauty, where countless birds came to feed on the berries and on the seed heads of the dried weeds rising above the snow. The countryside was, in fact, famous for the abundance and variety of its bird life, and where the flood of migrants was pouring through in the spring and fall people traveled from great distances to observe them. Others came to fish the streams, which flowed clear and cold out of the hills and contained shady pools where trout lay. So it had been from the days many years ago when the first settlers raised their homes, sank their wells, and built their barns.

(3) Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens, the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death. The farmers spoke of much illness among their families. In the town the doctors had become more and more puzzled by the new kinds of sickness appearing among the patients. There had been several and unexplained deaths, not only among adults but even among children, who would be stricken suddenly while at play and die within a few hours.

(4) There was a strange silence. The birds, for example – where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were moribund, they trembled violently and could not fly. It was spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound, only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh.

(5) On the farms hens brooded, but no chicks hatched. The farmers complained that they were unable to raise any pigs – the litters were small and the young survived only a few days. The apple trees were coming into bloom but no bees droned among the blossoms, so there was no pollination and there would be no fruit.

(6) The roadsides, once so attractive, were now lined with browned and withered vegetation as though swept by fire. These, too, were silent, deserted by all living things. Even the streams were now lifeless. Anglers no longer visited them, for all the fish had died.

(7) In the gutters under the eaves and between the shingles of the roofs, a white granular powder still showed a few patches; some weeks before it had fallen like snow upon the roofs and the lawns, the fields and streams.

(8) Not witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of life in the stricken world. The people had done it themselves.

(9) This town does not actually exist, but it might easily have a thousand counterparts in America or elsewhere in the world. I know of no community that has experienced all of the misfortunes I describe. Yet every one of these disasters has actually happened somewhere, and many real communities have already suffered a substantial number of them. A grim specter has crept upon us almost unnoticed, and this imagined tragedy may easily become a stark reality we all should know.

Source: Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*: Houghton Mifflin, 1962, 1994, pp. 1-3.

Name: _____

1. What type of town does Rachel Carson describe in the first two paragraphs?

2. In paragraph three what has happened in this town?

3. What was the result of this “strange blight” described in paragraph four?

4. Paragraphs seven and eight describe the cause of the problem. What was it and who was responsible?

5. In the final paragraph, what is Rachel Carson trying to say?

