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Silent Spring

by

Rachel Carson



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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

Note to the reader

This is a non-fiction book. However, it can be analyzed along literary lines. The following set of literary elements should, therefore, be regarded as a use of literary analysis to describe a non-fiction text.

SETTING

This non-fiction book is set mainly in the United States. It refers, however, to the use of insecticides and to the use of biological controls of insects in other countries as well. The primary target reader, however, is the.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The chemical companies - Those companies responsible for the research and production of chemical poisons for the control of pest insects.

Entomologists - Scientists who study insects.

U.S. government officials - Officials of departments such as the Department of Agriculture who are responsible for propagating the use of chemical poisons for the destruction of pest insects or who research non-chemical means of insect control.

Conservationists - People who attempt to study the natural processes of the earth and protect the earth from chemical poisoning.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The insects - Both the beneficial insects and the harmful insects.

The birds - They are killed by chemical poisons and who function in their natural habitat as natural insect controllers.

The earth - Alive with the activity of many organisms and which is threatened by massive and repeated doses of chemical poisons.

The water - Also alive with the activity of many organisms and which is threatened by chemical poisons.

The non-scientist citizen of the U.S., - They often uses heavy doses of chemical poisons on the home and farm to kill insects, or who's environment is subject to spraying against her/his will, and who also often recognizes when it's too late the severity of the dangers of these chemicals.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The earth in its many aspects--earth, water, and creatures--which is under

Antagonist - The chemical poisons used as insecticides in the U.S. On a different level, the manufacturers of these chemical poisons whose economic interests run counter to the safe and

Climax - The mid-twentieth century saw the climax of the use of insecticides in the.....

Outcome - The shocking and dangerous reduction of all the earth's natural resources for balancing insect populations and, simultaneously, the recognition that chemical poisons kill insects only in the short term. In the

SHORT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

Carson's first chapter is where she derives the title of her book. She describes a community, in which all the elements of the natural world, including humans, work together, where people are able to enjoy the sound of birds and the growth of spring. Suddenly, chemical poisons are introduced and spring is silenced. There are no more birds to sing in spring. She ends the chapter on the note that this description is constructed out of a composite of many different cities and that it is the inevitable result of the irresponsible use of chemical poisons for insect control.

Carson's second chapter begins the book's goal of informing the reader of the nature of chemical poisons and how they affect the process of the world. In chapter 3, Carson describes in detail all the different kinds of chemical poisons; especially those used as insecticides. She explains how these poisons affect animals and birds by depositing themselves

in fatty tissues where they are magnified. People and animals are poisoned over a long period of time. Poison passes through the food chain. All kinds of diseases ensue: liver disease, hepatitis, cancer and among others. Death is a common result.

In chapter 4, Carson begins a systematic examination of all the elements of the environment so as to show the reader how each element is affected by insecticides. She begins in chapter 4 with water, explaining how water pollution happens from the use of insecticides on the earth. Chemicals are washed into bodies of water and they even seep into ground water--the source of public water supplies. Once in the water, chemicals combine with other chemicals that have also been washed into the water. No one knows the likely results of the combination of chemicals or the natural chemical changes that happen to any chemical when it is released into the world. Chapter 5 describes the soil. It describes how soil is made out of the bodies of living creatures and how multiple living creatures live in the earth, creating new earth every day. Insecticides kill this multitudinous life and insecticides remain in the soil for years after their use. Chapter 6 describes plants as weed killers affect them. Carson documents the huge bird kills caused by weed killers. Weeds are killed by utility companies so they can run their lines and by highway departments to keep the highways clear. It's very possible to kill unwanted plants in more responsible ways, ways that don't threaten the ecosystem of the area.

Chapter 7 begins a new section of the book on the affects of massive spraying campaigns. It is called "Needless Havoc" and describes the massive spraying operations, their ineffectiveness in killing target insects, and the horrible record of the massive killing of non-targeted birds and animals. One campaign against the Japanese beetle in the Midwest ignored the fact that the eastern states had successfully controlled the beetle with natural enemies of the beetle. In the Midwest, massive spraying occurred, killing huge numbers of wildlife: birds and

THEMES

MAIN THEME

The main theme of Silent Spring is the destruction of the delicate balance of nature by the wholesale use of insecticides. Rachel Carson carefully explains what the balance of nature is. She describes the.....

MINOR THEME

The minor theme of Carson's book is the alternatives to chemical poisons for controlling insects. At every point at which Carson describes the destructiveness of chemical poisons on the ecosystem, she also informs.....

MOOD

The mood of *Silent Spring* is one of urgency. Carson employs the literary conventions and the language of melodrama to inspire the reader's admiration for the beauty and harmony of nature and also to inspire the

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Rachel Carson was born May 27, 1907 in Springdale, Pennsylvania. She was greatly influenced by her mother, Maria Carson, in her love of nature. She explored the woods close to her house.

She studied marine biology and graduated from the Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham College) in 1928 *summa cum laude*. Then she studied at Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory and earned her M.A. in zoology at John's Hopkins University in 1932.

After university, she was hired by the Bureau of Fisheries to write radio scripts during the Depression and she supplemented her income by writing feature articles on natural history for the Baltimore Sun. She as the first woman biologist hired by that agency. She began her career in the federal service as a scientist and editor in 1936. She eventually moved up to become chief of all publications for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. She wrote pamphlets on conservation of natural resources and edited scientific articles.

Rachel Carson became famous as a naturalist and science writer as she began publishing books she.....

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Silent Spring was the most controversial of Rachel Carson's books. One half million copies of the book were sold in the first year of its publication. Biologists and other scientists praised it highly. Yet, it was attacked by the chemical industry. One manufacturer of Chlordane, for example, tried to prevent Houghton Mifflin from publishing it. Many

government officials also attacked it. Both groups called it alarmist and its evidence unfounded. Carson was

Chapter Summaries with Notes

CHAPTER 1

Summary

Once there was a town in the United States of America where all living things existed in harmony. Thriving farms surrounded the town and every spring there were fruits and flowers in abundance. When people traveled to the area, they enjoyed the variety of plants. This was a land that was beautiful in spring and in winter. Suddenly, something happened to make everything start to die. No one could account for the strange kinds of symptoms people, birds, and animals started displaying. Many creatures died. Sometimes children would be outside playing and suddenly they would be stricken with something and die only a few hours later. People wondered what had happened to the birds. The birds that remained were often so sickly that they couldn't fly. Chickens still laid eggs, but the eggs didn't hatch. The apple trees put out blossoms, but no bees came to pollinate them. The countryside that once looked so pretty now looked dry and withered. People noticed a fine, white dust had settled all over the leaves and in the gutters of their houses. The problem with this land didn't come from witchcraft, but from the people themselves.

This is a scene that is only a composite. It never happened all in one place, but each of these events happened somewhere in the United States. This book will try to explain what has silenced the spring of many towns in America.

Notes

Rachel Carson begins her book with a scenario of the composite results of chemical poisons in the atmosphere. The tone is a storytelling tone. She begins, "There once was a town . . ." Thus, before Carson begins a non-fictional account of the affects of chemical poisoning on the environment and its creatures, she gives a sort of fictional image of what will happen if things keep going the way they have been. She chooses a small town in the heart of America. She describes the time of spring. She describes what the town was like before the poison and then she describes it after the poison. In this sense, Carson is using a very old narrative framework, the most famous example being the narrative of the fall which is described in the Judeo-Christian Bible. Before the fall into sin, Adam and Eve enjoyed the garden in complete harmony and bliss. After the fall, they were sent out of the garden and had to work for their food. Rachel Carson uses that very powerful narrative framework to describe the world as it exists in harmony and bliss before the fall into the massive use of poisons in the environment. Before that fall, people came to see the birds, the birds had plenty of various things to eat, children played happily, all the organisms of the earth from plants to insects to people operated in natural harmony. After the fall, things started dying from the bottom up, from insects to plants to people.

CHAPTER 2 - The Obligation to Endure

Summary

"The history of life on the earth has been a history of the interaction between living things and their surroundings." For most of this history, their environment has influenced vegetation and animals. Only recently in history have vegetation and animals influenced the environment. It is primarily people who have caused this change. The change has increased immensely in the past twenty-five years. People have contaminated the environment with dangerous and deadly chemicals.

These poisons can't be removed once they've been put into the earth. For example, Strontium 90 is a chemical that is released when there's a nuclear explosion. The chemical falls from the sky and lands on the earth where it enters into the chemical make-up of grass, corn, wheat, and other living things. It even enters the bones of human beings and it never leaves. Other examples are chemicals that are sprayed on crops and forests. They also stay in the soil and enter into living organisms. They pass from one organism to another. They also move in underground streams and then emerge into the air where they kill vegetation and poison animals of all kinds. People don't know all that they create when they put these chemicals into the atmosphere.

The history of life on the earth is hundreds of millions of years long. Things took that long to get to the balance where they are now. The environment has always contained both harmful and helpful elements. For example, some rocks give out dangerous radiation. Even the sun is dangerous in that it gives out short-wave radiation. The balance of nature, that which balances the dangerous and the good, happened over many years. In the modern world, though, time is not long like this. Major environmental changes happen in an instant. People have caused this speed up. Now, radiation isn't just coming from rocks; it's also coming from scientists tampering with the atom. Now, the chemicals of the natural world exist alongside the synthetic chemicals people have made.

Unlike the natural process of chemicals coming into the world where the earth takes millions of years to adjust to it, there is no such time for the earth to adjust to every synthetic chemical introduced into the world. There are five hundred new chemicals introduced each year. Most of these chemicals are used in the "war against nature." People want to kill insects and other living things they think of as pests. They are applied on yards, in homes, on farms and in many other places and they kill both good and bad insects. These things should be called "biocides" instead of "insecticides" because they kill all living things, not just insects.

The use of insecticides has escalated since the U.S. government started letting civilians use DDT. The reason for the increase is that insects have evolved to become immune to insecticides almost as fast as they've been introduced. So each time one insecticide becomes obsolete, a stronger, more deadly one is introduced. There's a phenomenon called "flareback." This happens when the insect population increases after it's been bombarded with sprays.

People are very worried about the threat of a nuclear war destroying the planet. They should think about the use of these chemicals that are being poured into the environment. These chemicals get into the tissues of plants and animals. They even get into the germ cells so that they will change the material of heredity. Some people are thinking about engineering people's genes. They don't seem to recognize the fact that another kind of engineering is happening inadvertently already.

This deadly change has been caused by something that seems completely irrational. People have poisoned the whole earth and all its creatures just to kill a small number of unwanted species. The irrationality extends further. In the United States, farmers have been given money by the government to make them cut back on how much they produce. At the same time, people will hear the argument that farmers need to use pesticides so they can increase production. Insects certainly need to be controlled, but they need to be controlled in rational and careful ways.

It's useful to look at the history of insects. They were around long before people were. They were very adaptable and very varied. Since people came around, a small percentage of insects have come into conflict with them. They compete for food and they carry disease. The disease-carrying insects are found where people live in very crowded conditions and where they don't have good sanitation. In these situations, control of insects is necessary. The startling news is that the control has been inept and has often made things worse instead of better.

Before the use of present day farming techniques, farmers had little trouble with insects. These problems came along with the introduction of single-crop agriculture. This system made explosive increases in insect populations inevitable. Nature works by a principle of variety creating the conditions of balance. If there are many kinds of plants, the insect that lives on one of those plants only has a limited amount of food. If there is one kind of plant, the insect that lives on that kind of plant has unlimited amounts of food. The same situation works with other kinds of plants. For example, it was once popular to line the streets of cities with elm trees. Suddenly one kind of beetle practically wiped out all those trees. If elms had only been one kind among many kinds of trees, that insect never would have gotten out of hand.

Another problem increases insect populations. It's the worldwide migration of plants and insects. During the Cretaceous Period, a hundred million years ago, floods cut off land bridges from one continent to another. Living things were isolated and they developed many new species. Then, some of these land masses joined again about 15 million years ago and the species that had been formed began to move around. Now this movement of organisms is being helped by people who move them intentionally and accidentally. There are many plants imported each year into the United States. It has introduced over 200,000 plants. Half of the 180 major insect enemies of U.S. plants were introduced from abroad; most have come on these introduced plants. When these new plants and animals get to new territory, they don't have the restraint of natural enemies to keep their population down. That way they become enormously abundant.

People have tried to stop the spread of invading plants and animals through quarantine and through massive chemical spraying, but these have been ineffective methods. What we need to do is to find out about the plants and animals, especially about how they interact with their environment. That way we can promote a healthy balance. We actually already have much of this knowledge, but we don't use it. There are many alternatives to the use of chemicals but people don't use them.

The people who have control over these chemicals usually don't know very much about them. They work zealously on

stamping out unwanted plants and animals. Carson isn't against the use of chemicals at all. The problem is that these chemicals have been controlled by people who don't know what they're doing and don't know the harm they're causing. The Bill of Rights doesn't guarantee people in the United States to be secure against lethal poisons that are distributed by individuals or public officials, but that is only because the framers of the Constitution didn't foresee the problem. These chemicals have been used without considering their effect on the soil, the water, the wildlife or on people. Most people don't know how big this problem is. Specialists only know about their area. Corporations make sure that their chance for profits isn't impeded. The U.S. public should be the ones to decide these matters.

Notes

The first substantive chapter of *Silent Spring* gives an excellent introduction to the causes of the problem of pesticides and other chemical poisons in the United States. It gives an overview of the history of insects and the way people have intervened in that history. Its aim, of course, is persuasive. Carson never forgets to bring the information to the reader purposefully: to show the reader the dangers of the present course of action and to urge the reader to do something about it.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Even though Silent Spring is not a novel, it still has a plot. Rather, it repeats a single plot in each of its chapters. The plot is constructed along the lines of an initial state of harmony and productivity, then a drastic and profound fall with the redemption held out to those who will accept its responsibilities. The first chapter is a perfect example of this plot. Carson first describes the world as we all would want it. People live in harmony with the natural world and enjoy its fruits and its beauties. Children grow up healthy and sound. People lived into happy old age. Then something..... drastic happens to change the course of this naturally harmony and everything dies. No birds sing in the spring.

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Silent Spring is Rachel Carson's vehicle for persuading the U.S. public about the dangers of insecticides. Her persuasive intent is clear from the beginning of the book and reiterated at key points throughout its pages. Carson knew that in order to persuade the public, she had to inform it first. Her book therefore gives the first lesson in ecology most of her readers ever would have had. She doesn't just describe the ecology of the earth, but even describes the ecology of the human body. She does so in order to explain the complicated process in which chemicals in the environment result in cancer in the individual.

In her persuasive intent, Rachel Carson uses two dominant rhetorical means of persuasion: the ethical appeal and the logical appeal. The ethical appeal calls on the reader's sense of right and wrong. Most readers of Carson's

STUDY QUESTIONS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS / TOPICS

- 1) Describe the kinds of and effects of the chlorinated hydrocarbons and the organic phosphates.
- 2) What is Carson's main means of persuasion in Silent Spring and how sound is this rhetorical choice on her part?
- 3) How does Carson represent the users of chemical poisons in the book? Are they demonized as a

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