

Discussion questions for Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*

General questions: Think about these as you read the book and be ready to discuss in class. (You don't need to hand this section in!)

1. *Silent Spring* is frequently credited with inspiring the modern environmental movement. It was published in 1962. Has it held up? What areas of the book seem outdated? What areas are still relevant today?
2. What audience do you think Carson was writing this book for? Do you think she is persuasive? What mechanisms does she use to persuade her readers?
3. Carson decides not to provide citations in the text but includes a list of sources at the end. What are the advantages and disadvantages to this approach?
4. What did you find to be the most interesting part of the book? The least interesting?
5. Notice how she uses references to atomic fallout to drive home her points about pesticides and herbicides. Why do you suppose she does this? (Think about the time period—the Cold War, above-ground testing of nuclear weapons, atomic fallout).
6. Do you agree that the project of controlling nature is arrogant, foolish, and dangerous, as Carson argues? Can you think of any more recent examples that support or refute this statement?

Specific questions: Please answer these questions to hand in the first day of class.

1. Carson's first chapter explains the title of her book. Why is it called *Silent Spring*?
2. Carson suggests that pesticides should be called "biocides." What idea is she expressing by using this word? Is Carson opposed to the use of all toxins?
3. "In nature, nothing exists alone." Why is this an important part of Carson's critique? How would you characterize her view of the many relationships in nature: between human beings and their environments, between plants and animals, between water and earth?
4. Keep in mind that this book was published in the early 1960s. What does she say were the major changes that took place in pesticides? Do you know of any changes that have taken place regarding pesticides in more recent years?
5. Carson identifies organisms that are not directly affected by pesticides but nevertheless suffer adverse effects. How does this happen?
6. What alternatives does Carson propose to the use of chemicals to control unwanted pests and plants? List and explain two specific examples that Carson provides in the book.
7. Carson's discussion of Dutch elm disease leads her to advocate "the conservation of variety." What does she mean by this?
8. How does Carson describe healthy soil? What is the major problem she identifies with pesticides and the soil?
9. "To have risked so much in our efforts to mold nature to our satisfaction and yet to have failed in achieving our goal would indeed be the final irony. Yet, this it seems, is our situation." She notes in chapter 15 two ways in which the failures have outweighed the risks. What are they? How does she explain and illustrate this point in the chapter?