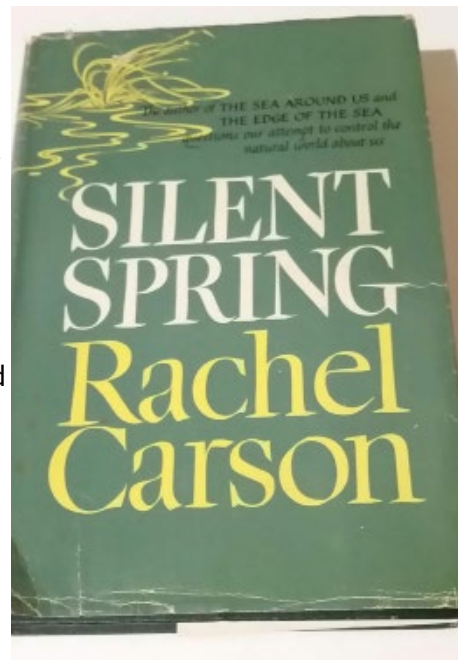


Handout- Excerpt from *Silent Spring* (Chunked Reading with Comprehension Questions)

In 1962, marine biologist Rachel Carson published Silent Spring, which documented the harm to the environment wrought by pesticides—particularly the insecticide DDT—and other chemicals. Although it sparked fierce opposition from critics who challenged her findings, the book became a bestseller and is generally credited with helping to foster a new environmental movement in the United States. Read the opening chapter of the book appearing below, and answer the associated questions below each reading, and at the end.

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay 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.



Original book cover of *Silent Spring*

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 when the flood of **migrants** was pouring through in 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 houses, sank their wells, and built their barns.

Question: How does Rachel Carson describe the town in the heart of America?

Prosperous:

Successful and thriving.

Abundance: A very large quantity of something.

Migrants: Birds that travel regularly as part of their life.



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 new kinds of sickness appearing among their patients. There had been several sudden 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.

Question: What happened to the chickens, cattle, and sheep in the area?

Blight: A disease; a thing that spoils or damages something.

Maladies: A disease or ailment.

Question: What happened to the farmers families?

Question: How has the description of the town changed?

There was a strange stillness. 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 a 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.

Question: What happened to the birds voices?

Deserted: A place empty of animals or people.

Moribund: At the point of death; in terminal decline.



On the farms the 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.

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.

What is happening to the chicks, pigs, plants, and fish?

Brooded: Sat on eggs to keep them warm for hatching.

Withered: Dry and wrinkled or shriveled.

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.

No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves.

What is the white granular powder on the roofs and lawns?

Granular: Small grains or particles.

Who or what does the text suggest was responsible for the situation described?

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 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 shall know.

What has already silenced the voices of spring in countless towns in America?

Misfortunes: Unpleasant events.

Specter: Something people fear will happen.

Stark Reality: How things really are, rather than imagined.



Post-Reading Questions

1. What is the purpose of the text?
2. Why might the text be called "Silent Spring?"
3. What do you predict the rest of Carson's book deals with?
4. Why do you think this book resonated with so many readers in the early 1960s?