Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*: A Commentary on *Silent Spring*

More than fifty years after its original 1962 publication, the modern environmental movement and the growing field of ecocriticism still find themselves indebted to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. The book is remembered for sparking a national controversy about the hazards of various chemicals, as well as inspiring an environmental consciousness in the American public. Responses to the book have come in many forms and from every angle, some supporting and others criticizing its claims. Some response has included activism and even legislation; the domestic sale of DDT was banned in 1972, approximately ten years after *Silent Spring* hit the shelves (Lear xviii). Some has come in the form of research by scientists who seek to discover the accuracy of Carson's claims; much has been proven true, while some remains debatable (Griswold). Still more critique has been provided by the chemical industry itself and others whose personal success, either politically or financially, was put at risk by the book.

The depth of *Silent Spring's* influence has likely been most widely recognized by ecocritics who also praise the work for its literary qualities. According to Greg Garrard in *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom*, *Silent Spring* relies heavily on the genres of pastoral and apocalypse, tropes often employed by more traditional "nature writers" (2). Interestingly, despite Carson's use of these literary techniques, and despite the vast pool of texts she has inspired, it appears that little response to her work has come in the form of traditional literature - fiction. There is a book of poetry, published in honor of *Silent Spring's* fortieth anniversary; however, many poets were commissioned to contribute to the anthology, while some pieces were actually written prior to *Silent Spring* (Burnside 21). Other texts that draw inspiration from Carson include *Neptune's Revenge*, *Sea Change* and *Song for the Blue Ocean*; but all of these are nonfiction (Buell 201).

In short, there is either a shortage of fictional texts that reference *Silent Spring*, or those that do have been largely overlooked. Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer,* for example, seems to be in direct dialogue with Carson's classic, yet the conversation has been taken for granted by critics. Suzanne Whitmore Jones notes Kingsolver's "Carson-inspired orations about keystone predators, evolution, and broad-spectrum insecticides," in her critique of the novel (94), but never elaborates any further. Richard M. Magee's "Reintegrating Human Nature: Modern Sentimental Ecology in Rachel Carson and Barbara Kingsolver," discusses the emotions elicited by each text and provides insight into the types of language and appeals that both books utilize. However, he too stops short of engaging with the complexities of the intertextuality.

There is ample evidence to suggest that the fictional work of *Prodigal Summer*, has something to say to or about *Silent Spring*, but still none have explored the depth of Kingsolver's commentary. Ceri Gorton in "The Things that Attach People: A Critical Literary Analysis of the Fiction of Barbara Kingsolver," explains that Kingsolver is known for alluding to other texts in her fiction. Though his critique does not focus specifically on the interplay between *Prodigal Summer* and *Silent Spring*, he speaks of her "narrative technique of employing non-fictional intertexts… to verify the informed status of her fictional work" (254); thus, we can assume she has done that here. I propose that through *Prodigal Summer* Kingsolver clearly pays homage to *Silent Spring*, but that she also provides a subtle critique of Carson's apocalyptic narrative.

Let us begin the exploration of this possibility by noting some of the key parallels between the two books. In looking at the authors' ecological visions, that Carson explained forthrightly and that Kingsolver manifests within her three main characters, Deanna Wolfe, Lusa Widener and Nannie Rawley, we cannot deny their similarities.

Deanna is the spokesperson for native species and keystone predators (specifically coyotes), issues that received a fair amount of attention in *Silent Spring*. Interestingly, Carson cites the "stockman's zeal for eliminating the coyote" as responsible for explosions in the field mice population (248) while Deanna's lover, Eddie Bondo, could feasibly be a representation of such a "stockman." Similarly, in "Moth Love" Lusa, an entomologist, illustrates how complex and important insects are, as well as how sustainable agriculture can be implemented -- important concepts for Carson. It is also notable that the entire thread of "Moth Love" hinges on the olfactory navigation system of moths -- a phenomenon explicitly considered in the final chapter of *Silent Spring*.

And, finally, the thread involving Nannie Rawley seems to practice what *Silent Spring* most consciously asks us to consider. Kingsolver points readers to the Nannie Rawley-Rachel Carson connection by naming the character of Nannie's daughter Rachel Carson Rawley. The character, Rachel Carson Rawley is only mentioned in the book a few times, but we learn that she was born with a hole in her heart and died at a young age (261). It's interesting to note, part of the controversy spawned by *Silent Spring* was caused by Carson's discussion of "The Human Price" which suggested chemical spraying might be associated with cancer and certain birth defects. It is unclear if Kingsolver intended for us to make this connection - to attribute Rachel Carson Rawley's premature death to prenatal chemical exposure - but she definitely wanted the character to be remembered in a positive light.

Once readers realize Nannie's daughter's name, the many similarities between Nannie and Carson become evident. Nannie believes, like Carson, that humans must be caretakers of the Earth and that every action we take to manipulate it has the potential to affect countless other beings. More specifically, Nannie feels that manmade chemicals wielded in the war against pests

have mysterious and detrimental effects on the world around us; therefore, she attempts to control nature with natural solutions, precisely as *Silent Spring* proposes. Because of this, Nannie could be called the most important of the three heroines, so far as this analysis is concerned; thus, we must consider her tumultuous relationship with Garnett Walker, for it is responsible for bringing a most important debate to the surface.

Garnett, Nannie's grouchy neighbor who obsessively sprays his property with chemicals targeted at unwanted plants and insects, believes "we must view God's creatures as gifts to his favored children, and use them for our own purpose, even if this occasionally causes this one or that one to go extinct after a while" (187). Garnett represents a mentality that Carson adamantly opposed, just as Nannie does in a passionate letter addressed to him that states:

> I do believe humankind holds a special place in the world... the same place held by... a salamander in whatever he has that resembles a mind of his own... The loss of one kind of salamander would be a tragedy to some other creature that was depending on it... Everything alive is connected to every other by fine invisible threads... Things you don't see can help you plenty, and things you try to control can rear up and bite you... (215-17).

Nearly every point made here by Nannie echoes the sentiment of *Silent Spring*. Consider that *Silent Spring* recognizes the special role of humankind, while also acknowledging the importance of every other species. It also contains countless illustrations of Carson's belief in the interconnectedness of life, and in a *Silent Spring* chapter titled "Nature Fights Back" Carson exclusively discusses the Volterra Principle, a concept referenced here at the end of Nannie's letter.

Ultimately, Nannie is always portrayed as the winner in her confrontations with Garnett, and through her, the voice of Rachel Carson is ever-present. Collectively, Nannie, Lusa, and Deanna remind us, as Carson did long ago, that it is our responsibility to be stewards of the Earth, not to manipulate it. As Carson put it, "the 'control of nature' is a phrase conceived in ignorance... when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man" (297). Similarly, *Prodigal Summer* suggests that "we cannot exert absolute control over ourselves or over our world" (Leder 246). Nature, by this philosophy, is neither separate from nor inferior to the human world (Magee 66).

So, with such symmetry in philosophy, where does Kingsolver's criticism of *Silent Spring* emerge? The first clue lies in the title itself. Both titles, *Silent Spring* and *Prodigal Summer*, consist of two words, the second of which in both cases refers to a season. However, the first two words of each title are drastically different. The word "prodigal" implies reckless lavishness, as well as abundance and plenty. It is as if Kingsolver is saying to Carson, "the spring may be silent, but the summer is alive!" In her essay, "Taming the Beast with Two Backs," Kingsolver says, *Prodigal Summer* "is about life, in a biological sense: the rules that connect, divide, and govern living species, including their tireless compunction to reproduce themselves" (223). While Carson illustrates just how precious and delicate life is, Kingsolver reminds us that it is also resilient.

The form in which *Prodigal Summer* is written also contributes to Kingsolver's commentary. Her essays are widely published and would seem to provide the perfect platform for any criticism or praise of Carson's work. Yet, given *Silent Spring's* literary qualities, it is just as fitting for her response to come in a fictional format, and in fact, it might be more fitting. Ceri Gorton argues there exists a "difficult, but fruitful tension between writing fiction for readers and

writing to a political agenda," and that Kingsolver uses this tension to her advantage as she successfully "promotes both through her narrative strategies and preoccupations" (1). Essentially, Kingsolver is working to bridge the gap between the literature of high-culture and the literature of low-culture through stories that resonate within us, playing on the human condition. By targeting a universal audience, her political and environmental messages become accessible to all.

Carson must have recognized this tension, as well, but maintained emphasis on the science and politics of her work, always lending them priority over the narrative strategies. *Silent Spring*, originally serialized in *The New Yorker*, certainly reached beyond the scientific community; however, it still targeted a "well-educated, middle-class suburban" audience (Buell 44). Thus, it may be a stretch, but Kingsolver could be suggesting that while *Silent Spring* made great bounds in raising public awareness of the issues at hand, writing to readers of fiction could have an even greater impact on public sentiment.

In addition to Kingsolver's choice of genre, the book's structure, the three individual, but meticulously interwoven stories that make up the novel, should inspire us to look for other connections. Kingsolver says of the novel, "My agenda is to lure you into thinking about whole systems, not just individual parts..." (qtd. in Leder 233). Leder argues that the book's "triple plot underscores the ways in which individuals interact within a system, altering and influencing each other in myriad and sometimes unexpected ways" (236). Kingsolver's work, like Carson's, emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things; however, Carson's explanations are presented in a straight forward, scientific language. *Prodigal Summer*, on the other hand, reveals connections slowly and discreetly through three different stories and, at times, the connections are easy to overlook. If Kingsolver's allusions to *Silent Spring* are similarly embedded in *Prodigal Summer* -

- if her critique is woven into the stories in the same fashion as her emphasis on connectedness (and I believe it is) -- then shouldn't we take a closer look at what else she might be saying?

Again, we must consider *Prodigal Summer's* three main characters for the answer. Just as they pay tribute to and mirror the message of *Silent Spring*, it is they who put Carson's methods under the microscope, for they assure us there are people living in this world who truly accept the responsibility of stewardship. Kingsolver's heroines are strong, educated women who demonstrate how we might live in harmony with nature. Deanna, Lusa and Nannie represent a growing population of citizens who are engaged, concerned, and willing to do their part for the greater ecological good. Ultimately, they leave readers with a sense of hope and faith in the future of our species and how it might come to peacefully coexist with others.

Silent Spring, on the other hand, doesn't have human "characters" in the traditional sense, but it manages to present humans as anything but heroic. The majority of people referenced in *Silent Spring* are either faceless, power-hungry bureaucrats and government officials or helpless victims -- all of whom diminish our confidence in man. Greg Garrard, in a discussion of rhapsodic nature writing (that which celebrates natural beauty and wildlife) versus jeremiad writing (that which serves as a warning or call to action) cites *Silent Spring* as a prime example of the latter (89). If we are to suppose, as some ecocritics do, that environmental literature can generally be classified as either one or the other, then *Prodigal Summer* must surely be the former. This difference may be the key to understanding Kingsolver's insinuations about *Silent Spring*.

Carson's skillful use of the apocalyptic mode seems to dominate her narrative, ultimately conjuring feelings of doom, defeat and hopelessness. According to Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline Palmer's analysis, this is the nature of the apocalyptic and an effective means for

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