

Grieving a Silent Spring

21 January 2026

ENGL 5V78

Alison Innes

ainnes@brocku.ca

Abstract

This presentation examines Rachel Carson's groundbreaking 1962 work *Silent Spring* within its social, political, and cultural context. Drawing on Marland (2013), I will consider *Silent Spring*'s connections to ecofeminist theories. I will introduce Butler's (2016) concepts of framing and grievability to explore how Carson uses Kramer's (1995) rules of literary journalism to frame environmental issues. Finally, I will bring in Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) as an Indigenous comparator to *Silent Spring* to consider how Indigenous methodologies might inform ecocriticism in literary journalism.

A copy of my presentation, handout and slide deck will be posted at <https://podcastologist.ca/2026/01/19/silent-spring> and I will provide printed copies of the handout during my presentation.

Rachel Carson in Context

Silent Spring is credited with launching the modern environmental movement. Post-war America in the 1950s and 1960s, buoyed by economic growth, was a prosperous nation surrounded by the Cold War threats of Russia and China (Wilson 358). The pursuit of

science was deeply intertwined with the pursuit of profit. The threats of the Cold War and post-war prosperity and consumerism encouraged the rapid development of new materials and processes. For the sake of American prosperity and security, science and technology were rewarded with high esteem and Americans placed “great trust in the seeming infallibility of material ingenuity” (Wilson 358).

Rachel Carson was born in Springdale Pennsylvania on May 27, 1907.¹ She grew up in this rural town, absorbing her lifelong love of nature from her mother. In 1929, she graduated from the Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham University), before going on to study at the Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory. In 1932 she earned her MA in Zoology from Johns Hopkins University in Maryland. The U.S. Bureau of Fisheries hired her to write radio scripts in the 1930s, where she eventually rose to the rank of editor-in-chief, as well as writing articles on natural history for the *Baltimore Sun*. For the Bureau she wrote pamphlets on conservation and natural resources until 1952 when she resigned to focus solely on her own writing. She lived in Silver Spring, Maryland from 1937 until her untimely death from complications of breast cancer on April 14, 1964. Although Carson did not claim to be feminist, her work coincided with the rise of second wave feminism in 1960s United States and would later be considered part of the foundation of ecocriticism.

Silent Spring had its supporters in the scientific community (Lear 437), but it received instant backlash from both scientists and industry. Carson was furiously attacked by scientists, government and industry as they attempted to suppress her message (Lear 429). She was dismissed as a spinster and probably communist by the then-Secretary of

¹ This section is summarized from <https://www.rachelcarson.org/biography>

Agriculture, Ezra Taft Benson, in a report to Eisenhower (Lear 429). The press obsessed about her marital status and *Time* magazine characterized her book as filled with errors, oversimplifications and scary generalizations (Lear 430). She was accused of being a mass murderer when DDT, which had been used to manage the spread of malaria *via* mosquitoes, was banned (McKie), and she dismissed as a “bird and bunny lover” and a sentimental romantic (Lear, “Introduction” xvii). In short, writes her biographer Linda Lear, “Carson was a woman out of control. She had overstepped the bounds of her gender and her science” (Lear, “Introduction” xvii).

Carson’s writing shook people out of complacency—they could no longer assume “someone else” was taking care of things (Lear 423). Letter writers to the editor of the *New Yorker*, predominantly women, expressed concern with a “spectrum of pollution” including food additives, thalidomide, radioactive fallout, and fluoride, as well as government secrecy and industry deception (Lear 435). Despite dealing with breast cancer and the effects of radiotherapy, Carson continued to denounce the links between corporate industry and science, asking the Women’s National Press Club “When a scientific organisation speaks, whose voice do we hear—that of science or of the sustaining industry?” (Carson, “Address to the Women’s National Press Club - Dec. 5, 1962”; McKie).

By her death in April 1964, *Silent Spring* had sold over a million copies (McKie). Her work continued to be validated after her death. The 1970s saw the start of an annual Earth Day celebration to raise public awareness of environmental issues. Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and passed the Clean Water Act in 1972. Later, in 1976, the Toxic Substances Control Act was passed in the US—over a decade after the

publication of *Silent Spring*. Under the current American administration, however, the EPA has been forced to cut their research due to funding cuts as the environment once again takes a back seat to industry. Our oceans are now seeing the accumulation of chemicals that Rachel Carson warned about (McKie).

***Silent Spring* Summary & Literary Journalism**

Silent Spring has been described as lyrical but also relentless (McKie). From the perspective of science writing it is lyrical and accessible, but it also follows a potentially monotonous tone. Her writing is an accordion-like pattern of broad generalizations and descriptions, and then a specific example or two. She is not so much telling a narrative story but amassing scientific evidence to build a case about the harms of chemical pesticides. In writing this book, Carson was taking on the male-dominated, patriarchal institution of North American science and its interdependence on American industry. The scope of her writing is vast, from global ecological systems like water and air to cellular processes and genetics. To cover such sweeping territory requires a balance between the broad descriptions and the specific examples which at times feel, at least to me, somewhat cursory coverage.

With years of scientific training, research, and writing under her belt, Carson has immersed herself in her subject. She is writing about something that is routine—the use of chemical pesticides in wilderness, farms, and homes in post-war America. She writes with a frank and direct voice, using imperative language to direct the reader towards action. When writing of the build up of DDT in salmon in British Columbia, she writes that “Despite

these precautions, and despite the fact that a sincere effort was apparently made, *in at least four major streams almost 100 percent of the salmon were killed*" (138). Her use of italics here further emphasizes the enormity of something that is almost too enormous to contemplate. Later on the same page she writes "we must make wider use of alternative methods...we must devote our ingenuity and resources to developing others," with the repetition of the imperative "must" emphasizing the need for action.

Largely absent from the work is the author herself. In a modern piece, such as Richardson's "Ballad of the Sad Climatologists" or Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the reader is given a sense of the author and their processes in the first person. Their subjects are fleshed out as nuanced, controversial, and intriguing characters in their own rights. When Carson appeals to authority to support her claims, however, those authorities range from nameless scientists or "biologists" (134) to a specific government department (e.g. Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Game p. 135). This emphasizes, I think, that her argument is not against individuals but against the systems that permit the collusion of industry and science in the destruction of the natural environment. When she does refer to a specific person, they are given their full name, title, and organization, but are not developed into characters, such as Professor Rolf Eliassen of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (40) or Dr. W. C. Hueper of the National Cancer Institute (50). While Carson uses the first-person plural to situate herself in alliance with the reader, she only infrequently speaks of her personal observations. For example, on page 247 she describes her personal observation of a school of jellyfish:

I remember from student days the miracle that could be wrought in a jar containing a simple mixture of hay and water... Or I think of shore rocks white with barnacles as far as the eye can see, or the spectacle of passing through an immense school of jelly fish, mile after mile, with seemingly no end to the pulsing, ghostly forms scarcely more substantial than the water itself.

Compared with what we might see from later ecofeminist literary journalists, Carson only offers the briefest glimpses into her personal experiences and her inner world of thought. I suspect this may be a deliberate move to try to pre-empt the scientific community's criticism of her as a hysterical, sentimental, nature-lover.

Carson's knowledge of literature comes through in her references to literary work. Her references include poet H. M. Tomlinson's essay "The Lost Wood" (106) and Lewis Carroll's White Knight (183) from his 1871 book *Through the Looking Glass*. Carson's title for chapter 17, "The Other Road" is a direct reference to American poet Robert Frost's 1915 poem "The Road Not Taken." Using Frost's imagery of diverging roads, Carson places readers at the fork with a choice to make (277). Frost's poem is tinged by the narrator's regret that he (or she) cannot take both roads but must choose. Carson evokes the sense of potential regret if we do not choose differently. Her characterization of the road as a "smooth superhighway" also alludes to the Biblical parable of two roads, a broad and easy one that leads to destruction or a narrow and more difficult one that leads to salvation (Matthew 7:23).

Silent Spring spawned an environmental movement. As a work of literature, it marks an important moment in history worthy of examination and re-examination because, as Wilson says, “the battle Rachel Carson helped to lead on behalf of the environment is far from won” (363).

Ecofeminism

Feminist theories challenge the social structures that uphold a patriarchal power structure. Feminism identifies and disrupts the hierarchies of Western thought and unsettles the binaries it operates on (Marland 852). Some of the binaries that patriarchy enforces can be seen here:

Female	Male
Passive	Active
Nature	Reason
Background	Foreground
Bearer of meaning	Maker of meaning
Dependent	Independent
Cold, moist	Hot, dry
Indoor/domestic space	Outdoor/active space
Wild, untamed	Self-controlled

Feminism sits somewhat uneasily alongside ecocriticism, as throughout many cultures women have been framed as wild, lacking self-control, and needing taming by men.

Women's association with wild nature can be seen in these examples from the Roman orator Cato through to psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud:

- Woman is a violent and uncontrolled animal. (Cato)
- A necessary object, woman, who is needed to preserve the species or to provide food and drink. (Thomas Aquinas)
- However man rules in science and art/The sphere of women's glories is the heart. (Thomas Moore)
- A woman is but an animal and an animal not of the highest order. (Edmund Burke)
- I cannot conceive of you to be human creatures, but a sort of species hardly a degree above a monkey. (Jonathan Swift)
- Women are certainly capable of learning, but they are not made for the higher forms of science.... (G. Hegel)
- Women represent the interests of the family and sexual life; the work of civilisation has become more and more men's business. (Sigmund Freud)

As these quotes show, there is a long history in Western thought of considering women uncomfortably close, if not squarely in, the category of nature, animal, or not-quite human.

Women are necessary, but they are uncontrolled animals; an animal of the higher order,

perhaps, but still an animal (Plumwood 19). The realm of civilization, the mastery of nature, and the world of reason is the domain of men, according to patriarchy. The category of nature excludes and devalues reason, but includes “the emotions, the body, passions, animality, primitive and uncivilized” (Plumwood 19–20). Nature, particularly as Mother Nature, is feminine, untamed, sentimental, romantic, and temperamental. Nature, like women, is pushed into the background of man’s activities (Plumwood 21). Discomfort with the way patriarchal systems associate women with nature leads some feminists to view any connection with nature with suspicion (Plumwood 20). Ecofeminism requires feminists to embrace the association of women with nature in a new way that challenges patriarchal norms and connects various axes of oppression.

Although Carson denied any connection to the feminist movement of the 1960s and the term ecofeminist did not appear until a decade after her death, Carson’s work exemplifies ecofeminist praxis (Joseph 119), and she has been described as an “ecofeminist forerunner” (Gaard and Gruen 535). Ecofeminism is an intersectional theoretical approach that links the historical patriarchal domination of women by men to ongoing environmental destruction (Marland 852; Joseph 119). Ecofeminism draws heavily on the insights of 1970s social feminism to develop “a ‘multi systems’ approach to understanding the interconnected forces that operate to oppress women and the natural world” (Gaard and Gruen 532). Ecofeminism believes that the current crises humanity is facing are the result of the mutually reinforcing and intersecting ideologies of racism, sexism, classism, imperialism, naturism, and speciesism, which create complex systems of oppression (Gaard and Gruen 532). While liberal feminism focusses on understanding

women as rational human beings, ecofeminism broadens its scope. Ecofeminists share the vision of a “just and sustainable future” but what exactly this is and how it is to be achieved is widely varied (Gaard and Gruen 536).

I want to introduce here two ideas from feminist theorist Judith Butler that might help us in our discussion of Carson’s work. The first is the idea of grievability; the second is framing. Both are explored in Butler’s 2009 work *Frames of War*. While Butler is writing about the traditional concept of warfare and drawing on unfortunately still timely examples from Gaza and the Arab world, I think these concepts are useful for considering both the war of chemical pesticides on nature and the intense backlash Carson received from industry in response to her book.

Grievability

Butler’s concept of grievability asks, whose life is worth grieving? When a life is recognized and apprehended as a life by the normative structures of a society, it is said to be grievable. Living beings outside of the norms of life are problems to be managed and although living, are not considered a life (Butler 8). To say that a life is grievable is to say that it matters, or has value:

Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of life appear. Thus, grievability is the presupposition for the life that matters.

(Butler 14)

The question of what life is grievable comes through again and again in *Silent Spring*. The pesticide industry is depicted as eagerly embracing the use of chemicals in the fields and in the home. Insect “pests” are promised to be eradicated, but they never are. An insect like budworm (chapter nine) or the gypsy moth or fire ant (chapter ten) is deemed a pest and therefore their destruction is not grievable—in fact, it would be celebrated. And yet despite the copious application of chemical pesticides, and the massive downstream and food web impacts of those chemicals, the budworm, gypsy moth, and fire ant persist. Carson does not argue for the complete elimination of chemical pesticides but only for their moderation (Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* 423), which could suggest that she still deems some life forms ungrievable. But the central argument of her book is for the grievability of natural life, from the microscopic soil microbes and cellular processes to global water cycles, and in particular the insects. This is beautifully captured in her closing sentence:

It is our alarming misfortune that so primitive a science has armed itself with the most modern and terrible of weapons, and that in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth. (Carson, *Silent Spring* 297)

The chemical weapons are turned indiscriminately against all insect life, the beneficial and those deemed “pests.” In this war on insects, all nature becomes ungrievable collateral damage.

Framing

The second Butlerian concept is that of framing. It is related to grievability in that framing influences our perception of something or someone as grievable. The framing of a war determines what we, as the viewers, will focus on. It is an operation of power (Butler 1). Life and death happen in relation to some kind of frame (Butler 7). The frame is not neutral but editorial, as it guides our interpretation of the image (Butler 8). The frame not only includes certain subjects, it excludes others. When we call the frame into question we can begin to see what is outside of the frame and trouble our existing understanding of things (Butler 9). So in *Silent Spring* we see Carson framing the microscopic life as still grievable. We see industry framing chemicals as the solution and having minimal risk to living beings. Carson frames the destruction of nature as immediate and alarming.

Carson repeatedly uses the framing of war when describing environmental destruction. In chapter seven, which unpacks the impact of chemical spraying for Japanese beetles, Carson says “Under the philosophy that now seems to guide our destinies, nothing must get in the way of the man with the spray gun” (85). Robins, pheasants, pets, and livestock are ungrievable victims on man’s “crusade” (86). Towards the end of the chapter, she frames spraying as not only a scientific but a moral question and asks “whether any civilization can wage a relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right be called civilized” (99). She frames the act of

acquiescing to the suffering of other living creatures as diminishment of human beings (100).

Framing can also be considered in how industry, government, and scientists responded to Carson. Carson was perceived as an outsider who dared to question male scientific authority. Industry framed Carson as a hysterical woman:

It was clear to the industry that Rachel Carson was a hysterical woman whose alarming view of the future could be ignored or, if necessary, suppressed. She was a “bird and bunny lover,” a woman who kept cats and was therefore clearly suspect. She was a romantic ‘spinster’ who was simply overwrought about genetics. In short, Carson was a woman out of control. She had overstepped the bounds of her gender and her science. (Lear, “Introduction” xvii)

Carson uses the technique of framing to focus the reader’s attention on the interconnected web of life, from tiny plankton to plants and mammals, that make up the natural world. Pollution may be invisible to the naked eye, but it must be understood within its context wider environmental (39). Carson stretches out the frame from focus on a problematic insect, such as a budworm or Japanese beetle, to bring into focus the intricate connections of the ecological web. In turn, the predominately male scientific, government, and industry response to narrow the frame on her to that of an emotional, hysterical woman who should be easily dismissed.

Ecofeminism and Decolonization

Indigenous people and perspectives are absent from Carson's work. While she refers to the impact of chemical pesticides on Alaskan "Eskimos" and describes their traditional diet from living off the land (179), she writes of the scientists investigating the diet and describes the land as "remote and primitive" and "lacking the amenities of civilization" (179). This is a very colonial perspective of nature as uninhabited wilderness, untouched, savage, and requiring taming and control. The Indigenous peoples are objects of curiosity and study, not agents in their own lives. But I would like us to consider the Indigenous perspective on what Carson is writing. She recognizes the need for balance in nature:

In some quarters nowadays it is fashionable to dismiss the balance of nature as a state of affairs that prevailed in an earlier, simpler world—a state that has now been so thoroughly upset that we might as well forget it. (246).

Carson argues for balance in nature and moderation in the use of chemical pesticides rather than the complete cessation of chemical pesticides (Carson, *Silent Spring* 246; Lear, "The Life and Legacy of Rachel Carson" 423; Wilson 361). She argues for an understanding that all nature, human and non-human, is interconnected. And while she does not recognize or credit this as Indigenous knowledge, the concept of balance, harmony, and relationship with the land is deeply rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing.

Anishnaabe Ukrainian author Patty Krawec shares the importance of relationships between people and the land in *Becoming Kin*. This connection is not about ownership of

the land, but relationship to and with the land (Krawec 140). Land is an integral part of Indigenous identities and ways of life. It is not owned by people, and it is not solely used by people. “Undeveloped” land is already land in use by a myriad of life forms. The *Ohenten Kariwatekwen* (meaning the words that come before all else), known in English as the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address, acknowledges all of creation and humanity’s place within it. It is given before ceremonies and gatherings to unite people in a common goal (Humke). Each element of the natural world, from the stars, sun, and moon to specific plants and animals, is acknowledged and thanked.

I am running short on time here, so I would like to shift to a discussion of what interconnected threads you may see between Rachel Carson’s work and Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Kimmerer is a trained biologist, and her book explores the interconnections between colonial scientific ways of understanding the world and Indigenous teachings. I have included a short excerpt from her chapter on the pollution of Onondaga Lake, in New York Finger Lakes district, as a starting point of comparison for thinking about the agency she gives to nature.

(Notes for discussion: agency of nature; active/passive voice; appropriation of blame; mobile stance; interconnected web of nature)

Discussion Questions

1. Kramer (1995) provides us with eight breakable rules of literary journalism.
Focussing in particular on her chapters on water, how does Carson use or break these rules to frame human relationship to the environment?
2. Kramer says “the defining mark of literary journalism is the personality of the writer” (1995, 29). In what ways do you see Carson’s personality emerge (or not) in these chapters? How does this compare to Robin Wall Kimmerer’s writing?
3. Robin Wall Kimmerer wrote her exploration of the environmental destruction of the Finger Lakes in New York state fifty years after Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*.
What threads or themes does Wall Kimmerer continue? What new threads does she pick up (or what threads does she lay down)?
4. Using the Marland and Glotfelty readings from last week, what would you include in the eight rules of ecofeminism or ecocriticism? Would there be rules that would be included in ecofeminism but not ecocriticism (or *vice versa*)?

Optional Supplementary Readings

Gaard, Greta, and Lori Gruen. “Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health.”

The Portable Feminist Reader, edited by Roxane Gay, Penguin, 2025, pp. 531–36.

Joseph, Sue. “Silent Spring: The Rise of the Environmental Movement.” *The Literary*

Journalist as a Naturalist, edited by Pablo Calvi, Palgrave Macmillan, an imprint of

Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025, pp. 111–31. Palgrave Studies in Literary Journalism.

Lear, Linda. “The Life and Legacy of Rachel Carson.” *Rachel Carson*, <https://www.rachelcarson.org>. Accessed 14 Jan. 2026.

Marland, Pippa. “Ecocriticism.” *Literature Compass*, vol. 10/11, 2013, pp. 846–68, <https://doi.org/10.111/lic3.12105>.

“Legacy of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring National Historic Chemical Landmark.” *American Chemical Society*, <https://www.acs.org/education/whatischemistry/landmarks/rachel-carson-silent-spring.html>. Accessed 14 Jan. 2026.

McKie, Robin. “Rachel Carson and the Legacy of Silent Spring.” *The Guardian*, 26 May 2012. Science. *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/may/27/rachel-carson-silent-spring-anniversary>.

“The Legacy of Rachel Carson.” *Silent Spring Institute*, <https://silentspring.org/about-us/our-story/legacy-rachel-carson-0>. Accessed 14 Jan. 2026.

Wall Kimmerer, Robin. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Milkweed, 2013. (Library ebook: https://ocul-bu.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01OCUL_BU/hngtcg/alma991009127498905152)

Works Cited

Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2016.

Carson, Rachel. "Address to the Women's National Press Club - Dec. 5, 1962." *Archives of Women's Political Communication*,
<https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2018/01/08/address-to-the-womens-national-press-club-dec-4-1962/>. Accessed 17 Jan. 2026.

———. *Silent Spring*. Mariner, 1962.

Gaard, Greta, and Lori Gruen. "Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health." 1993. *The Portable Feminist Reader*, edited by Roxane Gay, Penguin, 2025, pp. 531–36.

Humke, Matt. "Thanksgiving Address." *Experience Akwesasne*, 20 Aug. 2021,
<https://akwesasne.travel/our-stories/thanksgiving-address/>.

Joseph, Sue. "Silent Spring: The Rise of the Environmental Movement." *The Literary Journalist as a Naturalist*, edited by Pablo Calvi, Palgrave Macmillan, an imprint of Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025, pp. 111–31. Palgrave Studies in Literary Journalism.

Krawec, Patty. *Becoming Kin*. Broadleaf Books, 2022.

Lear, Linda. "Introduction." *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carson, Mariner, 2002, pp. x–xix.

———. *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*. Henry Holt, 1997.

———. "The Life and Legacy of Rachel Carson." *Rachel Carson*,
<https://www.rachelcarson.org>. Accessed 14 Jan. 2026.

Marland, Pippa. "Ecocriticism." *Literature Compass*, vol. 10/11, 2013, pp. 846–68,
<https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12105>.

McKie, Robin. "Rachel Carson and the Legacy of Silent Spring." *The Guardian*, 26 May
2012. Science. *The Guardian*,
<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/may/27/rachel-carson-silent-spring-anniversary>.

Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. 1993. Routledge, 1993.

Wilson, Edward O. "Afterword." *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carson, Mariner, 2002, pp. 357–
63.