

Under the Sea-Wind : First in a Treasure Chest of Sea Books from Rachel Carson

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Rachel Carson is now remembered largely for *Silent Spring* (1962), but this book was preceded by three best-sellers about the ocean environment: *Under the Sea-Wind* (1941), *The Sea around Us* (1951) and *The Edge of the Sea* (1955). In this paper I will focus on the ways in which her favorite poets influenced her first published book, *Under the Sea-Wind*. Then I will examine Carson's narrative technique and a tactful control of points of view in the book.

1 Carson's love of poetry

First, I would like to show how Carson incorporated poetical elements into *Under the Sea-Wind*. It is frequently mentioned that she decided to pursue her career as a biologist when she read the final lines of "Locksley Hall" by Alfred Tennyson in her dormitory at Pennsylvania College for Women. Carson repeatedly expressed her fondness for the works of Tennyson, A. C. Swinburne and John Masefield. She elaborated her idea on the sea and poets in an article titled "Sea Leaves Its Mark on World Poets." In the article, she claimed that one of the best known and best loved poems on the sea is John Masefield's "Sea Fever."¹⁾ Now, John Masefield was a sailor before he became a poet and playwright. His poems and ballads are known for showing his passionate, romantic, and somewhat nostalgic love for the sea. "The Gull's Way," the title for the second part of *Under the Sea-Wind*, might have been taken from Masefield's "Sea Fever." Carson also noted the significance of the ocean for major English poets such as Shakespeare, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats. Above all, according to Carson, the sea's "very essence is captured in the poetry of Swinburne, who, in his rhythmic flow of words, gives us in verse something of the hypnotic effect of the sea itself."²⁾ In short, as she said at the New York Herald-Tribune Book and Author Luncheon in 1951, she "loved Swinburne and Masefield and all the other great poets of the sea."³⁾ It was natural then for Carson that she took the epigraph for *Under the Sea-Wind* from Swinburne's "A Forsaken Garden," in which he contrasts the perpetuity of the sea with the limited life of the garden and of human love.

While the sun and the rain live, these shall be;
Till a last wind's breath upon all these blowing
Roll the sea.

To open her first book, Carson chose to emphasize the eternal existence of the sea.

Carson greatly admired Swinburne's "rhythmic flow of words," and wanted it to be an integral part of her work. She was, as Linda Lear observes, "conscious of the role of alliteration and rhythm to create atmosphere, and she read pages aloud to herself before she had her mother read them back to her."⁴⁾

1) Rachel Carson, "Sea Leaves Its Mark on World Poets," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*. December 2, 1951, 7.

2) Ibid., 7.

3) Linda Lear ed., *Lost Woods: The Discovered Writing of Rachel Carson*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998, 77.

4) Lear, "Introduction," *Under the Sea-Wind*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007, xiii.

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As she said in the foreword to the first edition, Carson tried to "make the sea and its life as vivid a reality for those who may read the book"⁵⁾ as possible. To accomplish the purpose, the narrative should be truthful, and it should have poetry and music to help the reader follow the world that is introduced. To illustrate the point, we would only have to see the opening paragraph of the book. Carson uses alliteration and assonance effectively.

The Island lay in shadows only a little deeper than those that were swiftly stealing across the sound from the east. On its western shore the wet sand of the narrow beach caught the same reflection of palely gleaming sky that laid a bright path across the water from island beach to horizon. Both water and sand were the color of steel overlaid with the sheen of silver, so that it was hard to say where water ended and land began. (10 Underline mine)

The letter "s" is predominant. In "swiftly stealing across the sound," for example, the sharp 's' sound is used to describe the swift movement of falling dusk. Assonance frequently accompanies alliteration, as Carol Gartner points out.⁶⁾ The following sentences evocatively describe the changing colors of the sky and the sea. They are beautiful in both their visual image and aurally. One can picture the blurring of the ocean and the land in the dusk from the phrase "both water and sand were the color of steel overlaid with the sheen of silver."

Some critics remark that Carson's style is poetic. Carol Gartner, the first critic who focused on the literary aspect of Carson's writing, asserts that *Under the Sea-Wind* has both scientific accuracy and the poetry of word pictures and building rhythms.⁷⁾ Miura and Ogihara also indicate that there are poetic phrases throughout *Under the Sea-Wind*.⁸⁾ They clarify the point with several extracts. For example, "On a day when the full harvest moon sailed like a white balloon in the sky" is so beautiful that readers can visualize the scene of the silver harvest moon sailing silently in the night sky.⁹⁾ Simultaneously, "the tides, which had grown in strength as the moon swelled to roundness, began to wash out a gully across the inlet beach." From the description, we also realize that there is a correlation between the tide and the moon. Then, with the visiting tide, the fish in the pond head for the sea:

Leaping and racing, foaming and swirling, the incoming flood brought release to the myriads of small fishes that had been imprisoned in the pond……. In their excitement they let the flood take them, toss them, turn them over and over. (53 Underline mine)

The rush and liveliness of the small fish is emphasized by present participles; "Leaping and racing, foaming and swirling." The repetitive "take them, toss them, turn them" is rhythmical and effective to show

5) Rachel Carson, "Foreword," *Under the Sea-Wind*, 3.

6) Carol B. Gartner, *Rachel Carson*. New York: Frederick Unger, 1983, 41.

7) Ibid., 29.

8) Miura Shoko and Ogihara Shiori, "Rachel Carson and Nature Writing," *The Report of Tokyo University of Fisheries*, No. 38 (March 2003), 12.

9) Ibid., 12.

that small fishes are at the mercy of the flood.

Carson weaved poetry into scientifically accurate narratives on the ocean. Her style is reminiscent of that of Swinburne, Masfield and all the other great poets of the sea.

2 Narrative technique and points of view

Secondly, I will briefly discuss Carson's characterization of birds, mackerel, eel and other central creatures in *Under the Sea-Wind*. *Under the Sea-Wind* is, in its author's words, "a series of descriptive narratives unfolding successively the life of the shore, the open sea, and the sea bottom."¹⁰ Book One depicts the life of the shore; Book Two is about the open sea; and Book Three is about the sea bottom. As far as possible, Carson wanted her readers to feel that they were, for a time, actually living the lives of sea creatures.¹¹ As Cheryll Glotfelty remarks, *Under the Sea-Wind* helps its readers "to become a fish or a bird or an eel or a drifting plankton."¹²

As a scientist working for the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Carson was determined to represent the oceanic world without the human bias of most popular books about the ocean.¹³ She should avoid anything unacceptable to scientists, and she refused to give inaccurate information to the public. On the other hand, she wanted the readers to find joy and delight in reading the book. She thought if the book had central characters, it helped the readers to sympathize with the oceanic world mostly unknown to them. She felt the sea itself would be her central character, though each part has its own major creatures named and individualized in the manner of Henry Williamson, an English naturalist she admired.

According to Linda Lear's extensive biography, Rachel's childhood favorites were the animal stories by Beatrix Potter with their wonderfully detailed drawings. She was also captivated by the adventures of Todd and Mole and their friends in *Wind in the Willows* (1908), like countless other children.¹⁴ Then, around the time she entered graduate school, she discovered Henry Williamson.¹⁵ His *Tarka the Otter* (1927) and *Salar the Salmon* (1935) impressed her because Williamson wrote how Tarka or Salar experienced the underwater world from their respective points of view. Paul Brooks, the first biographer and an editor of Carson's works, comments that her approach is reminiscent of Henry Williamson.¹⁶ Quoting Carson's review on *Tarka the Otter*, Brooks writes:

Her comment on Williamson's achievement in *Tarka* reflects her own goal in writing her first book, *Under the Sea-Wind*: "He enters into the life of the otter, sees with its eyes, follows and portrays the moving drama of its everyday life." (Brooks 8)

10)Carson, "Foreword," of *Under the Sea-Wind*, 3.

11)Carson, "Memo to Mrs. Eales on *Under the Sea-Wind*," 56.

12)Cheryll Glotfelty, "Rachel Carson," 154.

13)Carson, "Memo to Mrs. Eales on *Under the Sea-Wind*," 55.

14)Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*, 17.

15)Ibid., 90.

16)Paul Brooks, *Rachel Carson: The Writer at Work*, 7.

Carson felt a sense of identification with the creatures she wrote about. She was, however, well aware of the dangers of anthropomorphism. According to Lear, Williamson had achieved his sense of identification with his animals by subtly anthropomorphizing them. Carson thought she could avoid the error of anthropomorphism by making the sea and its life a vivid reality and by more accurately re-creating the natural conditions sea creatures inhabit.¹⁷⁾

For Carson, to get the feeling of what it is like to be a creature of the sea requires the active exercise of imagination and the temporary abandonment of many human concepts and human yardsticks. On the other hand, if we depart too far from analogy with human conduct, a fish, shrimp, comb jelly, or bird doesn't seem as real a living creature as it actually is.¹⁸⁾

In the twelfth chapter "Seine Haul," a process of fishing called "seine hauling" is described from the mackerel's eyes in addition to the omniscient narrator's point of view. The chapter begins with the omniscient narrator's description of a November night:

The night the sea burned with unusual phosphorescence. Many fish were near the surface, feeding. The chill of November quickened their movements, and as their schools rolled through the water they disturbed the millions of luminous plankton animals, causing them to glow with a fierce luster. (119)

The paragraph is descriptive and written with total objectivity, although the scene is mysterious with flickering light against the dark night. The second paragraph introduces Scomber the mackerel, the central character in that part. In the third paragraph, there is a significant shift to Scomber's point of view: "This was a larger school [of older mackerel] than Scomber had ever known before." Then an observing eye introduces one mackerel seiner with a dozen fishermen. As the fishermen find the school of mackerel, the captain gives the order to attempt a set. The boat makes a smaller circle and the water becomes brighter with the higher density of mackerels. Carson creates a dramatic scene:

The mackerel were nervous and uneasy. Those on the outside of the school were aware of a heavy movement, as of some large sea creature in the water near them. They felt the wash of its passage through the sea— the heavy wake of displaced water……Fearing the strange monsters, the mackerel feeding at the edge of the school turned in toward the center. (121-22 Underline mine)

Here, words like "nervous," "uneasy" and "fearing" are used to describe the behaviors of mackerel. Carson explained her method of expressing the feelings of a fish:

I have spoken of a fish "fearing" his enemies……not because I suppose a fish experiences fear in the same way that we do, but because I think he behaves as though he were frightened. With the fish, the response is primarily physical; with us, primarily psychological. Yet if the behavior of the fish is to be understandable to us, we must describe it in the words that most properly belong to human psychological states. (Foreword 5)

17)Lear, *Rachel Carson*, 91.

18)Carson, "Foreword," *Under the Sea-Wind*, 5.

As we have seen on the above, Carson sometimes made suggestions of anthropomorphism, but was careful to distinguish them from scientifically accurate behaviors.

The most unusual shift, however, is to a young fisherman on the mackerel boat.¹⁹⁾ In *Under the Sea-Wind*, human beings like fishermen are given no more than the time and attention she gives to other animals. Fishermen appear as predators like sharks and eagles, except one young fisherman in "Seine Haul." He is a unique figure among the humans in *Under the Sea-Wind* in that his is the only individual human point of view Carson uses. Firstly, the young fisherman seems sympathetic towards the fish. He has "the unslakable curiosity," that is, "curiosity about what lay under the surface (122)." Secondly, he is imaginative enough to wonder at what it would be like to live undersea as a fish. When he has "time to think such thoughts (123)," he wonders what the eyes of the mackerel have seen. Carson has him think, "What a splendid sight to see those fish streaking by at top speed in a blaze of meteoric flashes! (124)" We sense that human beings know far too little about the ocean.

It seems that the thought in his mind represents Carson's own imagination, who was thrilled with the mysteries of the ocean at the first actual experiences with it. As Miura and Ogihara point out, Carson gives him a representative role as a human being who sympathizes with sea life.²⁰⁾ His mind is filled with curiosity about nature, and his attitude toward nature is what Carson would like her readers to follow.

Conclusion

Carson always had a great appreciation for the natural world. She spent a great deal of her childhood exploring the woods on her family's property watching birds, insects and flowers. Besides exploring the natural world, she developed a love of poetry, as she recalled in adulthood: "I loved Swinburne and Masefield and all the other great poets of the sea." Through reading their poems, Carson both formed a strong attachment to the sea and acquired literary skills which she tactfully used in *Under the Sea-Wind*. Her fondness for animal stories and for reading about lively creatures in rivers and seas had their influence too, although Carson developed her own methods to meet the requirements of scientific writing. Carson's gifts as a writer and a scientist most perfectly come together in her firstborn, *Under the Sea-Wind*.

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19)Gartner, *Rachel Carson*, 33.

20)Miura and Ogihara, "Rachel Carson and Nature Writing," 18.

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紀要論文(2007)抄録

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レイチェル・カーソン(Rachel Carson, 1907-1964)の最初の著作である『潮風の下で』(*Under the Sea-Wind*, 1941)は、作家としての才能と科学者としての見識が最もよく融合した作品として評価すべきである。本稿では次の二点から『潮風の下で』の文学性を検証した。(1)A.C. スウィンバーン(A.C. Swinburne)やジョン・メイスフィールド(John Masefield)の詩の要素の効果的な利用 (2)語りの視点の工夫

カーソンは海を題材にしたスウィンバーンやメイスフィールドの詩を愛読したことを公言しているが、『潮風の下で』には、題材や情景描写の選択に彼らの影響がみられるだけでなく、韻律においてもスウィンバーン同様に頭韻が多用され、詩的效果をあげている。また、カーソンは作品各部で特定の鳥や魚を主要な登場人物として設定し、その生物の視点を借りて海の世界を描くことで、科学者としての正確さを犠牲にすることなく、海の世界を読者に身近なものにすることに成功した。