Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,   
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,   
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;   
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
                                                 -- Robert Frost

**Opening the Conversation about Climate Refugees with *The Grapes of Wrath***

*The Grapes of Wrath* may be the most honored American novel ever written – winning the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Nobel Prize. Certainly, Steinbeck is an important author in the secondary curriculum. *Of Mice and Men*, *The Pearl*, and *The Red Pony* are often taught, yet *The Grapes of Wrath* has special contemporary relevance. Set in the 1930s Dust Bowl, the novel describes a severe drought in the Southern Plains States that created massive dust storms, removed topsoil, and destroyed food crops. The Joads, in their forced departure from Oklahoma and journey to California, were just one family of 3.5 million people that left the Plains. *The Grapes of Wrath* chronicles this desperate drought-caused human movement, the largest short-term migration in American history.

Although the Dust Bowl of the 1930s was not an event occasioned by human-caused global warming, scientists tell us that the greenhouse gasses humans have emitted since then, especially since the Great Acceleration of the 1950s, are rapidly warming our planet, and causing severe droughts and dust storms around the world. As drought, heat waves, wild fires, enormous storms, polar vortices, sea-level rise, and other human-caused "natural" disasters increase, the numbers of climate migrants, displaced people, and refugees will swell world-wide from currently tens of millions, to the hundreds of millions. This will happen certainly within the lifetime of our students and is already underway. Indeed, climate change may be the greatest challenge facing humankind, yet *we are not talking about it*. The latest data gathered by the Yale Program on Climate Communication (2018) indicates that although 70% of Americans believe global warming in happening, 64% never talk about it. (https://bit.ly/2M8Ml9Y) My experience teaching *The Grapes of Wrath* as an opening for conversation about climate change and learning about the experience of climate refugees, convinces me that this novel can help our students think deeply and compassionately about the present, and our looming future.

To establish conversation about climate refugees, I divided *The Grapes of Wrath* into three main parts, Drought, Migration, and Life in the New Land. I quote from our class discussion, and from the papers and the blogs that emerged from our reading and dialogue. (Blogs available at https://bit.ly/2AeIDoj).

**Drought**

As we read the first part of the novel, students discussed the Dust Bowl destroying the ability of the Joads and their neighbors to survive from the land where they have lived for generations. Drought, one of the most dangerous impacts of climate change, is expected to devastate food production in major breadbaskets around the world, including in the United States. (NASA predicts droughts in America in the life of our students four times longer that the Dust Bowl. (Miller, 137)) The 1930s drought Steinbeck describes is destructive enough. Banks foreclose on farms and send tractors to push houses over. The police arrive, armed, to catch anyone who attempts to stay. The farmers despair, “This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us. We can’t start again.” (95) Forced to leave they ask, “How can we live without our lives? How will we know it’s us without our past?” (96)

*The Grapes of Wrath* describes the Joads and other climate refugees attempting to maintain their dignity. My student Jeylani, whose family immigrated from Somalia, opened up, shared with us, and wrote in his blog about the Joads,

Throughout their journey, they are very conscious about their appearance, and do not want to be perceived as beggars. This is a sentiment that I relate very close to, as my family has been of the same uncompromising values of never looking like we struggle in life. [Quoting the novel] “Tom dropped angrily to the ground and moved toward the fat man. ‘We’re paying our way,’ he said fiercely. ‘You got no call to give us a goin’-over. We ain’t asked you for nothin’.” (136)

Before I started teaching *The* *Grapes of Wrath*, I wondered if my students would make connections between events in the novel and issues in the present day. In his first blog post only a few days after we started the novel, Collin wrote:

Don’t let the fact that we are in the 21st Century fool you into thinking that the Dust Bowl was the end of American migration due to climate change. Jeff Goodell writing for *Rolling Stone* [“Welcome to the Age of Climate Migration,” 2-25-18] compares a modern family on Route 66 to the Joad family. How can he not? They lost their home as a result of Hurricane Harvey [that flooded Houston in 2017] and had nowhere to go, so they loaded up their van with only the things they could carry…

Through our conversations about the early portion of *The Grapes of Wrath*, my students learned important lessons. Involuntary migration is traumatic and devastating, wrenching people and families apart. People do not leave their land, their homes, and their communities unless they are forced to by unlivable conditions, or violence, or both.

**Migration**

The second part of *The Grapes of Wrath* describes the abuse that refugees suffer as they flee for survival. Again and again, owners of stores, gas stations, and land take advantage of the Joads, trying to make money from their desperation. Locals, frightened of refugees, carry pick handles and shotguns to block streets and attack refugee camps. (309) The Dust Bowl climate refugees encounter threatening road blocks and check points. Lexie writes,

On the road the Joad’s are trying to cross this “free country,” but they soon find out the country is not as free as it should be. Pa says to a man, “This is a free country. Fella can go where he wants.” The man replies, “That’s what you think! Ever hear of the border patrol in the California line? Police from Los Angeles stopped you bastards, turned you back. Says, if you have no real estate we don’t want you. Says, got a driver’s license? Let’s see it. Tore it up. Says you can’t come in without a driver’s license.” (130)

“Okies” are brutalized by police officers on the road and in migrant camps. Jack put it this way, “The police misuse their power and trample the rights of their fellow citizens to try and regain some warped idea of order.”

In the novel the migrants try to help each other, and they occasionally find people along the way who treat them decently. Cynthia explains, “The migrants became skilled in making friends with one another and supporting each other. It did not take long for them to realize that they were better as a whole than they were as individuals.” In the most uplifting section of the novel the Joads are residents at a government camp where they are respected and participate in decision making. As Brynne puts it, “Through this camp people began to feel human again.”

Yet, my students were greatly troubled by the treatment of the Joads and all the migrants on their journey and arrival in California. Over and again, Steinbeck shows innocent people, victims of events beyond their control, climate refugees, perceived as dangerous, a threat. A character states, “These goddamned Okies are dirty and ignorant. They’re degenerate, sexual maniacs. They goddamned Okies are thieves. They’ll steal anything.” (312) In her paper, Nichole quotes the novel, “The local people whipped themselves into a mold of cruelty. Then they formed units, squads, and armed them – armed them with clubs, with gas, with guns. We own the country. We can’t let these Okies get out of hand.” (312) Emily commented, “Even though the migrants were just people, the Californians let their fear take control of their judgment. They now believed that these new people were not people at all, but thieves and repulsive animals. This fear led them to severely mistreat the migrants who were only seeking a better life.” Forrest wrote, “The people in California dehumanized the refugees to justify the way that they mistreated them.” Like Collin, Allison made connections with the present:

President Trump had this to say about Mexican immigrants, "You wouldn't believe how bad these people are. These aren't people, these are animals." It's eerily similar to the dehumanizing rhetoric in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In the novel, the Joad family stops at a service station … As they're departing, a man says, "Them goddam Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain't human. A human being wouldn't live like they do. A human being couldn't stand it to be so dirty and miserable. They ain't a hell of a lot better than gorillas." (243)

**Life in the New Land**

The Joads and other climate refugees in *The Grapes of Wrath* desperately hope that California will be a place where they can work hard, reestablish themselves, and create a new life. In class we talked about how the humble, diligent Joads and other migrants contrast with the selfish wealthy California farming corporations. Students commented on how business associations dominated by banks and large farms use the “Oakies” as tactic to lower wages and increase profits. They incite locals to scapegoat the refugees, and direct the local police, courts, and the judicial system to brutalize them. Our conversation about *The Grapes of Wrath* helped us see how climate change exacerbates already existing inequalities, making an unjust system dramatically more oppressive and violent.

Students made further connections between the treatment of migrants in the novel and in America today. Isabella wrote,

Migrant workers are always on the political agenda, often with the subtext of immigrant workers “stealing jobs from hard-working Americans” or something along those lines. This is a phenomenon that I find to be rather perplexing, as most migrant workers, as I recall, work laborious jobs, similar to those in *The Grapes of Wrath*, often on industrial farms. The novel raises yet another question for me, how are these migrant farmers being treated today?

Students even made connections between the novel and events in our own community in Michigan. Collin shared,

At one point the Joads are driving south and are stopped by a small gang of local citizens, who tell them to turn around. They don’t want Okies coming into their town (309). Here in my local town, Kalamazoo, this past week the homeless have been protesting the lack of low-income housing, limited number of shelters, poor conditions in shelters, and accusations that police are unwilling to investigate reports of assault. On Facebook local citizens were commenting, “Why don’t they just get a job!” or “They should just crawl back in to the hole they came out of.” A sentiment from *The Grapes of Wrath* that has stuck around.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is about basic rights, the right to have a place to live, the right to travel when forced from your home, the right to work, and for workers to organize. The former minister Casy becomes a labor organizer, and hero of the people. Emily wrote, “Casy ends up dying for what he believes in, the equal rights of others and himself in the workplace, when he is murdered by a police officer.” As he learns how human rights are denied and the importance of standing up for those in need, Tom Joad emerges as one of the great heroes of American literature. In perhaps the most famous lines from the novel, Tom, inspired by Casy, proclaims, “Wherever there’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever there’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there.” (463) Our discussion of *The Grapes of Wrath* helped students understand that real heroes are not comic book figures with super powers, but can be regular people, politically conscious and committed to decency and justice.

Writing in 1939, Steinbeck was clearly raising alarms about elements of fascism existing not only in Germany, but also in the United States. My students wondered to what extent the current determination to build walls and demonize refugees embodies that same way of thinking. Sydney writes, “They called the migrants ‘Oakies.’ Today a lot of people on one side of the spectrum label Mexicans “dirty people” who are “rapists” and “thugs.” They get treated just as poorly (if not worse) that the Joad family.” In a time when many Americans, including our president, fail to appreciate the challenges refugees face, *The Grapes of Wrath* led to important conversations that helped students understand that climate migrants and refugees are not a danger or a threat to be frightened of or build walls against, but decent people, victims of forces beyond their control, desperate for a way to make a living and preserve their dignity.

**Beyond *The Grapes of Wrath***

Teaching *The Grapes of Wrath* opens doors to further conversations. Students can learn more about the Dust Bowl from cultural monuments such as the 1940 John Ford film version of *The Grapes of Wrath* staring Henry Fonda as Tom Joad, from Dorothea Lange’s photography, and from Woody Guthrie’s folk music. Madison made a report to the class about Woody Guthrie, himself an “Okie” who migrated to California during the Dust Bowl. Madison explained that Guthrie wrote a series of songs he called “Dust Bowl Ballads” including one specifically about Tom Joad, telling the story of the novel in song form. Another Guthrie song is about the outlaw Pretty Boy Floyd, a sort of popular hero referred to again and again in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Of course, Woody Guthrie’s most famous song is “This Land is Your Land” written in 1940 as a response to Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America.” Students may not know two verses from the original version of the song that are especially pertinent,

Was a high wall there that tried to stop me  
A sign was painted said: Private Property,  
But on the back side it didn't say nothing —  
This land was made for you and me.

One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple  
By the Relief Office I saw my people —  
As they stood hungry, I stood there wondering if  
This land was made for you and me.

In class we discussed *The Grapes of Wrath* along with other works addressing climate change and refugees. I have come to believe that Climate change is not just a topic for science classes, but pertinent to English language arts. Given that the poorest of the world will be the first to suffer from climate change, that consumptive lifestyles of the wealthiest are most responsible for climate change, and that choices made by one generation impact those in another, climate change raises profound ethical questions. My students found “cli-fi” short stories a powerful way to talk about the personal, social, and intergenerational consequences of climate change. The two stories they liked best were “How Close to the Savage Soul” (free on-line at <https://bit.ly/2R2LTwl>) a story with references to *Lord of the Flies*, *Brave New World*, and *The Tempest*, and “Into the Storm” about climate change creating instability in Canada (also free on-line at https://bit.ly/2eGkiiE).

My students read and discussed the fast-paced best-selling contemporary cli-fi novel *The Water Knife*, set, like *The Grapes of Wrath*, in the Southwest but in the climate changed near future. They were engaged by the young adult novel *Refugee* (2017) by the popular writer, Alan Gratz, a novel which interweaves the story of a Jewish family fleeing the Holocaust in the 1938, a Cuban family fleeing repression by Castro in the 1994, and a Syrian family fleeing in 2015. (The Jews in the novel, just like the Anne Frank family, were refused entry to the United States, and many of them were killed in the Holocaust.) Class discussion of poetry made the issues all the more personal. We considered the powerful contemporary poem about refugees including “Home” by Warsan Shire (<https://bit.ly/2tGBoz5>) and the UN Climate Summit poem, “Dear Matafele Pienem” (<https://bit.ly/1ogtymQ>) by the 26 year-old poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, from the Marshall Islands, and other refugee poems (found at <https://bit.ly/2HfHOwo> and <https://bit.ly/2kyq9Zy> ). Students were intrigued by the epic 2017 documentary film about the global refugee crisis, *Human Flow* (<https://bit.ly/2A7wT6L> ). They selected key moments in the film they wanted the class to talk about. Students shared the view of the narrator that “It is going to be a big challenge to recognize that the world is shrinking and people from different religions and different cultures are going to have to learn to live with each other.” (*Human Flow*) (The full syllabus for my class is online at https://bit.ly/2EA6gex.)

I needn’t have wondered if the class would connect with contemporary issues: refugees and climate change were constantly in the news while I was teaching. There was a “migrant caravan” including many women and children from Central America aiming to cross the American border that was used by politicians to drum up fears and win votes. When I asked with a fingers-of-five how much my students knew about the Honduran refugee caravan, I saw a lot of fists and only a couple of ones and twos. When I called on those with even a few fingers, they were still confused. So, all of us used laptops and phones to do some quick research on Honduras and on the “caravan.” Cynthia shared that she had learned that 48% of the people of Honduras are undernourished and that a quarter of the children are “stunted.” Jeylani shared that he had read that people were joining the refugees because of poverty and violence. I asked the students if they had heard of the expression “banana republic” – and told them I wasn’t asking about the clothing store! None of the students were familiar with the term. So, I explained that Honduras, like many of the Central American countries, was a food exporting nation, sending products like bananas, coffee, and shrimp mostly to the United States, while much of the population was going hungry. I explained that “banana republics” typically had brutal military governments often put in place by the United States to protect the position of American companies and a small number of rich families and their control over farmland and the economy. Emily brought up that she read about a coup in 2009 in Honduras which led to violence. I shared from my research that there had been a free election in 2006, but that this president, committed to democratic reform, was removed by the military, more or less with United States support. Students discovered that the resulting breakdown of civil society in Honduras led to the rise of gang violence and a soaring murder rate. I also pointed out that climate-change drought was already impacting Central America and predicted to become even more devastating.

As we looked more into the caravan situation our conversation began to identify parallels with *The Grapes of Wrath*. As with the Okies, the victims of poverty, violence, and drought were being perceived as a threat. Madison was able to quote President Trump’s tweets that the caravan included “many criminals” and people from the “Middle East.” The president tweeted that he would “call up the U.S. Military and CLOSE OUR SOUTHERN BORDER!” and that the migrants were “funded by the leading Democrats.” Laura shared information from an article debunking each of the President’s claims.

The next day, I shared with the students copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and divided them into four groups to consider which of these rights were violated in the case of each of the refugee groups in the YA novel *Refugee*, Jewish refugees from Hitler’s Germany, poor people from Cuba under Castro, and a middle-class family fleeing violence in Syria in the present day, as well as the Honduran refugees. The students were astounded to find that in all four cases many, if not most, of their rights had been severely violated. When I asked the class if people in each of these cases had the right to leave and seek asylum, the conversation indicated unanimous agreement.

The United Nations High Council on Refugees reports that today there are more refugees and displaced people in the world than there have ever been in all human history, 65 million -- at least a third of these are climate refugees. By 2050 the number of climate refugees is expected to dramatically increase, predictions are between 200 and 700 million. In *Tropic of Chaos*, Christian Parenti describes the futility of walls,

If climate change is allowed to destroy whole economies and nations, no amount of walls, guns, barbed wire, armed aerial drones, or permanently deployed mercenaries will be able to wave one half of the planet from the other. (11)

At this time in our history, it is critically important to have conversations about refugees and climate change – and works like *The Grapes of Wrath* and related texts are ideal starting points.

Given the enormous consequences of climate change, and so little being done to adequately address it – our own country the source of 30% of all greenhouse gases in the air and, now, the only country on earth determined to leave the Paris Agreement – it is hard not to be overwhelmed. Yet talking with my students lifts me up. For the most part, when they first come in the door, my students know very little about climate change, its ecological or its social impacts. My introductory literature class converted, through teaching *The Grapes of Wrath* and other texts, to theme of climate change, climate refugees, and climate justice created a tremendous opportunity for students, and for me, to talk, learn, and think about what is happening in our world. (For more ideas about teaching about climate change in English, see *Teaching Climate Change to Adolescents: Reading, Writing, and Making a Difference* published in 2017 by NCTE.)

My students read Pope Francis’ magnificent 2015 Encyclical Letter “Laudato si’: On Care for Our Common Home” addressed to all people on earth. The Pope describes the impact of climate change on poor communities around the world and the desperate situation of climate refugees.

There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever. Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded. (par 25)

Climate change endangers the habitability of the earth, and threatens all of us. To address it we must work together with our “brothers and sisters” in other countries. *The Grapes of Wrath* and other literature about climate refugees can help students develop awareness of the impact of climate change today and develop empathy with the most vulnerable.

The novel also shows that a just outcome requires activism and profound social change. Today, rejecting life in a world wracked by global warming, the younger generation is leading the way. Our students can learn about and join with diverse groups of young people trying to make governments address climate change, such as 350.org, Sunrise Movement, and Extinction Rebellion. They can support the 21 teenagers suing the US government (Juliana v. US) demanding that their lives not be devastated. They can discover 15-year-old Greta Thunberg engaging, at first alone, in climate protests and school strikes, and, then, inspiring thousands of middle school and high school students around the world to follow her lead.

In class conversation inspired by *The Grapes of Wrath* and our other reading, Nichole pointed out that rather than climate change pulling the world apart, the crisis is presenting an opportunity: for all of us to come together.

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