

ALLEN WEBB

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

Allen Webb used Steinbeck's novel to encourage students to consider the implications of a climate refugee crisis.

*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, "MENDING WALL"

The *Grapes of Wrath* may be the most honored American novel ever written: winning the National Book Award in 1939, the Pulitzer Prize in 1940, and cited by the Nobel Prize Committee in 1962. Set in the 1930s Dust Bowl, the novel describes a severe drought in the southern Plains 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 who left the Plains. *The Grapes of Wrath* chronicles this desperate drought-caused human movement, the largest short-term migration in US history.

Recent science indicates human-caused global warming contributed to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s (Foderaro), and scientists tell us that the greenhouse gasses humans have emitted since then are rapidly warming our planet and causing severe droughts and dust storms around the world (Lynas 30; Wallace-Wells 55). As droughts, heat waves, wildfires, 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 worldwide, from currently tens of

millions to hundreds of millions of people. 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 most Americans are not discussing it.

The latest data gathered by the Yale Program on Climate Communication indicates that although 70 percent of Americans believe global warming is happening, 64 percent never talk about it (Marlon et al.). My experience teaching *The Grapes of Wrath* as an opening for conversation about climate change and learning about the experience of climate refugees

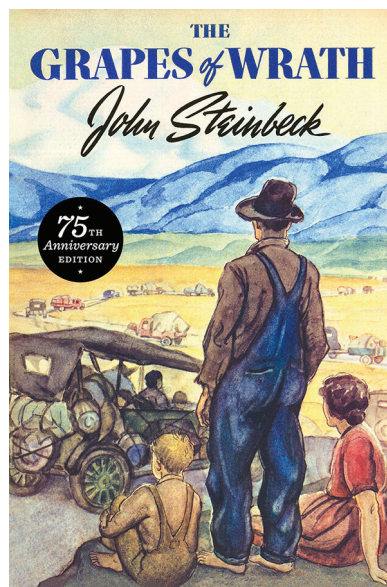


FIGURE 1. The original cover of *The Grapes of Wrath* appears on the 2014 anniversary edition.

convinces me that this novel can help our students think deeply and compassionately about the present and our looming future.

CONVERSATIONS ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change is increasingly a topic in English language arts classrooms. In March 2019, the NCTE membership passed a resolution stating,

Climate change is not simply a scientific or technological issue, but one with enormous ethical, social, political, and cultural dimensions. Understanding climate change challenges the imagination Addressing climate change demands the involvement of English language arts teachers. (*Resolution*)

At the college level, there is a long tradition of teaching environmentalism and ecocriticism in English. The Association for Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE), a national organization, holds a conference every two years. A few scholars have written about the relevance of ecocriticism and ecojustice to secondary-level teaching (Martusewicz et al.; Matthewman; Turner).

Teaching Climate Change to Adolescents: Reading, Writing, and Making a Difference, which I coauthored with Richard Beach and Jeff Share, addresses

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climate change in English from many perspectives, including “cli-fi,” persuasive and creative writing, critical media studies, and drama, with a focus on how students can make a difference. (Climate fiction, or “cli-fi,” is emerging as an important new genre that addresses climate change and

global warming. Unlike “sci-fi,” however, cli-fi may take place in the world as we currently know it, in the present or the near future.)

None of these books, including my own, addresses teaching one of the most urgent and

compelling dimensions of climate change: the refugee crisis. This crisis is affecting millions and defining national and international politics. Alas, even the terms used cause controversy. In this article I use the term *refugee* as it is commonly understood, to refer to someone who has been forced from their home through no fault of their own. Yet definitions of *refugee* in national and international laws vary. Depending on the law or interpretation of the law, climate refugees may or may not have legal protections—regardless of the desperate situation they have been forced into by human-caused global warming.

A former high school English teacher, I am now a professor of English working with preservice and inservice secondary teachers. The teaching I did last semester was built around *The Grapes of Wrath*, a work that many high schools have in class sets. My students were predominately first-years and sophomores with majors across the spectrum, mostly Euro-American from middle-class and working-class families, from small and medium-size towns across Michigan. One Asian American student, two students from African immigrant families, and a student from China were also enrolled. I devoted the entire semester to a thematic focus on climate refugees, and I used only materials that I thought could also be used in high school.

When I engage in thematic teaching, I begin by identifying specific relevant issues to focus the reading of literary works (Carey-Webb 8). To establish a conversation about climate refugees, I noted that the novel naturally divides into three parts that correspond with the experience of many climate refugees: Drought (environmental crisis), Migration, and Life in the New Land. I hoped that using these ideas to frame reading and discussion of *The Grapes of Wrath* would facilitate connections between the novel and climate refugees in the real world.

Writing blogs can help students make these kinds of links. In the class, all students kept their own academic blog, and I required five posts at specific times over the semester. I encouraged their posts to “explore connections between the literary works that we are reading and the news, commentary, resources, research, and ideas on the Web.” All of their blogs

were linked on a “blog roll” that I created, which facilitated the expectation that they comment on each other’s posts (climatechangerefugees.blogspot.com/).

I did not want to begin the unit by lecturing about climate change or climate refugees. Instead, I wanted to immerse students in the world of *The Grapes of Wrath* and see how they might, certainly with my encouragement, start to develop text-to-world comparisons and understand the crisis from the point of view of its victims.

DROUGHT

As we read the first part of the novel, students discussed how the Dust Bowl destroyed 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 that may be as long as forty years, five times longer than the Dust Bowl (Miller 137).

The 1930s drought that Steinbeck describes is destructive enough. In the novel, the 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 writes 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 from 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)

The blogs started doing their intertextual work right from the start. In his first post, only a few days after we began the novel, Collin makes connections between the novel and a contemporary magazine article about hurricane victims:

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,” 25 Feb. 2018] compares a modern family on Route 66 to the Joad family. How can he not? [The Joads also traveled on Route 66.] 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 focused on the early portion of *The Grapes of Wrath*, my students and I learned climate migration is traumatic and devastating, and people do not leave their homes and communities unless they are forced to by unlivable conditions and/or violence.

MIGRATION

The second part of *The Grapes of Wrath* describes the abuse refugees suffer as they flee for survival. 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 roadblocks and checkpoints. “Okies” are brutalized by police officers on the road and in migrant camps. Jack puts 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 along the way people who treat them decently. In the most uplifting section of the novel, the Joads are residents at a US 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. 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. The goddamned Okies are thieves. They’ll steal anything” (312). In her analysis paper, Nichole quotes this passage from 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).

Allison makes 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 goddamned 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)

In a time when many Americans 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.

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. Students commented on how business associations dominated by banks and large farms use the “Okies” as a tactic to lower wages and increase profits. Our conversation helped us see how climate change exacerbates already existing inequalities.

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 a leader of the people. Emily writes, “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 superpowers but can be regular people, politically conscious and committed to decency and justice.

BEYOND THE GRAPES OF WRATH

Reading closely *The Grapes of Wrath* with our students opens doors to further conversations and analysis that extends beyond the novel and classroom. Students can learn more about the Dust Bowl from cultural monuments such as the 1940 John Ford film version of *The Grapes of Wrath*, starring Henry Fonda as Tom Joad, or from Dorothea Lange’s photography (widely available online). Madison made a report to the class about the folk singer Woody Guthrie, himself an “Okie” who migrated to California during the Dust Bowl.

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In class, we discussed *The Grapes of Wrath* along with current literary works addressing climate change and refugees. 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 Savage the Soul” (free online at dragonfly.eco/how-close-to-savage-the-soul/), which is a story with references to *Lord of the Flies*, *Brave New World*, and *The Tempest*, and also “Into the Storm,” about climate change creating instability in Canada (also free online at climateimagination.asu.edu/everything-change/).

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 (Bacigalupi). They were engaged by the 2017 young adult novel *Refugee* by Alan Gratz. The novel interweaves three stories: a Jewish family fleeing the Holocaust in 1938, a Cuban family fleeing repression by Castro in 1994, and a Syrian family fleeing in 2015. (The Jews in the novel, just like Anne Frank’s family, were refused entry to the United States, and many were killed in the Holocaust.)

Class discussion of poetry made the issues all the more personal. We considered powerful contemporary poetry about refugees including “Home” by Warsan Shire (www.youtube.com/watch?v=nI9D92Xiygo) and the UN Climate Summit poem “Dear Matafele Pienem” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJuRjy9k7GA) by the poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, from the Marshall Islands, and other refugee poems (found at www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/144265/poems-on-immigration and www.verbalremedy.co.uk/refugee-poetry/). Students were intrigued by the epic 2017 documentary film about the global refugee crisis titled *Human Flow* (www.humanflow.com/watch-at-home/).

Refugees and climate change were constantly in the news while I was teaching. There was a migrant caravan including many women and children from Honduras aiming to cross the US border. (In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck also uses the word *caravan* to describe Dust Bowl migrants [256].) My students didn’t know much about the caravan, so we used laptops and phones to do some quick research.

Cynthia shared that she had learned that 48 percent of the people of Honduras are undernourished, leading to a quarter of the children being 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.” 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 such as 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 or supported by the United States to protect the position of US companies and a small number of rich families with control over farmland and the economy. 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 affecting Central America and is predicted to become even more devastating (Wernick).

As we conducted more research on 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 US 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” (@realDonaldTrump). Laura shared information from an article debunking each of President Trump’s claims (Rizzo).

The next day, I shared copies of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948) and divided students 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 the people's 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 human history. By 2050 the number of climate refugees is expected to dramatically increase; predictions are between 200 and 700 million. In *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence*, 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 save one half of the planet from the other" (11).

My students read Pope Francis's 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.

Climate change endangers the habitability of the earth and threatens all of us. To address it, we must work with other countries and support our most vulnerable "brothers and sisters."

The Grapes of Wrath shows that a just outcome requires activism. Our students can learn about and join with diverse groups of young people trying to make governments respond to climate change, such as 350.org, Sunrise Movement, and Extinction Rebellion. They can support the twenty-one teenagers suing

the US government (*Juliana v. US*, Our Children's Trust) demanding that their lives not be devastated. They can discover fifteen-year-old Greta Thunberg who, in October 2018, at first alone, engaged in a school strike climate protest. As her protest became an example, thousands of middle school and high school students joined her. Indeed, as this article was being written in March 2019, in 2,000 cities worldwide, 1.4 million young people inspired by Greta Thunberg undertook a global school strike to demand that governments take action on climate change.

In a class conversation inspired by *The Grapes of Wrath* and our other close reading, Nichole pointed out that rather than pulling the world apart, the climate crisis is presenting an opportunity: for all human beings to come together to protect our common home. Secondary school English students can and should be part of that conversation, opening a door to activism necessary to protect their future. [EJ](#)

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READWRITETHINKCONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

After reading a book that illustrates a human-made disaster, students examine how other great mistakes in history affected humankind and changed the world. For example, they may discover that the massacre at the 1972 Munich Olympics led to increased security at all subsequent games. They may learn that the sinking of the *Titanic* led to safety policy changes so that all ships needed enough lifeboats to carry all passengers in case of an emergency. While listening to each other's presentations created using technology, students take notes to compare and contrast the disasters, using graphic organizers. <http://bit.ly/11718HF>

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