NEH: Steinbeck Institute 2016

Final Project: Adam Dennis

Materials considered:

* *Harvest Gypsies*, Chapter 1 (p.20- tie into modern refugees and immigrant labor)
* *Harvest Gypsies,* Chapter 2 (student research on living conditions in refugee camps and current American refugee-like areas)
* *Harvest Gypsies,* Chapter 3
* Jeffers “The Purse-Seine”

Context:

This year-long project is designed for a college prep, Junior English survey of American literature, which follows two major thematic structures under which the literature falls:

First semester: Howls about America, which includes the following:

* “Howl,” transcendentalist pieces
* *Into the Wild*
* Gothics/Romantics (nonfiction, poems, etc.)
* *Catcher in the Rye*
* *A Tale for the Time Being*.

These, and other, smaller pieces feature a writer criticizing (and at times celebrating) some aspect of American life. The school year begins with Ginsberg’s “Howl,” which is framed as a start to a counter-culture revolution. It begins a discussion about America as a lived experience, that there are multiple “Americas” and as we try and define America we may praise and criticize it. “Howl” allows students to create a parody about their own generation while starting the year-long process of defining America and highlighting what needs howling about, just as Ginsberg included biting social critique in his work. Steinbeck and Jeffers, then, later in the year, allow students to see a different “howl,” a critique of America as a system of economic and cultural forces, technological machinery and financial institutions that did great harm and separated us from each other and, perhaps, our better nature. With this curriculum I aim to guide students to look at the different “Americas” they see now- who is being served, who marginalized and brutalized? Steinbeck calls for specific change in *Harvest Gypsies* and student can use that to call for change they think is needed now.

Second semester: The American Dream, which includes the following:

* *The Great Gatsby*
* *Between the World and Me*
* *The Crucible*
* *The House on Mango Street.*

Proposal:

I plan to use portions from Steinbeck’s *Harvest Gypsies* and a Jeffers’ poem to guide students to examine America’s faults as these two writers saw them. Also, these writers will provide students with models for re-seeing and critiquing their own world. This exploration into Steinbeck’s and Jeffers’ work will likely take a week but the learning will be applied throughout the rest of the year.

Objective:

To inspire students to engage in social justice causes.

* Students will be able to make current connections and applications between “transcendentalist” texts and authors and Steinbeck and Jeffers.
* Students will write their own “Howl” about America.

Plan:

Step 1:

After reading “Howl,” *Into the Wild*, Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, and *Catcher in the Rye*, and chapter one from *The Things They Carried*, students will read Steinbeck’s *Harvest Gypsies*, chapter 1 while pursuing these questions:

* What do the migrants carry?
* What current disenfranchised groups are analogous? What are they carrying?

(read p. 20 closely: What evidence supports your answers to the previous questions?

Step 2: read *Harvest Gypsies*, chapter 2 while pursuing these questions:

* How, and in what ways, are the migrants humanized?
* Considering the previous disenfranchised groups students self-selected, what human element is missing from the current coverage and mainstream consideration?
* (Optional: write a chapter 2-style report on the self-selected disenfranchised group)

Step 3: read *Harvest Gypsies*, chapter 3, and Jeffers “The Purse-Seine” while pursuing these questions:

* About what are these two writers “howling”?
* What current state of government, power structures, and/or privilege need “howling” about and why?

Step 4: Students are assigned to write, and perform if they choose, their own “Howl”-style poem.

Culminating project:

After reading each of the aforementioned pieces, but before *Mango Street*, students will select one path to engage in for a social justice movement and write a reflection on the experience.

Options include, but are not limited to:

* Writing a journalism piece as activism
* Attend a protest or gathering of a local social justice cause [environmental action, coal, logging, lead-contaminated water, animal rights, Black Lives Matter, housing accessibility, police brutality and reform, mental illness treatment, etc.)
* Join a group and participate in their work (Habitat for Humanity, Fences for Fido, etc.)