

**Johanna Perez**

**Program:** Citizens Thinkers Writers at Yale University

**University:** Tufts University

**Texts:** Albert Camus, *The Plague*; J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*

**Bio:** Johanna Perez is an American Mexican resident of New Haven, Connecticut. In the summer of 2019, Johanna participated in Yale University’s Citizens Thinkers Writers program and later graduated from Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School in 2020. She will follow her education at Tufts University this fall to major in Psychology and Ceramics. When she doesn’t spend her time playing squash at Squash Haven, she draws and finds other creative things to do in her spare time.

**Profile:** Even before she was chosen for the Teagle Fellowship, Johanna knew that fictional narratives can reflect and, in turn, shape peoples’ experiences and the world around them. In her application, she described her connection to Estrella, the main character of the novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* by Helena María Viramontes: “Together, we were children of immigrant parents, struggling in poverty, reaching for a better life.” In some ways, however, Estrella’s story differed from Johanna’s, and the novel compelled her to reflect on those differences: “As I continued to read, I compared my life to hers. The things I took for granted were luxuries she longed for.”

Johanna carried her ability to connect literature and reality to her reading this summer. With her mentor, Yanette Rosario, she chose two texts, *The Plague* by Albert Camus and *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J. M. Coetzee, and analyzed their depictions of characters responding to times of crisis. More specifically, Johanna noted that both Dr. Rieux from *The Plague* and the magistrate from *Barbarians* undergo a journey resulting in a sense of “self-identification and responsibility.” And, she wrote, “as these main characters realize their responsibility to others mid crisis, they take advantage of their given power to fight for social justice.”

While reading *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Johanna focused on the magistrate’s crisis in learning the Empire he served comfortably was torturing Barbarians. “In his heart,” she noted, “he knows that the actions of the Empire and his people are not just and lack ethical reasoning.” While it is clear that the magistrate has unknowingly supported gross injustice, Johanna empathized with the magistrate’s doubts and fears upon learning the truth: “How could he fight a fight that wasn’t his? Why would he defend the barbarians if he has been a part of the Empire and has served it throughout his life?” In the end, the magistrate fights for justice by freeing the Barbarians and Johanna held up his personal journey as a model:

“For the first time, he defines what he believes in...because although there are simple differences in their color, appearance, culture, and style of living, the magistrate knows that they are all alike as human beings.”

Similarly, Johanna found that Dr. Rieux of *The Plague* experiences his own process of self-identification and accepting responsibility to serve his community. Despite the overwhelming nature of the titular plague, he overcomes “his fear for his own health, both mental and physical...and makes the choice to fully accept his responsibility as a doctor and begins treating people.” Johanna contended that Dr. Rieux’s and the magistrate’s stories can serve as lessons for our contemporary moment during the pandemic and struggles against injustice:

“In the midst of a crisis, Dr. Rieux and the magistrate showed us that witnessing injustices, while holding the power to stop them, is the same as being complicit in acts of cruelty. They taught us that no matter how much power you have or how big your voice is, an act of social justice is an act of kindness; and an act of kindness is capable of saving lives. Whether you're a doctor, a magistrate, or a citizen, anyone is capable of making a change. During our own pandemic and fight for social justice, an act of change or kindness can keep someone safe and healthy, or it can save a life and bring awareness about the condition of the oppressed. Let’s use our power wisely.”