

Asmaa Hassanin

Program: Freedom and Citizenship at Columbia University

University: St. John's University

Texts: Albert Camus, *The Plague*, Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Bio: Asmaa Hassanin is from Egypt and now lives in Manhattan, New York City. She participated in Columbia University's Freedom and Citizenship program in 2019 and graduated from Maxine Greene High School in 2020. This fall, she will be attending St. John's University majoring in pharmacy. She enjoys writing feminist short stories.

Profile: In her application for the Teagle Humanities Fellowship, Asmaa wrote about the profound impact that literature can have on the mind and spirit. She drew specifically on the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, a text which inspired her to “seek knowledge,” “explore the perspectives of others,” and express her opinions. In reading about Frederick Douglass, whose hard-won literacy was integral to his own journey, Asmaa gained an even greater appreciation for knowledge and the possibilities that are opened through it. “What I love about knowledge is it has a similar effect on me as it had on Frederick Douglass,” she wrote, “it makes me conscious and it makes me free.”

Asmaa carried her desire to learn from other perspectives to the texts that she explored this summer with her mentor, Angie Neslin. While the COVID-19 pandemic and protests demanding racial justice were defining her present moment, Asmaa discovered pertinent parallels in Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* and Albert Camus' *The Plague*.

Though Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote *Between the World and Me* in the form of a letter to his son narrating his experience as a Black man in America, Asmaa realized that the book is not “just for Coates' son, but also for those who believe there is no longer racism in the United States or forget that a brutal history of slavery and segregation...is what has fueled this nation's prosperity.” Reading the intimate words of a father to his son upon the murders of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Michael Brown in 2015, she wrote that each of us must do our part “depending on our individual circumstances and privileges...for a student it might mean going to a protest, while for a professional athlete it may be boycotting a playoff game, and for others it could be calling members of Congress and pressuring them to pass needed legislation.”

Asmaa also noticed a theme of collective response to crisis in Albert Camus' *The Plague*, and she writes about the similarities between the “denial and refusal to accept the new reality” shown by the citizens of the town of Oran and present attitudes toward COVID-19. Much like the fictional town government, which did not want to call the plague by its name because it would be “a mistake to paint too gloomy a picture,” in the response to the pandemic, she saw a rejection of the greater needs of society.

She wrote, “I see those who refuse to remain indoors or to wear a mask as people who refuse to take part in our struggle. As in Oran, a collective struggle is the only way to overcome our current moment. It’s not easy to wear a mask, to maintain physical distance from friends and family, or even to study online—but that’s why it’s called a struggle! The restrictions and regulations that we need to struggle to follow are not barriers between us and our freedom, but rather barriers between us and death, as well as the further spread of the disease.”

Asmaa found hope and brightness in Camus’ narrative—in the character of Rambert, for instance, a “moving example of an individual putting aside personal comfort—even rejecting a chance to escape from the quarantined town—to take part in the struggle as a volunteer fighting the plague.” She quoted Dr. Rieux, a central character in *The Plague*, who claims that “this whole thing isn’t about heroism; it is about decency...the only way to fight the plague is with decency.” When asked what decency entails, Rieux responds that for him, “it consists of doing my job.” For Asmaa, “doing our jobs is part of the struggle, both for racial justice and the pandemic.” Whether it is by marching in the streets, calling senators, following mask mandates, or keeping quarantine, she saw Americans taking part in struggles that she wants to be a part of. “By reading, reflecting, and writing on these issues, I am also taking part in the struggle, in my own way. Please do your part in the struggle too.”