

**Nicholas Unger**

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

**University:** Rochester Institute of Technology

**Texts:** Sophocles and Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

**Bio:** Nicholas Unger (usually just going by Nick) has lived in Seymour, Connecticut, for as long as he can remember. He is an alumni of Yale University's 2017 Citizens, Thinkers, Writers program, graduating from ESUMS (the Engineering and Science University Magnet School) in New Haven in 2018. After a year at the Georgia Institute of Technology, Nick is transferring to the Rochester Institute of Technology to major in Game Design and Development, hoping to pursue opportunities in the humanities along the way. When he has the time, he loves to spend it with video games, movies, or a great book.

**Profile:** When Nicholas applied for the Teagle Fellowship, he wrote about his experience reading *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and learning how literature can enlarge our moral imagination.

As a Teagle Humanities Fellow, Nicholas read two “wildly different” works—*Philoctetes* by Sophocles and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. He wanted to ask the same questions for both: “How might they connect to our current moment? What do they have to say about the inequality some people face over others? And perhaps, most importantly, how do they say we can solve the issues of inequality?” The answers to these questions were certainly not definite or absolute; and yet, in the process, Nicholas thought critically about trauma and possibilities for repair. Nicholas wrote, “In a time of unprecedented confusion, anger, and disillusionment, I turned to literature to make sense of both the protests that continue to shake our country and the pandemic that has changed our lives forever.”

Sometimes, as Nicholas discovered, the texts had indirect connections to the present moment. *Philoctetes*, for instance, could hardly have anticipated twenty-first century race relations, while Ta-Nehisi Coates’ book is a commentary on the trauma of racial violence in contemporary America. However, Nicholas noted, *Philoctetes* “is a drama that shows the difficulty of finding compromise when ideals clash, and how inequality is defined by humans to disenfranchise other humans.” *Philoctetes*’ snake bite becomes a festering source of trauma that eventually precludes the character from trusting his fellow Greeks. “Both Coates and Sophocles choose to use the body and physical wounds as a representation of past trauma and pain,” Nicholas observed.

“In the wake of all the pain and anger that the past brings,” Nicholas asked, “where do we go from here?” After all, both *Philoctetes* and *Between the World and Me* show how difficult it is for individuals to solve the problem of inequality. In the former, the final argument between the characters is so rancorous that Heracles must descend from the heavens and intervene. Even so, the argument is not neatly settled and the mistrust is never truly healed. “In doing

this,” Nicholas wrote, “Sophocles emphasizes just how difficult it is for the individual to be the one responsible for change. It takes divine intervention to cease the arguing, and even then, no one side truly comes out as a victor. In a work that focuses so strongly on the suffering and trauma of individuals, the work also recognizes how difficult it is for even a well-meaning person like Neoptolemus to make change.”

Similarly, in *Between the World and Me*, Coates asks people to humble themselves and “let go of their own perceived superiority.” Nicholas explained what that request means to him: “To me, this struggle manifests as asking the people who believe in ‘the Dream’ to come to terms with their uncomfortable history and to understand the pain that comes with it and the trauma they have inflicted and continue to inflict on black Americans. By humbling themselves and confronting their own sort of trauma in that way, there is a path to create a more equal world.” It is a lesson that would have served Philoctetes well, and offers hope for the future.