

Rosalía Minyety

Program: Freedom and Citizenship at Columbia University

University: Columbia University

Texts: Albert Camus, *The Plague*; J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*; Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Bio: Rosalía Minyety was born in the Dominican Republic and moved to New York City in 2015. She graduated from Frank McCourt High School in June 2020 and is now a first-year student at Columbia University majoring in Biomedical Engineering. Her interest in STEM and literature allows her to create essential connections between the sciences and humanities.

Profile: When Rosalía was younger, she didn't give much thought to the concept of time. It wasn't until March of this year, when Covid-19 and the ensuing quarantine brought her world to a standstill that Rosalía considered the role of time in her life: "I began thinking of time as a main contributor in my ability to not only act, but also think about who I was as an individual and my role in society."

As Rosalía turned towards her reading this summer, she continued to ponder the passage of time. The year 2020, she wrote, "became a turning point in my personal life, in which my previous thoughts of what I believed to be important (like having a physical high school graduation, being at prom or moving into my dorm) and true (the stereotypes created by society) were challenged in different ways." Reading *The Plague* by Albert Camus and *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J.M. Coetzee with her mentor, Yanette Rosario, helped Rosalía articulate her experience:

"For me, 2020 made me think about freedom and how much value it holds in my life. However, instead of teaching me what freedom is, it guided me through the process of understanding the difference between physical freedom - the ability to go to the outside world - and mental freedom - the ability to create my ideas. This year allowed me to redefine what I thought was 'normal' and adapt to new ways of living and thinking."

According to Rosalía, *The Plague* illuminates how the restriction of freedom works: "it makes people reconsider what they believed was a 'normal' way of living." After the citizens of Oran were quarantined, Rosalía wrote, "They considered themselves detainees within their own homes, where the only thing they have of the past is their memories, which now 'serve no use.'" The characters' feelings of suppression and powerlessness reminded Rosalía of her own emotions between March and May of 2020, when the pandemic first peaked and time seemed to pass without meaning:

"The people of Oran lost their freedom. They were confined within the walls of their homes and simply saw time pass by as they awaited the cease of the pandemic...The lack of freedom

forced the people in Oran (and myself) to look at life differently; in a selfless, hopeless, planless, and even painful way.”

While Rosalía found *The Plague* helpful in exploring the idea of physical freedom, she looked to Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* as an example of the “challenges that arise from a lack of mental freedom and the significance of creating one’s ideas about the world.” In this narrative, the town magistrate is able to rise above the widely held belief that the Barbarians are savages; he is able to break free of a mentality imposed upon the people by the Empire and regain his mental freedom. Like the magistrate, Rosalía also underwent a period of educating herself this year, when protests against police brutality were occurring across the country: “May served as a time for inspiration, education, and much needed societal wake-up call. It empowered me to challenge societal stereotypes and expectations based on race. Like the magistrate, I was able to regain my mental freedom. By becoming more knowledgeable, I broke free of society’s thoughts on how certain people are and I was able to redefine the world around me for myself.”

In short, this year has both challenged and affirmed Rosalía’s understanding of freedom:

“2020 has taught me great lessons about the value of physical and mental freedom and how challenging these can help me better my life. I have learned about the power of extending love and kindness to others. I might have been exempt from having a prom, physical graduation, and a typical beginning to my college life, but it still made me wonder whether or not those things are really important; I was still allowed to grow mentally and break free from societal ideas that held me back from creating my own.”