

Samantha Hernandez

Program: Freedom and Citizenship at Columbia University

University: Dartmouth College

Texts: J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Bio: Samantha Hernandez is originally from the Dominican Republic, but was raised in the Bronx, NY. She participated in Columbia University’s Freedom & Citizenship program in 2018 and graduated from Democracy Prep Charter High School in 2019. This spring, Samantha finished her freshman year at Dartmouth College where she intends to major in Sociology and minor in Philosophy. She enjoys going biking and having picnics in The Central Park in the summer.

Profile: When Samantha Hernandez participated in Columbia’s Freedom and Citizenship program in 2018, she received a t-shirt with the words, “the unexamined life is not worth living.” The quote, from *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, comes after the philosopher receives a guilty verdict and death sentence for corrupting the youth by encouraging them to ask questions. In his “Apology,” Socrates considers whether he should beg mercy on behalf of his sons, or even promise to cease his ways entirely in exchange for a lighter sentence. Why does he not pursue those paths? “Not through arrogance,” he answers. As Samantha paraphrases, it is because “a life without questioning and constant reflection cannot be a fruitful one.”

In applying for the Teagle Humanities Fellowship, Samantha wrote of another character, Beneatha, in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. Attending a talk by Cornel West, Samantha heard the eminent scholar describe Beneatha’s character as arrogant. Taking dutiful notes, Samantha suddenly paused upon hearing that word, arrogant: “Looking at Beneatha I saw myself, the only one pursuing an education and challenging all of her family’s conservative beliefs, all to be labeled as arrogant.” Samantha wrestles with the distinction between arrogance and inquisitiveness, between humiliation and strength.

Cementing her place as a disciple of Socratic inquiry, Samantha opened her final essay by acting the gadfly and calling upon all Americans to examine their world through the pages of books:

“Without examination of our surroundings and of our interior motivations, we become complacent; this complacency is called ignorance, and it is deadly to both marginalized communities and our society as a whole. Luckily there’s a cure. If privilege (or a lack of it) doesn’t allow you to examine yourself and step into the shoes of other people, there is one thing you can do: read. It does not matter what socioeconomic status you hold; reading serves the same purpose for rich, poor, and everyone in between: a gateway to knowledge and empathy.”

With the help of her mentor, Angie Neslin, Samantha spent the summer in conversation with the book *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J.M. Coetzee. She wrote of a country magistrate “uninterested in examining the government he serves,” who opts to make small talk and ignore disturbances rather than ask difficult questions. It is only when he learns of truly evil acts of torture and murder at the hands of Colonel Joll that the magistrate decides to learn more. He must not stop there, Samantha argued, and neither can we. “Examination without action is inherently worse, exacerbating a situation we know is wrong. Like the magistrate, who knew there was something fundamentally wrong about Colonel Joll torturing barbarians, instead of choosing the path of least resistance, we must act against our incompetent leaders.”

Leadership became another area for Samantha’s introspection, as she finds clear parallels between the Empire’s Colonel Joll and American politicians. “After all the commotion and change Colonel Joll imposes on the town in his pursuit of the ‘truth’ about the barbarians, and after provoking a war with them through ill-advised military maneuvers, he abandons the citizens in his care and leaves them to fend for themselves.” As in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Samantha concluded, too often, “throughout this pandemic our government has abandoned its citizens.”