

# The diva – college essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

What evidence supports the reputations of Madonna and Maria Callas as divas? How might these reputations be compared and contrasted? Please support your answer by referring to their performances, as provided in the module materials. Both Madonna and Maria Callas have been labelled with the term 'diva'. However, Madonna's early life did not match this title. As the third of six children, Madonna scarcely stood out but perhaps this fuelled her drive to be noticed.

Tragically, she lost her mother to breast cancer at the tender age of five, which may have prompted her to seek the attention that she did not receive from a mother figure in her career. Following her mother's death, Madonna's father married his housekeeper, Joan Gustafson, and together, they gave her a very strict catholic upbringing. This must also have pushed her to disentangle herself from rules, regulations and accepted conventions, prompting the emergence of her 'diva' persona.

In terms of talent, Madonna developed her flair for dancing by attending the university of Michigan on a dance scholarship for two years but she soon abandoned this pursuit and moved to New York to begin her career.

Ironically, her success lay more in reinventing herself every decade, while her diva status was propelled by the growing American pop culture, music industry and controversy that surrounded these and her. Madonna influenced public perception of her by incorporating sexual appeal in her music videos, which attracted criticism and disapproval.

Madonna's video for 'Like a Prayer' attracted public scrutiny as images of her performing in a field of burning crosses and being intimate with a black

saint were deemed irreverent by critics, parents and religious organisations. It also impacted on her career as it resulted in Pepsi's cancellation of her \$5 million contract. Far from harming her career, this was one way in which Madonna manipulated the media in order to market herself as a 'brand' of diva, who thrived on sex appeal rather than on musical abilities.

She cleverly crossed boundaries as her 'Like a Prayer' video flagrantly combined prayer and sexuality and even her conventionally deviant romantic involvements overlapped with her career; she dated Tony Ward, a bisexual model and pornographic star, who starred in her videos for "Cherish" and "Justify My Love". By her very deviance, Madonna became queen of the music video and, aided by her exploits and ever-changing fashion, she remained relevant, setting outlandish trends and gaining popularity.

Madonna does not have the "vocal prowess" (Jones, 2008, 'Madonna', p. 165) associated with Maria Callas but she is undeniably perceived as a diva because there's "something compelling about her personality, whether you like it or not" (Moohan, 2008, 'What is a diva', p. 163), which has induced her rise to fame. Madonna's surfeit of accolades and achievements endorses her diva status by her growing list of capabilities: singer; songwriter; actress; film producer; author; business entrepreneur; and philanthropist. Unworried about critics, Madonna has forged an iconic place in American culture, overriding the disparaging associations with the term 'diva'.

Maria Callas was a tremendously talented "opera star" (Phillip, 2008, 'Maria Callas and the Authority of the Historic Recording, p. 174). Maria's diva

reputation stems from her accomplishments as a renowned opera singer who had an amazing “ powerful and sensitive way of acting out the words as she sings them” ( Phillip, 2008, ‘ Callas as a Singer: Puccini’s Tosca, p. 178) Maria Callas’ parents were Greek immigrants who shortened their last name to Callas. In comparison to Madonna, she too had a disadvantaged upbringing that was out of the American ‘ norm’.

Similarly too, Callas had a strict upbringing as her mother was said to be “ ambitious” (<http://www.famous-women-and-beauty.com/maria-callas-biography.html>) not allowing her to “ socialize” (<http://www.famous-women-and-beauty.com/maria-callas-biography.html>) with other children but instead “ in her free time Maria studied and practiced. ” (<http://www.famous-women-and-beauty.com/maria-callas-biography.html>). It is perhaps owing to this that she honed such fine skill in her art, embracing what restrained her in a way that Madonna did not. However, both were perfectionists albeit in very different ways.