

# The poisonwood bible and the handmaids tale essay examples

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Offred and Leah are characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Poisonwood Bible* respectively. They are both women who live in a patriarchal society and have to submit to the interests and needs of men rather than their own, Offred as a Handmaid and Leah as the daughter to a missionary. They struggle to survive this society, one by rebellion, the other by blending with the society. This paper seeks to provide a link between the *Poisonwood Bible* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as, the characters, similarities and differences in the books.

*The Handmaid's Tale* was written by Margaret Atwood, a Canadian author. It is speculative, and a science fiction dystopian novel was published for the first time by McClelland and Stewart in 1985. It had a futuristic setting where the United States government had been overthrown by a totalitarian Christian theocracy. The novel explores a feminine theme where women are subjugated as well as the methods they use to become recognized as worthy members of society. It has won various awards in radio, film, opera and stage. *The Poisonwood Bible* is a best-selling novel by Barbara Kingsolver. It revolves around a missionary family, the Prices, which moved from Georgia to Kilanga village in the Belgian Congo.

The novel centers on the character, Offred, a protagonist who was separated from her daughter and husband. This was after the formation of the Republic of Gilead. She was part of the first generation of women in Gilead and thus had a strong memory of pre-Gilead times. She is considered fertile and thus she is placed in the home of Commander Fred as a handmaid. She is supposed to bear a child on behalf of the commander and his wife. Offred is considered an important commodity. She resists the new order being

imposed upon her (Atwood). The Poisonwood Bible is a book that rabidly indicts colonialism in all forms. These are post, pre and neo colonialism. It exposes the cultural greed and arrogance of some superpowers. Leah had some initial certainty about her father's mission. The book traces the development of all the five women characters. However, Leah's maturation has a central role. This is because her perspective has the widest breadth and girth. She stands out the most in identifying with her father's goals and mission. She is also the one who comes to understand and embrace the African civilizations fully. In the book, she awakens to the allures of life. This includes the allure of Anatole (Kingslover).

Offred is a name that describes her slave function. She is, of Fred meaning she is a commodity belonging to her commander who happens to be. She is referred to in the novel as a two legged womb. At some point, all the handmaids are accounted for except one. Offred gives a physical description of herself as follows. She is thirty three years of age, has brown hair and is 5'7 feet without shoes. For the better part of the novel, the audience is unaware of physical appearance of Offred.

The republic is founded by a questionable process. This was a homophobic and racist coup, which was fuelled by people's desire of being ecologically, physically and socially free. The environment had been degraded for a long time. It started with a terrorist attack which was stage managed. Islamic extremist movements were blamed for the attack. The president and a large fraction of congress are killed in the ensuing melee. The ' sons of Jacob', a movement launches a social revolution, which starts by, suspending the Constitution of the United States of America under the pretext of ensuring

the order is maintained. They quickly took away all rights of women and attributed this to financial records that were labeled and stored electronically. The new political leadership moved quickly in consolidation of power and reorganization of society along a new system which was militarized, hierarchal and extremist Christians. This applied skewed Old Testament inspired doctrines regarding religion and the social environment selectively. These doctrines were imparted within the newly created classes in society. Women were not allowed to read in the new society.

The novel is narrated in the first person by Offred. She describes her life as a handmaid during her third assignment as such. In this case, she is a handmaid to Fred who is also referred to as "The Commander". She has a number of flashbacks hinged on before and after the revolution. She finds that all her autonomy has been ceded to her husband. She also thinks about the failed attempt to escape and relocate to Canada, to indoctrination into her life as a handmaid. The audience sees a picture of Gilead's society through the eyes of Offred. She also enables the audience to see the various categories of women and their lives in this new theocracy. There is some significance in her father punishing Leah. This is because Leah has started awakening the culture around her. Her father punishes her for the sin of pride. This is because pride is related to free thought and autonomy. These were not concepts, which were expected to be associated with someone with a missionary caliber. The family of a missionary was supposed to tow the line, be submissive and not to question any level of authority. Leah seems to be gravitating towards freedom, freewill, and autonomy, and Nathan seeks to prevent it among his family members Nathan, her father exemplifies

excessive pride. This detached him from members of the community and has resulted in his inability to open up as well as appreciate the culture around him. Leah, although having pride, seems to be shifting away from this kind of pride of her father's sort.

The terms of a person being a handmaid are clearly defined. The commander is only supposed to have sex with the handmaid during the 'ceremony'. His wife has to be present during this ritual. However, the commander begins an unaccepted and ambiguous relationship with Offred. Because of this Offred is exposed to hidden and contraband aspects of this new society, such as cosmetics and fashion magazines, she begins a number of relationships. The commander even takes her to a secret government run brothel, and has numerous meetings with her in his study, where he also allows the handmaid to read. On the other hand, Fred's wife secretly interacts with Offred with an intention of getting her secretly to father a child with her driver. The wife of the commander in return gives her the news about her daughter, who Offred had not seen since she and her family were captured as they tried escaping from Gilead.

The sexual relationship with Nick, the driver grows considerably. They begin to engage and rendezvous more frequently. Offred finds her sex with Nick to be enjoyable despite her doctrine and husband's memories. She even goes the extent of trusting Nick and divulges potentially dangerous information regarding her past life. She later learns about the resistance through Offred, another handmaid. The mayday resistance was an underground movement that sought to overthrow the rulers of the new republic. Ofglen strangely disappears, strangely after her disappearance; the wife of the commander

finds evidence between the commander and Offred. Offred contemplates committing suicide. She is carried away by some members of the secret police. The secret police known as eyes had orders from Nick. She was taken in a large black van. Nick tells her that these men were part of the global network of resistance and that Offred should trust him. Offred does not have a clue whether Nick is a member of the May Day resistance. She thinks that he may be a government agent posing as a member. She wonders whether following the men would result in her recapture or freedom. She has a final thought about her future.

Offred becomes a rebel. Rebels are defiant about society's considerations and rules and may risk everything to retain their dignity. Offred experiences internal conflict as she seems to accept social trends, which is a victim mentality, as well as revolting for the sake of humanity of other if not most individuals. This may serve as a warning to the society about potential hazards of accepting skewed social evils. It also boldly illustrated the internal struggle faced by rebels in choosing when to rebel. She accepts the behaviors of the house of Offred and willingly plays to the tune of both Fred and his wife. She also wishes to be part of the mayday movement in the republic.

She seems unhappy about being a handmaid, but she seems to be so confused about her identity, and because of this, she easily accepts the roles imposed upon her by Fred's wife or the Commander himself. She accepts radical change with so much ease and little protest. She has been manipulated with a belief that this system had been designed for her own purposes. Her purpose is to function as a vessel. She must lay on her back

once a month for the commander. She quickly accepts the assurance that the new order is meant to protect her. Offred is made to believe that giving birth and acting as a vessel is her sole purpose. She then began measuring her self-worth by her ovaries' viability, and this has a big impact on her self-image. Offred characteristically sex with the commander as a deploring act using vulgar terminology

"The commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love because that is not what he is doing. Two, copulating would be inaccurate since it implies two people, when there is only one. Nor does rape cover it. There was not a lot of choice, but there was some, and this is what I chose." This statement was potentially dangerous. It shows how Offred had convinced herself on how the deplorable act is not that bad. She slowly begins to accept and embrace the system and she also justifies the violations being meted against her. She labeled such acts to be a choice, and therefore, shifts the burden and blame to herself from her oppressors. She refers to an outright crime to be a mere ritual. She has signs of showing the victim mentality where she easily accepts defeat and a challenge but associates the will of the current regime with her own. She is complacent, and that is where the danger lies. If she accepts what is happening to her to be choices, she then eliminates any desires to rebel. Such a mental framework gives her a false sense of security. This impedes any abilities to fight back. Offred's unwillingness to exhibit some resistance is caused by fear. The novel says that she has a fear spies are everywhere, so trust is but a lost luxury

Leah has a significant and important contribution towards the chest project.

She is relaxed about it and does not see the point of putting effort into work because she does not have an intention of getting married. This is in contrast with Rachel who is a hard worker and works without question. Leah eventually finds part of salvation through matrimonial love. Rachel, on the other hand, weds but leaves a series of men. Leah is loyal as well as passionate as portrayed in the book. She speaks of not wanting or needing a husband. She then turns to the notion of having her own family. This has the effect of preempting that, when love will exist, it will be lasting and substantive. Her imagined talks with Anatole hint on where the love might be directed soon. Perhaps she feared fighting by herself. However, her reluctance to fight back has more to it than just fear. Her acceptance of the shady roles in society clouded her perception regarding freedom and the need to rebel. Offred's unwillingness to embrace the outside resistance is because of an embedded mentality. Her character seems altered, and her acceptance of social evils gives her a weak profile. Offred identifies with the rebels and their causes. She is either too conflicted or too scared. She might be considered to be a coward because she is interested in the rebellion but want others to rebel for her. She seems confused about what she requires. She wishes things would go back to how they recently were, but she is bizarrely comfortable in this new system, which gave her some false sense of protection.

The changes seem also be to very overwhelming to her. As she adjusts, she is making a decision whether to save her or risk breaking rules for the sake of change. She may exhibit signs of giving up but memories from her past cannot let her go without a fight. She has to fight to keep her past alive and



to avoid being sucked in a system that entirely stresses and restrains her movement and actions. Her inspiration streams from the knowledge that she is alive. Her goal is to ensure she survives to see a new day. She hopes to see her daughter and husband someday. Her reality and dreams become intertwined. She fights to retain her piece of mind acknowledges humanity and its necessity. She is highly inquisitive when learning new concepts even games. The magazines offers her cogent proof that some humanity had survived outside the republic and even within it, and no one could take it away. Leah is intelligent as well as active. Leah fits in the new reality that has been placed upon her. She settles within the dictates of the country and its perceived rulers. She makes the realization that many people think they know about Africa's problems and solutions that may be required. They come to Africa with solutions and end up leaving the people worse off than they were found leading to a vicious poverty and disease cycle.

The two characters somehow manage to have their hearts settled to what they wanted despite the setting. Offred rebelled against the norms of the society she lived in by joining and supporting the resistance while Leah got assimilated into the society. These two stories put into perspective how different cultures interacted in colonialism times as well as during the slave trade.

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