

HOUSEBOY / Une vie de boy (1956)

Ferdinand Oyono (1929-2010)

Sources: (Paris: Editions Julliard, 1956) / (trans. John Reed, Waveland Press, Inc., 2012)

OVERVIEW

Author Ferdinand Léopold Oyono, born on 14 September 1929 in Ngoulemakong in southern Cameroon and deceased on 10 June 2010 in Yaoundé, occupies a singular place in African intellectual history. His trajectory moves from the classrooms of the Lycée Général Leclerc in Yaoundé to the lecture halls of the Sorbonne, and later to the *École nationale d'administration* in Paris, where he trained for diplomatic service. This path produced a figure who combined literary insight with political pragmatism. Oyono's later career as diplomat and minister, including his tenure as Cameroon's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Culture, reveals a man who chose to inhabit the very institutions he once dissected in fiction. His life suggests a tension between critique and participation, between the imaginative freedom of the novelist and the constraints of statecraft. This duality is part of what makes him an unusual and compelling figure in the landscape of postcolonial Africa.

Book *Houseboy* is a major work of African literature. It tells the story of Toundi Ondoua, a young Cameroonian whose diary is found as he dies near Equatorial Guinea. His notebooks, written in Ewondo and later copied into French, record his life under French colonial rule. The book explores domination, humiliation, and the collapse of moral authority. It shows how colonial power works through violence, secrecy, and ordinary interactions. Toundi's experiences reveal the hypocrisy of the church, the cruelty of administrators, and the fragile pride of the colonial elite. His story becomes a testimony of how empire shapes and destroys individual lives. In Cameroon, *Houseboy* was welcomed as a truthful picture of colonial society. Readers recognized the abuses and contradictions described by Oyono, and the novel became part of the country's literary heritage after independence. The novel helped open discussions about colonial administration, the role of African domestic workers, and the use of personal testimony in fiction. Today, it remains one of the most important early novels written by an African author in French and continues to influence conversations about colonial memory and the human cost of empire building.

Background *Houseboy* appears in the mid-1950s, when Cameroon is still under French rule and nationalist movements are rising. The country is marked by censorship, political tension, and growing demands for independence. In this climate, Oyono's novel stands out as one of the first works to describe colonial life from an African point of view. Culturally, a new generation of African writers is beginning to write in French and challenge colonial narratives. Oyono is part of this early wave, along with Mongo Beti and Camara Laye. Their work exposes the contradictions of the colonial system and gives African characters their own voices. By choosing the form of a diary, Oyono presents colonialism as a lived, intimate experience shaped by fear, humiliation, and unequal power.

MAIN CHARACTERS

<i>Toundi Ondoua (Joseph)</i>	An African young man, who is the domestic servant of the Commandant
<i>The Commandant</i>	The powerful civil administrator, who takes pleasure in brutalizing Toundi
<i>Madame</i>	The Commandant's wife, who has an affair with the prison director
<i>Father Vandermayer</i>	The priest of the Catholic mission of Dangan, who is a racist and sadistic man

SYNOPSIS

Toundi Ondoua's diary is discovered as he lies dying near the border of Equatorial Guinea. Villagers who rescue him before his death hand his worn notebooks to an anonymous narrator, who transcribes them faithfully, explaining that he has tried "to keep the richness of the original language without letting it get in the way of the story itself." What follows is thus Toundi's own account of his life under French colonial rule.

Toundi begins by recounting his childhood in Cameroon, marked by poverty, beatings, and humiliation under his father's rigid and violent upbringing. His father's severity drives him to flee to the Catholic mission, where Father Gilbert takes him in. Toundi becomes a choir boy, proud of his education and service. However, he quickly learns that the church is immersed in hypocrisy. Father Vandermayer, Gilbert's assistant, is a suspicious and violent man who abuses choir boys and adult Africans. When Father Gilbert dies in an accident, Toundi is sent to serve the powerful Commandant. Life in the Commandant's household exposes Toundi to the daily humiliations of colonial power. The Commandant often threatens and kicks him. At the service of the commandant where he has the opportunity to observe the whites of Dangan, Toundi witnesses the Europeans' hypocrisy, racism, and moral corruption. Madame, the Commandant's wife, becomes the center of Toundi's misfortune. Beautiful, restless, and cruel, she begins an affair with Monsieur Moreau, the sadistic prison director. Toundi is forced to deliver her letters to him and becomes entangled in her secrets.

As Madame's affair intensifies and the Commandant becomes aware of it, suspicion falls on Toundi. He is accused by madame of spying and by the commandant of being a go-between. When Sophie, the engineer's girlfriend, flees with his money and suspicion falls on Toundi for being her accomplice, both Madame and the Commandant are happy to see him arrested for he knows too much about them. Toundi is arrested, beaten, and tortured. A rifle butt breaks his ribs. He is taken to the hospital. When goes to the hospital to demand custody of him, Toundi realizes that he will not survive unless he flees. A black nurse helps him to escape. Toundi flees into the forest, where he collapses. His diary ends as his body fails, leaving only his notebooks as testimony to the colonial world that shaped and destroyed him.

PLOT NARRATIVE

From Toundi to Joseph The narrator explains that he was born Toundi Ondoua. He recounts that he received the name "Joseph" on the day the white priest baptized him. Toundi also explains that the villagers accuse him of causing his father's death, because he ran away to join Father Gilbert the day before his initiation, the day before he was meant to confront the serpent that watches over his clan. To the priest, Toundi's arrival is an act of God. To Toundi, it is far simpler. He admits that it was curiosity and gluttony that drove him to follow this man with strange yellow hair, the man who tossed lumps of sugar to children who scrambled and fought for them each time he passed through the village. Toundi's mother, who constantly warned him that his gluttony would one day bring shame and disaster upon them, seems to be proven right today. She's just returned from a quarrel with the mother of a child who twisted Toundi's arm to snatch away the two pieces of sugar he fought to win in the crowd of children. The two women ended up fighting, and the incident caused a scandal throughout the village.

The father's fury Toundi's father is furious. He accuses Toundi of bringing shame upon the family by behaving as if he is never fed at home and as if they must beg in order to survive. To him, this public humiliation cannot go unanswered. He decides that, once again, Toundi must be corrected. He grabs his cane, the same one whose blows Toundi and his mother have endured many times before. Toundi's father tells him to come closer and not make things difficult by forcing him to run after him, because his leg is bad. He tells Toundi to cooperate, to let himself be beaten properly without moving too much, so they can finish with the matter quickly and put it behind them once and for all.

Toundi's fear turns to defiance Toundi protests and says he has done nothing wrong to deserve a beating. His father is offended and orders him to stay still. He tells Toundi that if he steps back, it means he is capable of lying with his own mother. After hearing this, Toundi keeps still and accepts the first blows. He refuses to cry, because he knows his friends are listening and will be ready to call him a coward if they hear him weep. The repeated blows become unbearable. Toundi twists and pulls back. His father tells him to step forward and warns that if he retreats again, it means he is ready to lie with his grandmother, the mother of his father. Toundi shouts that he will not take any more blows and that he is not ready to lie with

his grandmother or his mother. He runs out of the hut. His father promises that he will beat him eventually, even if it takes years, because in the end, Toundi will always return to this hut to sleep.

The birth of Toundi's hatred for his father Toundi wonders where he can go. Maybe to his uncle's place? He changes his mind. He has never been able to stand his uncle's smell. That evening, as he looks through a crack in the hut, he sees his uncle and his father sitting in front of a dish of porcupine that was caught four days earlier in a trap. His mother tells them not to worry about Toundi, because she has kept his share for him. Toundi's father says that Toundi is a rude child who does not deserve to eat the porcupine. His uncle agrees and adds that Toundi should not be rewarded for his bad behavior. The father orders that Toundi's portion be brought to him, and he devours it together with the uncle. Toundi sees his mother crying. That night, Toundi wishes his father were dead.

Toundi's escape to the Fia Mission Toundi goes to the Fia Catholic mission and knocks on Father Gilbert's door. The priest, who is in the middle of his meal, receives him and offers him food. Toundi, who does not speak French, tries to explain through gestures that he wants to stay at the mission and that he does not want to return to his strict father. The next day, Toundi's father, who has learned where his son is, arrives in the afternoon to try to convince him to come home. He promises not to beat him anymore. Toundi does not believe a single word. He sticks out his tongue at him in defiance. His father leaves, angry and discouraged. That evening, Toundi's mother arrives at the mission. She tells him that she supports his decision to stay with the priest. She tells him she knows his father does not love him the way a father should love his son. This is how Toundi becomes Father Gilbert's boy.

The choir boy of Dangan Toundi and Father Gilbert travel from village to village on a motorcycle to preach the good word. Toundi's parents are long dead. Father Gilbert and Toundi are now at Saint Peter's Catholic Mission in Dangan, the large town inhabited by white people. Toundi imagines that he will become one of them and live as they do. He cannot stop thinking that he is like a parrot caught by grains because of his own greediness. He remembers his mother's words, spoken with a laugh: "Toundi, what will your greediness bring you to?" Toundi is a choir boy. He rings the small church bell and serves at up to three masses a day. From constantly kneeling, his knees have become hard. He explains that white people and black people receive communion separately. He holds the plate under the chins of the faithful when the priests give them communion, and he enjoys lightly tickling the chins of the young white girls. Another choir boy taught him to do this. It is their only way of getting close to those girls.

From gratitude to harsh awakening Toundi is grateful to Father Gilbert for clothing him, even if it is with old garments, because he arrived almost naked. He is grateful for being housed, and above all for being taught to read and write. When Father Gilbert introduces him to the white people of Dangan, he tells them that Toundi is his masterpiece. As for Toundi, he is proud to be a boy who can read and write, who knows how to set a table, an educated boy, because nothing is more precious than education. Father Vandermayer, Father Gilbert's assistant, returns from his tour in the bush with five women taken from their polygamous husbands. Toundi explains that more and more women seek baptism to escape polygamy. If only they knew that Father Vandermayer will subject them to a harsher regime of labor than the one they are fleeing.

The priest of suspicion Toundi describes Father Vandermayer as a suspicious and violent man. As the overseer of the choir boys, he trusts no one with the collection of the tithe. He strips the choir boys and searches them, even in their bodily openings, to make sure they are not hiding any coins. He also forces adult Catholic natives suspected of adultery to undress in his office and whips them while questioning them about their sins. He asks, "When you were kissing, weren't you ashamed before God?"

The death of Father Gilbert Father Gilbert dies in an accident. That morning, his moped has trouble starting, and Toundi has to push it more than once before seeing him speed off in a burst of noise, dust, and the sour smell of gasoline. A heavy branch from the old cotton tree, the same tree that has already caused the death of two Greeks, falls on him. It is the old catechist Martin who first comes to announce the news, rolling on the ground and stammering. But Father Vandermayer, thinking he is drunk, gives him a kick and insults him. Now the ambulance arrives with Father Gilbert's body, followed by a convoy of white

people and soldiers. Father Vandermayer takes charge of the funeral preparations with an air of importance and satisfaction.

The day Toundi lost himself Several times, the soldiers push Toundi away violently when he tries to approach the body of his benefactor. Vandermayer watches without intervening. Martin tells Toundi that he had a feeling something dark would happen, because he heard the chimpanzees crying throughout the previous night. He says he has nothing left to do but leave, nothing left to do but die. Father Gilbert is buried. Toundi realizes that he is truly gone, because he has not heard his voice thunder through the mission since yesterday. Toundi says that the death of Father Gilbert is also his own death.

Toundi will be the Commandant's boy Father Vandermayer comes to tell Toundi that he will be placed in service with the Commandant, who needs a boy. Toundi knows that Vandermayer will be glad to get rid of him. Vandermayer has no idea that Toundi does not like him either and is delighted at the thought of leaving, especially at the thought of becoming the boy of the chief of the white men. After all, "the dog of the king is the king of dogs." Toundi keeps thinking about the black girl whose chin he stroked with the paten during communion. She winked at him that day, and she keeps winking at him each time she sees him. He thinks she is foolish for doing that.

Toundi's first day at the Commandant's On his first day of work with the Commandant, the Commandant calls Toundi into his office and examines him closely. He is pleased that Toundi is clean, free of scabies, and speaks well. Then he asks Toundi if he is a thief. Toundi replies that he is a Christian and does not believe in stealing, because he will go to hell if he does. The Commandant tells him he will not wait for him to go to hell, and that hell is too far away. He says he will skin Toundi himself if he steals. Toundi answers that he knows that already and that the Commandant should not worry about him stealing anything. The Commandant tells him that they shall be friends then.

A night raid at Toundi's The Commandant is a strong man with hard calves, able to climb the many stairs of his residence without losing his breath. Today, he gave Toundi a painful kick in the shin because Toundi's hat had fallen and rolled to the Commandant's feet. Later that night, "the location," the black quarter, received a visit from Gullet, the chief of police, and his men. They overturned the furniture in the house where Toundi lives with his sister and brother-in-law. They destroyed everything without saying what they were looking for. They left without finding anything, except for two bananas swallowed by Gullet. Toundi was afraid that his sister, who was watching Gullet devour her bananas with contempt, might do something reckless. When Toundi arrives at work in the morning, the Commandant, whom they call Panther-Eyes behind his back, asks him whether he slept well. Toundi tries to lie and says he did. The Commandant asks, "In spite of the raid last night?" Then he shrugs and walks away.

Sophie's dream of escape Sophie, the African mistress of the agricultural engineer, is unhappy. She tells Toundi that all she dreams of is emptying her lover's safe and running away to Equatorial Guinea, because she means nothing to him. She is tired of hearing him say, "Sophie, don't come today. I have a European coming to see me ... Sophie, you can come now, the European has gone ... Sophie, when you see me with a white lady, don't look at me, don't greet me."

The Commandant is uncircumcised From inside his shower, the Commandant calls Toundi and tells him to bring a bottle of something kept under his table. Toundi knocks on the shower door, but the Commandant orders him to come in. Toundi steps inside and discovers the Commandant completely naked. He is stunned. This man he has always seen as a kind of demi-God is uncircumcised. From that day on, the fear Toundi once felt for the Commandant begins to fade. When the Commandant shouts orders at him, Toundi takes his time before obeying.

Ondoua's secret message Ondoua, the village drummer, has been given a huge alarm clock by the agricultural engineer so he can sound the hour and wake the laborers. Ondoua confides in Toundi that the message he drums is actually an insult directed at the whites. He translates the rhythm for Toundi: "Ken ...

ken ... ken ... out of bed... out of bed... he doesn't give a damn about you... he doesn't give a damn about anyone ... how he torments us ... there is nothing you can do ... out of bed."

An Evening at the Salvains Toundi accompanies the Commandant to the Salvains' home. Mr. Salvain is the new headmaster of the Dangan public school. The Commandant brings a gift for Mrs. Salvain, who pretends to be embarrassed but accepts it with visible delight. She sits between her husband and the Commandant, who showers her with compliments. Mr. Salvain is very proud of the changes he has introduced. He explains that he has expelled all the older students from the school, many of whom were getting the girls pregnant and infecting them with gonorrhea, as well as those who could not learn anything. He says he has created an "Infant School" for children aged two to six, because he believes that "young African children are just as intelligent as ours" (32). Mrs. Salvain adds that as for the adults, they are hopeless, lazy, and thieves. The Commandant tells Mr. Salvain that he is pleased with his work, and that he will visit again.

Velvet chairs and wooden trunks Toundi describes the Sunday scene at the mission, where each European arrives with an escort of black servants. Before mass, the Europeans gather in a corner of the mission around the Commandant and Father Vandermayer. When the small bell rings, the Africans push through the door of the nave to take their places on the tree trunks arranged in two rows, one for men and one for women. As for the Europeans, they follow Father Vandermayer through the sacristy door and sit, men and women shoulder to shoulder, in wooden armchairs covered with velvet. During mass, all sorts of discreet intimate scenes unfold under the sly gaze of the doctor's wife. The chief of police presses the hand of one of the Dubois girls. Madame Salvain moves her thigh closer to the Commandant's. After Father Vandermayer sings the *Ite missa est* (end of the mass), the Europeans leave the church, and the door is closed so the Africans can remain and listen to Father Vandermayer's sermon, which is full of obscenities.

The engineers threatens Toundi The Commandant, Toundi, the agricultural engineer, and Sophie, the engineer's mistress, go on a tour to a distant village. The engineer pretends to the Commandant that Sophie is his cook and orders her to climb into the back of the truck with Toundi. They arrive in the village in the evening. The Commandant and the engineer are lodged in a large hut. Sophie is lodged with Toundi in a small hut with no windows. The engineer calls Toundi and threatens him, saying he will send Sophie to the hospital as soon as they return to Dangan. He insists that Sophie has been entrusted to him by her father and that he cares for her like a daughter. He warns Toundi that he knows where to find him and that he will take Sophie to the hospital to be examined. Inside the hut, Sophie tries to get Toundi's attention. He shows no interest. She tells him she will tell everyone in Dangan that his "knife is not sharp." Toundi replies that he prefers it that way. While she continues talking, Toundi falls asleep.

A welcome party wrapped in racism A letter announces the arrival of Madame, the Commandant's wife. The news seems to surprise him, though without much enthusiasm. Madame finally arrives. She is a beautiful woman whose presence makes all the European women of Dangan pale. The whites of Dangan gather at the Commandant's house to celebrate her arrival. She is the center of attention. The conversation soon turns to the Africans, to their supposed dirtiness, alcoholism, and theft. Toundi notices a look of complicity between Madame and the agricultural engineer. He is disappointed. The doctor's wife exclaims irritably that there is no morality in this country. The school director replies that one cannot say much better of Paris. The Europeans grow uneasy.

Accusation of treason Mr. Fernand, the disinfectant officer, stands up and walks toward the school director, accusing him of being a traitor to France and of trying to put revolutionary ideas into the heads of the Africans since his arrival, by making them believe they are as good as the whites. The Commandant steps in to separate them. After drifting for a while onto sleeping sickness and the impossibility of properly raising horses in the country, the conversation returns to the natives, with each European giving his own account of how Africans are inferior. Gullet complains that Africans are now ministers in the French government. They say they wish a coup d'état could change things in France.

Mr. Moreau visits Madame The prison director visits Madame while the Commandant is away on mission. The sentry tells Toundi that the director does not leave Madame's bedroom until after midnight.

The laundry boy warns them to mind their own business and stay out of trouble, because they are there only to work. Even so, Toundi asks the laundry boy to check Madame's bed sheets to confirm whether the prison director and Madame were together. Baklu, the laundry boy, agrees.

Madame is more daring The Commandant's wife becomes increasingly daring. She's been sending letters to Monsieur Moreau, the prison steward, through Toundi. Her lover spends more and more time with her and lingers longer in her bed. She even dares to invite the Moreau couple, and during lunch she plays under the table with Monsieur Moreau. Madame Moreau is not fooled. She goes out crying on the veranda and asks her husband to take her home. After leaving her there, he returns immediately to throw himself into the arms of the Commandant's wife. The Commandant comes home earlier than expected, which completely ruins his wife's mood. The poor man does not know that his wife no longer loves him. He asks her if she is ill. The truth is that she cannot stand him anymore. Toundi feels sorry for him, this man of such importance who is being betrayed by his own wife.

Nothing stays hidden to the black quarter Madame becomes very nervous and unpredictable whenever her desire to see Monsieur Moreau takes hold of her. She threatens the boys and even becomes violent. Toundi no longer feels safe when the Commandant is away on mission. With the Commandant, at least, he knows what to expect. Everyone in the black quarter knows that the Commandant's wife is betraying him with the prison director. The prison director's boy even says that Madame lets Monsieur Moreau take liberties with her on the back seat of the Commandant's car along the roadside. Every detail of the whites' lives reaches the black quarter, yet nothing from the black quarter ever travels back.

"Is the white man's neighbor only other white men?" Toundi goes to deliver a letter from Madame to Monsieur Moreau, and he finds him busy torturing some of Mr. Janopoulos's laborers, who are accused of theft. The suffering Monsieur Moreau inflicts on the Africans is so extreme that Toundi remembers the priests' words about loving one's neighbor. He wonders, "*Is the white man's neighbor only other white men?*" (76). Toundi knows that, as usual, these Africans will die at the hands of Monsieur Moreau, will be buried in the prison cemetery, and the priest at the church will ask the congregation to pray for those unfortunate souls who did not reconcile themselves with God before their death. Toundi returns to the residence with his heart full of rage.

The cook's warning Madame comes to ask for news. Toundi simply tells her, with a faint smile at the corner of his mouth, "He will come at three... at siesta time." The cook warns Toundi that he is playing a dangerous game by speaking to Madame with a smirk. He tells him that Madame's reply, "Thank you, Mr. Toundi," does not bode well for him. Monsieur Moreau arrives, and Madame leads him into the living room. As Toundi serves them whisky, Moreau tells her that Toundi has shifty eyes, a sign that he is plotting something. He urges Madame to get rid of him. She answers that the Commandant is very attached to Toundi, though she cannot understand why. Out on the veranda, Toundi suddenly finds himself singing a mournful song, the kind sung when someone is dying.

As shameless as corpses Baklu, the laundry boy, is washing Madame's soiled sanitary towels, and this sparks a discussion between him, Toundi, and the cook. They say that white women are useless, that besides being unable to do anything, they cannot even wash their intimate laundry. Worse, they bring it out shamelessly for everyone to see. They conclude that white people, who take their pleasures in public and anywhere they please, are shameless, like corpses.

Condoms under madame's bed Madame becomes furious after the doctor's wife whispers something to her, mentioning Toundi's name. She avoids calling him for a while, then finally asks him to prepare her bath. As she gets ready, she breaks a bottle, scattering shards under the bed. Toundi fetches a broom to sweep them up and discovers some condoms hidden among the fragments. Madame explodes with anger and drives him out of her room. The cook and Baklu cannot contain their laughter when they see Toundi, who has no idea what he has just uncovered or why Madame is so upset. Madame demands that a chambermaid be found for her. The cook brings a girl named Kalisia, who has known many white men and has decided to earn her living differently. Kalisia is struck by Madame's beauty and tells Toundi that she is sure he is Madame's lover.

Kalisia advises Toundi to flee The Commandant returns from his tour earlier than expected and in a foul mood. He accuses Madame of betraying him with Monsieur Moreau, whose lighter he is holding in his hand. He says she has humiliated him once again, that she did not wait long before returning to her little game. She tries to apologize, but he refuses to listen. He says that the Africans call him “the Commandant whose wife opens her legs in ditches and in cars.” He also accuses Toundi of being the go-between. Kalisia is afraid for Toundi. She tells him he has become a danger to both the Commandant and Madame because he knows too much about them. She advises him to flee without waiting for his pay. Toundi tells himself that this is not the Commandant’s first disappointment with his wife and that he, Toundi, is not responsible for what is happening.

Madame accuses Toundi of spying Toundi later surprises the Commandant and Madame kissing. They startle. Madame accuses him of spying on them. The Commandant and his wife begin to treat Toundi abusively. They become violent with him and accuse him of smelling bad. Toundi takes small revenge by spitting into the Commandant’s glass of water.

Sophie’s flight Sophie, the engineer’s mistress, has run away with the contents of his safe. Gullet comes to the residence with the engineer to arrest Toundi, claiming that he is Sophie’s lover and that he helped her escape. The Commandant does nothing to protect him. Madame seems pleased with Toundi’s misfortune. Toundi is tortured at the prison. A rifle butt breaks his ribs. Moreau arrives at the hospital where Toundi has been taken and orders that Toundi be handed over to him as soon as he regains a little strength. Toundi listens to the advice of a black nurse, who urges him to flee to Equatorial Guinea, swearing that Moreau will not get his hands on him.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

TOUNDI (*observant, vulnerable, aware*)

Observant Toundi’s sharp observational sense shapes his entire experience. He notices every shift in mood, every secret glance, every contradiction in the colonial household. He sees the complicity between Madame and Moreau, the humiliation of the Commandant, and the cruelty of Father Vandermayer. His awareness is a form of knowledge that isolates him. When he witnesses Moreau torturing laborers, he recalls Christian teachings and asks whether “the white man’s neighbor” is only other whites. His observant nature exposes the hypocrisy of the colonial world and ultimately makes him dangerous to those who depend on silence.

Vulnerable Toundi’s vulnerability is constant, beginning with his father’s beatings and continuing through his service in the Commandant’s household. He is kicked, humiliated, and blamed for scandals he did not cause. Madame’s fury, Moreau’s suspicion, and the Commandant’s insecurity all converge on him. When Sophie runs away, he becomes the scapegoat and is tortured until his ribs break. Even in the hospital, Moreau demands custody of him. Toundi’s vulnerability is the condition imposed by a system that denies him protection, identity, and justice.

Aware Despite living in a world built on domination, Toundi retains a strong moral awareness. He questions the contradictions between Christian teachings and colonial violence, especially after witnessing Moreau’s brutality. He feels genuine pity for the Commandant, recognizing the humanity of a man betrayed by his wife. He refuses Sophie’s advances, recoils from Madame’s manipulations, and remains disturbed by the abuses he sees. Even his small act of revenge, spitting in the Commandant’s water, shows restraint rather than cruelty.

THE COMMANDANT (*Authoritarian, Humiliated, blind*)

Authoritarian The Commandant embodies rigid colonial authority. He threatens to skin Toundi if he ever steals, kicks him for a fallen hat, and orders raids on the black quarter. His power is expressed through physical dominance and emotional intimidation. He expects obedience without question and interprets any deviation as betrayal. His authoritarianism is professional and personal, shaping every interaction in his

household. Yet this rigid control masks insecurity, and when his authority falters, especially through his wife's infidelity, he becomes volatile.

Humiliated Humiliation becomes the Commandant's deepest wound. Madame's affairs destroy his self-image as the powerful "chief of the white men." When he confronts her with Moreau's lighter, he repeats the nickname Africans give him: "the Commandant whose wife opens her legs in ditches and in cars" (98). This public shame corrodes his authority and makes him lash out blindly. He accuses Toundi of being an accomplice, not because he believes it, but because he cannot bear the collapse of his dignity. His humiliation becomes a political crisis, revealing how fragile colonial masculinity truly is.

Blind The Commandant is blind to the reality around him. He cannot see the suffering of Africans, the hypocrisy of his household, or the resentment he inspires. He misreads Madame's unhappiness, thinking she is "ill," and fails to understand that his servants know everything about his private life. He believes Toundi is loyal simply because he obeys, never realizing that fear governs their relationship. His blindness isolates him from truth and from the people he commands. This inability to perceive reality contributes to his downfall and deepens Toundi's tragedy.

MADAME (*Manipulative, restless, cruel*)

Manipulative Madame manipulates everyone around her with charm, secrecy, and emotional volatility. She seduces Moreau, deceives her husband, and uses Toundi as a messenger for her clandestine letters. Her interactions with Toundi shift unpredictably between politeness, fury, and calculated distance. She instrumentalizes shame, especially when he discovers condoms under her bed. Her manipulation destabilizes the household and places Toundi in danger. In the colonial hierarchy, her social power shields her from consequences, making her one of the most dangerous figures in Toundi's life.

Restless Madame is driven by dissatisfaction and constant agitation. Her arrival in Dangan brings excitement, but she quickly grows bored with her husband and the rigid colonial world. Her restlessness manifests in nervous moods, impulsive decisions, and reckless affairs. She becomes "nervous and unpredictable" whenever she wants to see Moreau, threatening servants and lashing out violently. Her inability to remain emotionally stable fuels chaos in the household and contributes directly to Toundi's downfall. She is a figure who cannot tolerate stillness, morally or emotionally.

Cruel Madame's cruelty emerges gradually, then openly. She treats Toundi as expendable, threatening him, insulting him, and driving him out of her room in rage. She is pleased when he is arrested, showing no concern for his fate. Her cruelty extends to other Europeans, such as Madame Moreau, whom she humiliates by playing with her husband under the table.

FATHER VANDERMAYER (*Hypocritical, sadistic, controlling*)

Hypocritical Father Vandermayer embodies religious hypocrisy. He preaches morality while abusing his authority, forcing choir boys to strip and searching "even in their bodily openings." He whips adults suspected of adultery while asking whether they were "ashamed before God." His treatment of Martin, kicking him when he announces Father Gilbert's death, reveals a man whose actions contradict every Christian value he claims to uphold. His hypocrisy contributes to Toundi's disillusionment with the Church and exposes the moral corruption of colonial religion.

Sadistic Vandermayer's sadism is unmistakable. He derives satisfaction from humiliating and hurting others, especially Africans under his authority. He strips choir boys, searches their bodies, and whips adults during interrogations. His cruelty is systematic, woven into his daily routines and justified through religious rhetoric. His behavior creates an atmosphere of fear at the mission and shapes Toundi's understanding of colonial power as inherently violent. Vandermayer is one of the novel's most disturbing figures because his sadism is cloaked in spiritual authority.

Controlling Control defines Vandermayer's identity. He distrusts everyone, oversees the choir boys with military rigidity, and insists on managing every detail of the mission's finances and morality. He

forces confessions through physical coercion and takes charge of Father Gilbert's funeral with self-satisfaction. His controlling nature reflects the broader colonial project: the need to discipline and reshape African lives according to European norms. His presence suffocates Toundi and marks the beginning of the boy's descent into deeper forms of domination.

THEMES

Racism Racism is the foundation of the world Toundi enters, shaping every relationship, every rule, and every moment of his life. It is not simply prejudice. It is a system that organizes bodies, space, morality, and violence. From the beginning, Toundi learns that Africans and Europeans do not share the same world. At church, Africans sit on rough tree trunks while Europeans sit in velvet armchairs. During communion, the two groups receive the sacrament separately. Even worship is segregated, revealing how racism penetrates the most sacred rituals.

Racism also appears through constant physical and psychological violence. The Commandant kicks Toundi for a fallen hat. Soldiers push him away from Father Gilbert's body. Gullet raids the black quarter without explanation. Moreau tortures African laborers until they die and are buried anonymously in the prison cemetery. These acts are not isolated. They are permitted because Africans are seen as bodies without rights, dignity, or humanity. Toundi's question, "Is the white man's neighbor only other white men," emerges from witnessing the contradiction between Christian teachings and colonial cruelty.

Racist ideology is also expressed through language. Europeans describe Africans as lazy, hopeless, and thieves. Gullet complains that Africans have become ministers in France and wishes for a coup to restore white supremacy. Even intimate scenes reveal racial hierarchy. Madame's affairs become gossip in the black quarter, yet Africans are blamed for knowing too much, as if knowledge itself is forbidden to them.

Racism ultimately destroys Toundi. His proximity to white secrets makes him dangerous. When Sophie runs away, he becomes the perfect scapegoat. He is arrested, beaten, and tortured until his ribs break. Moreau demands custody of him at the hospital, treating him as property rather than a human being. Toundi flees toward Equatorial Guinea, but he dies alone in the forest. His diary becomes the only trace of a life crushed by a system that never saw him as fully human.

Colonial Violence and Oppression The novel presents colonial rule not as a daily reality that shapes every aspect of African life. Violence is constant, arbitrary, and normalized. It begins in Toundi's childhood, when his father beats him with a cane, but it intensifies once he enters the colonial world. The Commandant kicks him for a fallen hat. Soldiers push him away from Father Gilbert's body. Gullet raids the black quarter, overturns furniture, and destroys property without explanation. These acts show a system in which Africans can be harmed at any moment, without reason or accountability.

The most extreme violence comes from Monsieur Moreau, whose torture of African laborers is described with chilling clarity. Toundi witnesses men accused of theft being beaten until they die. Their bodies are buried in the prison cemetery, and the priest asks the congregation to pray for souls who did not reconcile with God. This ritual disguises brutality with religious language, showing how colonial institutions work together to maintain oppression. Toundi's reflection, "Is the white man's neighbor only other white men," captures the moral contradiction at the heart of colonial rule.

Oppression is physical, psychological, and structural. Africans are forced into positions of servitude, constantly reminded of their inferiority. At church, they sit on tree trunks while Europeans sit in velvet armchairs. During mass, Europeans leave before Africans hear Father Vandermayer's obscene sermon. Even in private homes, Africans live under surveillance. Toundi becomes a target because he knows too much about the Commandant's household. Kalisia warns him that knowledge itself is dangerous for an African.

Colonial oppression ultimately destroys Toundi. When Sophie runs away, he becomes the perfect scapegoat. He is arrested, beaten, and tortured until his ribs break. Moreau demands custody of him at the hospital, treating him as property. Toundi flees toward Equatorial Guinea, but he dies alone in the forest. His diary becomes the only surviving trace of a life crushed by a violent and oppressive system.

Hypocrisy of Colonial Christianity The hypocrisy of colonial Christianity is one of the most striking themes in *Houseboy*. The novel exposes a profound contradiction between the moral teachings of the Church and the behavior of the European missionaries who claim to embody Christian virtue. Christianity

arrives in Toundi's world as a promise of salvation and compassion, yet it quickly becomes a tool of domination, humiliation, and control. The priests preach love, forgiveness, and charity, but their actions reveal cruelty, suspicion, and abuse. Father Vandermayer represents this hypocrisy most clearly. He forces choir boys to strip and searches "even in their bodily openings," claiming to protect the tithe from theft. He interrogates adults suspected of adultery, whipping them while asking whether they were ashamed before God. His treatment of Martin, whom he kicks and insults when the old catechist announces Father Gilbert's death, shows a complete absence of empathy. Vandermayer's sermons to Africans are filled with obscenities, even though he presents himself as a guardian of morality. His behavior contradicts every Christian value he claims to uphold.

The hypocrisy extends beyond individual priests. The colonial Church reinforces racial segregation. Africans sit on tree trunks during mass while Europeans sit in velvet armchairs. Europeans leave the church before Africans hear the sermon, as if spiritual instruction for Africans is a separate and inferior matter. The Church becomes a space where hierarchy is sanctified rather than challenged.

Toundi's moral awakening emerges from witnessing these contradictions. When he sees Moreau torturing African laborers, he remembers the priests' teachings about loving one's neighbor. He asks himself whether "the white man's neighbor is only other white men." This question captures the moral collapse of colonial Christianity. The religion that claims universal love is practiced selectively, excluding Africans from its compassion.

Power and Social Hierarchy The colonial world Toundi enters is built on rigid divisions that determine who commands, who obeys, and who suffers. These divisions are visible in daily routines, in church seating, in household interactions, and in the violence that Europeans inflict on Africans. The hierarchy is openly displayed and constantly reinforced. The Commandant represents the pinnacle of colonial authority. He examines Toundi like an object, threatens to skin him if he ever steals, and kicks him for a fallen hat. His power is expressed through physical dominance and emotional intimidation. Even his casual gestures, such as calling Toundi into the shower while naked, reveal a man who assumes complete control over Toundi. His authority is unquestioned, and Africans must adapt to his moods and whims.

The hierarchy is also visible in the church. Europeans sit in velvet armchairs while Africans sit on tree trunks. Europeans leave before Africans hear Father Vandermayer's sermon, which is filled with obscenities. This separation shows how colonial power infiltrates spiritual life, turning worship into a performance of racial and social superiority. Within the household, hierarchy determines relationships. Toundi becomes "the dog of the king," proud at first to serve the chief of the white men, yet quickly aware that his position offers no protection. Madame uses her social power to manipulate servants, threaten them, and punish them for witnessing her secrets. Moreau uses his authority to torture laborers and later demands custody of Toundi at the hospital. Even minor European figures, such as the disinfectant officer or the school director, speak of Africans with contempt, reinforcing their place at the bottom of the social order.

Knowledge itself becomes dangerous for Africans. Kalisia warns Toundi that he knows too much about the Commandant and Madame, and that this knowledge makes him a threat. In the colonial hierarchy, Africans must serve without seeing, obey without understanding, and suffer without complaint.

Sexual Exploitation and Gender Dynamics The colonial household is a site of racial hierarchy and a space where gendered power operates through secrecy, coercion, and unequal relationships. Women in the novel, both African and European, navigate a world shaped by male authority and colonial expectations, yet they also exercise power in ways that expose the instability of the colonial order. African women often appear in positions of vulnerability. Sophie, the agricultural engineer's mistress, dreams of escaping to Equatorial Guinea because she is treated as disposable. Her lover hides her, controls her movements, and threatens to send her to the hospital for examination. Kalisia has "known many white men" and seeks another way to survive, revealing how African women are pushed into relationships with Europeans as a means of economic survival. Their bodies become sites of exploitation, shaped by colonial power and male desire. European women occupy a different position. They possess social privilege, yet they are also trapped within rigid expectations of respectability. Madame uses her beauty and status to manipulate men, but her actions reveal a deeper dissatisfaction and a desire for agency. Her affairs with Monsieur Moreau destabilize the household and expose the weakness of colonial masculinity. She becomes "nervous and unpredictable," threatening servants and lashing out when her desires are frustrated. Her behavior shows how gendered power can move in both directions, harming those beneath her while challenging the authority of her husband.

Sexual exploitation also intersects with racial hierarchy. Madame's intimate laundry becomes a subject of ridicule among African servants, who see it as evidence of European shamelessness. Moreau's sexual liberties with Madame occur in the Commandant's car, a symbol of colonial authority. Even gossip about these affairs circulates through the black quarter, showing how sexual behavior becomes a form of social currency.

Humiliation and Loss of Dignity The colonial world Toundi enters is built on practices that strip Africans of their humanity, forcing them into positions where shame becomes routine. Toundi's earliest experiences already contain humiliation, such as when his father beats him and forces him with blackmail over guilt of incest to let himself be beaten properly, while neighbors listen. Once Toundi enters the Commandant's household, humiliation becomes a constant condition rather than an occasional punishment. The Commandant humiliates Toundi casually and publicly. He kicks him and examines him like an object during their first meeting. Soldiers push Toundi away from Father Gilbert's body, denying him the dignity of mourning. Gullet, the police chief, raids his family home, overturning furniture and swallowing his sister's hard-earned bananas with contempt. These acts reveal how colonial authority depends on degrading Africans, reducing them to bodies that can be handled, searched, or struck without consequence.

Humiliation also comes from Madame, whose unpredictable moods and secret affairs place Toundi in constant danger. She drives him out of her room in rage when he unknowingly uncovers condoms under her bed. She is thrilled, "skipping like a little girl" when he is arrested, showing no concern for his suffering. Her behavior strips Toundi of dignity by treating him as a disposable servant whose feelings and safety do not matter. Hardly is Toundi arrested that she passes his apron to Kalisia. This is Toundi's final humiliation. He is falsely accused, arrested, tortured, and beaten until his ribs break. Moreau demands custody of him at the hospital, treating him as property. Toundi flees, but he dies in the forest of Equatorial Guinea, stripped of dignity in life and in death.

The Commandant himself suffers humiliation, which he then redirects toward Toundi. When he discovers his wife's infidelity, he repeats the nickname Africans give him, "the Commandant whose wife opens her legs in ditches and in cars." His loss of dignity becomes a crisis, and he accuses Toundi of being an accomplice. His personal shame fuels violence, revealing how colonial masculinity collapses when confronted with vulnerability.

Surveillance and punishment The colonial world is built on watching, controlling, and disciplining African bodies. Nothing Africans say or see is without consequence. Surveillance becomes a method of domination, and punishment becomes the tool that enforces it. Toundi's position as a houseboy places him under continuous observation. The Commandant examines him closely on his first day, judging his cleanliness, his speech, and even his potential for theft. This inspection sets the tone for their relationship. Toundi must always be visible, always available, and always obedient. Even his sleep is monitored. The Commandant asks whether he slept well, then reveals he knows about the raid on the black quarter. This moment shows how Africans live under constant scrutiny, even in their own homes.

Father Vanderlayer represents another form of surveillance. He strips choir boys and searches even in their most intimate parts, claiming to protect the tithe. He forces adults suspected of adultery to undress and interrogates them while whipping them. His office becomes a space where privacy is erased and punishment is justified through religious authority. The mission, which should offer spiritual refuge, becomes a site of fear. The household itself is a place where surveillance flows in both directions. Africans observe Europeans, learning their secrets, their affairs, and their hypocrisies. But this knowledge is dangerous. Kalisia warns Toundi that he knows too much about the Commandant and Madame, and that this makes him a threat. In the colonial hierarchy, Africans are expected to serve without seeing and obey without understanding. When Toundi accidentally uncovers Madame's condoms, he is punished immediately, driven out of her room, and later accused of spying. Punishment reaches its peak when Toundi is falsely accused of helping Sophie escape. He is arrested, beaten, and tortured until his ribs fracture.

Disillusion and Disappointment Through Toundi's eyes, the colonial world appears at first as a place of promise, order, and opportunity. He imagines that living among Europeans will elevate him, that education and service will grant him dignity, and that proximity to power will protect him. This hope is sincere, shaped by his gratitude toward Father Gilbert, who clothes him, teaches him to read, and introduces him proudly as his "masterpiece." For a moment, Toundi believes he has found a new life. However, this hope collapses as he confronts the reality of colonial rule.

The death of Father Gilbert marks the beginning of Toundi's disillusionment. The priest who once embodied kindness is replaced by Father Vandermayer, whose cruelty and suspicion reveal the darker side of the Church. Toundi watches choir boys abused, adults whipped, humiliated. The mission, once a refuge, becomes a place of fear. Toundi realizes that the Christian world he admired is built on hypocrisy and violence. His disappointment deepens when he enters the Commandant's household. He expects respect and stability, yet he encounters humiliation, surveillance, and unpredictable authority. The Commandant kicks him, interrogates him, and treats him as a tool rather than a person. Madame's beauty initially fascinates him, but her manipulation, cruelty, and secret affairs reveal another layer of moral corruption. Toundi sees that the Europeans he once admired are driven by jealousy, lust, and insecurity.

The greatest disillusionment comes from witnessing the brutality of colonial justice. Moreau tortures laborers until they die and later demands custody of Toundi so he can do the same to him. The Commandant, whom Toundi once pitied, abandons him when he is falsely accused. Madame is pleased by his arrest. Every figure of authority betrays him. By the end of the novel, Toundi understands that the world he entered with hope is the same world that destroys him. His diary becomes a testament to a young man who believed in the promises of colonial order, only to discover that those promises were illusions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Toundi's diary influence the way we understand his story?

Students can think about why Oyono uses a diary instead of a traditional narrator. They can consider how the diary makes Toundi's suffering and observations feel personal.

2. What does the novel reveal about the hypocrisy of colonial rule?

Students can look at the behavior of the priests and administrators. They can identify moments where Europeans preach morality but act cruelly. Students can discuss how these contradictions affect Toundi's view of the world.

3. In what ways does Toundi's vulnerability expose the violence of the colonial system?

Students can discuss how Toundi is blamed for events he did not cause. Students can look at how he becomes a scapegoat when Sophie runs away. Students can examine how his final escape shows the limits of survival under colonial rule.

4. How does *Houseboy* challenge the idea of France's "civilizing mission"?

Students can compare Christian teachings with the violence Toundi witnesses. They can examine how Europeans justify their authority. Students can discuss how the novel invites readers to question colonial ideology.