

Claire Dougherty
ced5388@psu.edu
English 448, sect. 001
Spring 2019
Dr. Mulford

Pamela, an Individual Case

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* tells the story of an impoverished young servant who, through her virtue alone, transcends social classes until she eventually becomes a member of the gentry. On the surface, it appears as though Richardson seeks to question both the stability and the ethics of eighteenth-century England's strict social hierarchy. However, by characterizing Pamela as extraordinary, Richardson depicts her rise from one social class to another as an exception to an otherwise stable system, rather than a disruption of it. Though his plot has the potential to disrupt social order, Richardson's work remains largely apolitical due to his treatment of Pamela as an individual case, as opposed to a criticism regarding structural class oppression.

From the outset of the novel, Pamela is described as possessing extraordinary character. She stands out amongst her fellow servants, due to her beauty and moral code. As the novel opens, the reader learns about the recent death of Pamela's mistress. Pamela's role as the favorite servant of Mrs. B becomes clear as she reveals that "some of [Mrs. B's] last words" were "remember my poor Pamela!" (1). Soon after, the reader also learns that Mrs. Jervis, the most well-respected servant, admires Pamela similarly and treats her "as if [she] were her own daughter" (6). The other servants also frequently note her beauty and virtue. By establishing Pamela's exceptional character through the eyes of those around her, Richardson distinguishes

her from the other members of her social class, which creates a sense of ambiguity as to where she belongs socially. This tendency to stand out also serves to emphasize her individuality.

The thorough characterization of Pamela further highlights her individuality. Through his deliberate use of the epistolary form, Richardson allows the reader to see the world through Pamela's eyes. As her private life and thoughts are revealed, Pamela and the reader form an intimate bond. This relationship is further strengthened by the nature of the plot. The first half of the narrative is largely concerned with Pamela avoiding the threat of Mr. B and his sexual advances. It comes as no surprise that Pamela, at only 15-years-old, is at first characterized as naïve. An example of this occurs when she reflects on a conversation in which Mr. B encourages her to read and write: "To be sure I did nothing but curtsy and cry, and was all in Confusion, at his Goodness. Indeed he is the best of Gentlemen, I think!" (4). The trusting nature of Pamela results in some readers feeling an urge to protect her. It is important to note that her vulnerability is heightened by the absence of an authority figure to look after her. With her parents physically absent from the narrative, Mrs. Jervis was briefly able to fulfill the role of guardian before Pamela's departure from Bedfordshire, and after her arrival at the Lincolnshire estate, Mr. Williams tries—and fails—to do the same. As a result, the reader takes on the role of her protector, which further bonds the two. The more intimate this relationship between Pamela and the reader becomes—and it could be argued that the reader standing in as a mother or father figure is the most intimate relationship possible—the more the reader views Pamela as an individual.

Pamela's socioeconomic status is also characterized as extraordinary. Though Pamela was born into a poor family, she was plucked from it by the late Mrs. B. From there, Pamela's mistress teaches her to dance, to sing, to draw, to sew, and, most critical to the plot of the novel,

to write. This, in the words of Pamela, gives her “qualifications above [her] degree” (11). This education distinguishes her from her fellow servants, as it better reflects that of an upper-class woman. The history of Pamela’s family also blurs social categories. Throughout the novel, the reader learns that though Pamela’s parents may be poor at the present, Mr. Andrews used to own a school. It is in relaying a conversation between herself and John in a letter to her parents that Pamela reveals the family’s economic background. “It is a thousand pities,” she writes, “that such worthy hearts should not have better luck in the world! and [John] wonders, that you, my father, who are so well able to teach, and write so good a hand, succeeded no better in the school you attempted to set up, but was forced to go to hard labour” (6). This passage reveals two important aspects of the Andrews’ economic background. Such as in the case of Pamela, Mr. and Mrs. Andrews seem to value education in the same way someone of a higher station would. Additionally, the story of the Andrews suggests that in their individual case, the poverty that they face is through no fault of their own. These elements of Pamela’s background emphasize the remarkable nature of her socioeconomic background, as well as create ambiguity in regards to where she fits socially, but do so subtly, without outright disrupting the social order.

It is Pamela’s consciousness of class order that allows her to transcend social categories; she is not presented as a threat. Her respect for the social order is often demonstrated through her language. When speaking to Mr. B, she often references their opposing social stations, using terms such as “rich and great” to describe him, and “poor and little” to describe herself (69). Even after Pamela becomes a member of the gentry through her marriage to Mr. B, this consciousness remains intact. Later on in the novel, Lady Davers refuses to dine with Pamela at the table. She asks Mr. B, “But, Brother... do you think I’ll sit at Table with the Creature?” Rather than take offense at the comment, Pamela suggests to Lady Davers, “if your good Brother

will permit it, I will attend your Chair all the time you dine” (427). Although at this point Pamela had technically secured her position amongst the gentry due to her marriage, she still empathizes with the fact that her new social standing is threatening to Lady Davers due to her class consciousness.

Similarly, Pamela never indicates any desire to abandon her social class. Early on in the narrative, when Mr. B kisses Pamela in the summerhouse, she boldly rejects him as she cries, “I am honest, though poor: and if you was a prince, I would not be otherwise.” When he tries to give her gold in exchange for her silence, she says, “I won’t take the money... poor as I am I won’t take it” (12). Moments such as this establish the value that Pamela places on her virtue, and demonstrate that she is impervious to the temptation of wealth. When she receives fine clothing from Mr. B upon the death of her lady-in-waiting, Pamela rejects the gift outright, citing that if she were to wear them in her father’s poor village house, she would appear pretentious and out of place. She explains: “I cannot wear them at my poor father’s; for I should bring all the little village upon my back: and so I resolve not to have them” (86). This moment reflects two components of Pamela’s class consciousness. It not only demonstrates her thorough knowledge of social mores, but also her desire to not disrupt them. If Pamela had acted like an opportunist, she would have been perceived as a threat to normative social categories. Paradoxically, it is Pamela’s lack of desire to rise socially that permits her to do just that. She does not threaten social order because her ambivalence toward wealth and glamour prove to those around her that she does not intend to disrupt it.

Ultimately, the more Pamela is individualized by Richardson— whether it be through the admiration of those around her, her thorough characterization via the book’s epistolary form, or her distinctive socioeconomic background— the more clear it becomes that Richardson is

treating the trajectory of Pamela's social standing as an exceptional case. It is the extraordinary nature of Pamela, coupled with her class consciousness and desire not to disrupt the social hierarchy, that permits her to transcend social categories. From the beginning of the novel, there is a sense of disorder in regards to where Pamela belongs socially. She does not seem fit to fulfill the duty of a servant, nor does it seem appropriate for a chambermaid to become a member of the upper class, which creates a sense of tension. However, once she is married to Mr. B and learns throughout the second half of the novel to behave in a way that is expected of her as a member of the gentry, order is restored. While Pamela's trajectory may seem to suggest that status and station were fluid, this notion is shut down as Pamela returns to this normative social category at the end of the novel. And while the narrative may also seem to question the stability of eighteenth-century England's social hierarchy, Richardson does not accomplish this either, and it was likely not his intention to do so. Richardson does not advocate the marriage of chambermaids to their masters, but rather this extraordinary chambermaid in this particular situation.