

Pamela: Or Virtue Rewarded

by Samuel Richardson

Summary

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) is a famous example of an epistolary novel, or a novel composed of letters. Richardson was famous for this style of writing and used it in his other novels. *Pamela* differs from Richardson's other novels in that the letters are mostly from the titular Pamela; whereas in his other novels, more points of view are included. The novel focuses on Pamela to hone in on her experience and state of mind.

Pamela is a fifteen-year-old maidservant in Bedfordshire. She is innocent and virtuous. She serves Lady B, who is kind to her. Unfortunately, Lady B has just passed away. Pamela is nervous about her work situation, as she does not come from money. Lady B's son, Mr. B, promises to keep her and all the other servants employed.

Mr. B begins making advances towards Pamela. At first, they are just verbal, as she reports to her parents. She promises she will do everything to preserve her virtue. Her parents agree with her, but advise her if Mr. B ever makes physical advances towards her she should return home, despite their impoverishment. Soon thereafter, Mr. B makes a physical advancement towards Pamela, which she rebuffs. He attempts to pay her to keep her quiet, but she refuses and tells her friend the housekeeper, Mrs. Jervis.

Mr. B continues to make advances towards Pamela, including trying to kiss her while she undresses for the evening after hiding in her closet. She faints, which dissuades Mr. B from continuing. Pamela threatens to return home to her parents. Mr. B is against this and thwarts her return.

He offers Pamela more money, and then marriage to a Lincolnshire clergyman named Mr. Williams. She refuses and packs her bags to return home. Mr. B tricks Pamela and sends her to his estate in Lincolnshire. He also writes her parents telling them he has sent her away to preserve her virtue, as she has had an affair with a penurious clergyman. Pamela's father does not believe him and attempts to retrieve her at the Bedfordshire estate, but she is not there.

Pamela begins a journal in Lincolnshire, hoping one day her parents will read it and understand. She is virtually a captive there, under the watch of Mrs. Jewkes, the spiteful housekeeper. Mr. B writes to Pamela and invites her to be his mistress. She refuses. Pamela begins to plan her escape and enlists the help of Mr. Williams. They exchange letters leaving them next to the sunflower in the garden. Mr. Williams tries his best to help her, even asking the local gentry for assistance. They refuse due to Mr. B's social standing, advising Mr. Williams to marry Pamela.

Mr. Williams asks Pamela to marry him to help her escape, but she refuses. Pamela is concerned when Mr. Williams is robbed, wondering if Mr. B set the robbery up to steal her letters. She is determined to escape but gives up on this idea when she is hurt during her attempt.

Mr. B soon arrives at Lincolnshire. He again asks Pamela to be his mistress and she refuses. Mr. B and Mr. Jewkes come up with a plan for Mr. B to finally seduce Pamela. He dresses up as a female servant named Nan and pretends to be drunk. As Nan, he sneaks into Pamela's bed. When Pamela realizes what is happening, she has a violent fit, similar to a seizure.

After Pamela's fit, Mr. B's demeanor changes. He seems regretful in his actions, but continues to pursue her, albeit without force. Pamela begs him to stop his advances. He admits that he loves Pamela, but feels he is unable to marry her due to the social gap. Pamela is shocked, but somewhat stirred by his confession. She hopes he means what he says. Mr. B leaves his estate for a few days. While he is gone, Pamela is stopped by a fortuneteller who says Mr. B is trying to force her into a sham marriage. She rethinks her burgeoning affection for Mr. B.

When Mr. B returns, Mrs. Jewkes gives him some of Pamela's recent writings. After reading them, his affection for Pamela only grows. He feels guilty for the way he has treated her and promises to make things right by marrying her. Pamela is still suspicious of him and denies him, asking to return home. Mr. B is upset and angry, but allows Pamela to go home. Pamela feels strangely sad.

On her way home, she receives a letter from Mr. B, imploring her to return and marry him. He speaks of reform and changing his ways, and Pamela, believing him, decides to return. On her return, they wonder how the gentry will react to their marriage, and Pamela tells Mr. B why she was wary of his proposal. He admits he thought of luring her into a sham marriage, but changed his mind.

The gentry accept Pamela easily, due to her charm. Her father comes looking for her, worried that she is now a mistress, but is happy and excited to see her engaged and content. Mr. B and Pamela are soon married. Pamela then has a hostile interaction with Mr. B's sister, Lady Davers where she effectively holds Pamela hostage, disparaging her social status. Lady Davers forces Mr. B to confess to a dalliance he had as a young man. Pamela learns there was a child produced from this dalliance named Miss Goodwin. He introduces Pamela to Miss Goodwin, who believes Mr. B is her uncle. Miss Goodwin's mother is happily married in Jamaica.

Mr. B sets up Pamela's parents to look after Mr. B's estate in Kent. Lady Davers ultimately accepts Pamela. Pamela has many children with Mr. B and visits with her family often. She is happy and takes Miss Goodwin under her wing, ensuring that she becomes as pious as Pamela.

Character List

Pamela

A lively, pretty, and courageous maid-servant, age 15, who is subject to the sexual advances of her new Master, Mr. B., following the death of his mother, Lady B. She is a devoted daughter to her impoverished parents, Mr. and Mrs. Andrews, to whom she writes a prodigious number of letters and whom she credits with the moral formation that prompts her to defend her purity at all costs. Pamela resists Mr. B. through the long weeks of his aggression toward her, capitulating neither to his assaults nor to his later tenderness. Though it takes a while for her to admit it, Pamela is attracted to Mr. B. from the first, and gradually she comes to love him. They marry about halfway through the novel, and

afterward Pamela's sweetness and equipoise aid her in securing the goodwill of her new husband's highborn friends.

Mr. B.

A country squire, 25 or 26 years of age, with properties in Bedfordshire, Lincolnshire, Kent, and London. He is Pamela's employer, pursuer, and eventual husband. Richardson has censored Mr. B.'s name in order to protect the pretense of non-fiction, but scholars have conjectured based on manuscripts that the novelist had "Brandon" in mind. Mr. B. has rakish tendencies, and he attempts to compel Pamela's reciprocation of his sexual attentions, even to the point of imprisoning her in his Lincolnshire estate. His fundamental decency prevents him from consummating any of his assaults on her, however, and under her influence he reforms in the middle of the novel.

Lady Davers

The married elder sister of Mr. B. to whom the Squire's Bedfordshire servants apply when trying to enlist some aid for Pamela. She objects strenuously to the union of her brother with their mother's waiting-maid, subjecting Pamela to a harrowing afternoon of insults and bullying, but eventually comes to accept and value her new sister-in-law. She once cleaned up after her brother's affair with Sally Godfrey. Lady Davers is subject to drastic changes in mood, given to alternate between imperious and abject humors, but she is, like her brother, basically decent.

Lady B.

Pamela's original employer, the mother of Mr. B. and Lady Davers. Lady B. was morally upright and kind to Pamela, educating her and contributing to the formation of her virtuous character. On her deathbed, she told her son to look after all the Bedfordshire servants, especially Pamela.

Mrs. Jewkes

The housekeeper at Mr. B.'s Lincolnshire estate and Pamela's primary warder during the period of her captivity. Pamela represents her as a brazen villain, physically hideous and sexually ambiguous, though the hyperbolic attributions of depravity may be Pamela's way of deflecting blame from Mr. B., about whom her feelings are more conflicted. Mrs. Jewkes is devoted to her Master, to a fault: she is as ready to commit a wrong in his service, not excluding assisting in an attempted rape of Pamela, as she is to wait loyally on that same Pamela once Mr. B. has decided to elevate and marry her.

Mrs. Jervis

The elderly housekeeper of Mr. B.'s Bedfordshire estate, one of the virtuous servants who applies to Lady Davers on behalf of Pamela. She has a genteel background and is an able manager, presumably the linchpin of the well-ordered Bedfordshire household. Despite her good nature and her motherly concern for Pamela, however, she is nearly useless in defending her young friend from their Master's lecherous advances.

Mr. John Andrews

Pamela's father and her chief correspondent. He is virtuous and literate like his daughter, formerly the master of a school, though his fortunes have since declined and he is now an agricultural laborer. He had two sons, now dead, who pauperized him before dying. Pamela credits both her parents

with forming her character by educating her in virtue and giving her an example of honest, cheerful poverty.

Mrs. Elizabeth Andrews

Pamela's mother, who has no independent presence in the novel.

Mr. Williams

The curate (junior pastor) of Mr. B.'s parish in Lincolnshire. Pamela engages his assistance in her efforts to escape her captivity, and she finds him dutiful but ineffectual; he makes an unsuccessful bid to become Pamela's husband, and his efforts on her behalf come decisively to naught when Mr. B. sends him to debtor's prison. Overall, he is meritorious but scarcely appealing, and he suffers from his position as the suitor whom no one takes seriously. Mr. B.'s drawn-out preoccupation with his "rival" Williams only serves to keep the latter's risibility in view.

Monsieur Colbrand

The monstrous Swiss man whom Mr. B. sends to Lincolnshire to keep watch over Pamela. Like Mrs. Jewkes, he becomes Pamela's ally after the Squire's reformation.

Jackey

Lady Davers's nephew, who accompanies her to Mr. B.'s estate in Lincolnshire and aids her in browbeating Pamela. He exemplifies what Richardson sees as the aristocratic impulse toward sexual exploitation of social inferiors, though he is quicker than his aunt in perceiving Pamela's innate respectability.

Beck Worden

Lady Davers's waiting-maid, who attends her at Mr. B.'s estate in Lincolnshire and aids in the persecution of the newly married Pamela.

John Arnold

A footman at the Bedfordshire estate. In the early stages of the novel he delivers Pamela's letters to and from her parents, and Pamela appreciates his cheerfulness in performing this service. After her abduction, however, he sends her a note confessing that he has allowed Mr. B. to read all of the correspondence between Pamela and her parents. He has been torn between his duty to Mr. B. and the promptings of his conscience, and the result is that he comes into conflict with both Pamela and Mr. B. The Squire dismisses him, but after the marriage, Pamela has him reinstated.

Mr. Longman

The steward at the Bedfordshire estate, one of the virtuous servants who applies to Lady Davers on behalf of Pamela. He admires Pamela and supplies her with the abundant writing materials that allow her to continue her journal during her captivity in Lincolnshire.

Mr. Jonathan

The butler at the Bedfordshire estate, one of the virtuous servants who applies to Lady Davers on behalf of Pamela.

Nan (or Ann)

A servant-girl at the Lincolnshire estate. Mrs. Jewkes gets her drunk and Mr. B. impersonates her on the night of his last attempt on Pamela's virtue.

Sally Godfrey

Mr. B.'s mistress from his college days. She bore him a child, the future Miss Goodwin, and then fled to Jamaica, where she is now happily married.

Miss Goodwin

Mr. B.'s illegitimate daughter by Sally Godfrey. She lives at a boarding school in Bedfordshire and does not know who her parents are; she addresses Mr. B. as her "uncle."

Sir Simon Darnford

A noble neighbor of Mr. B. in Lincolnshire. He refuses to help Pamela when Mr. Williams applies to him but comes to admire her after her elevation by Mr. B. He is given to dirty jokes.

Lady Darnford

The wife of Sir Simon Darnford.

Miss Darnford (the elder)

The first daughter of Sir Simon and Lady Darnford. She once had hopes of marrying Mr. B., but she accepts Pamela's triumph sportingly.

Miss Darnford (the younger)

The second daughter of Sir Simon and Lady Darnford. She joins her sister in demanding a ball to commemorate the nuptials of Pamela and Mr. B.

Mr. Peters

The vicar of Mr. B.'s parish in Lincolnshire. He refuses to help Pamela when Mr. Williams applies to him but eventually gives Pamela away at her wedding.

Mrs. Peters

The wife of Mr. Peters.

Lady Jones

A noble neighbor of Mr. B. in Lincolnshire.

Mr. Perry

A genteel neighbor of Mr. B. in Lincolnshire.

Mr. Martin

A genteel but rakish neighbor of Mr. B. in Bedfordshire. Pamela dislikes him due to his penchant for saying cynical things about married life.

Mr. Arthur

A genteel neighbor of Mr. B. in Bedfordshire.

Mrs. Arthur

The wife of Mr. Arthur.

Mr. Towers

A genteel neighbor of Mr. B. in Bedfordshire.

Lady Towers

A renowned "wit," the wife of Mr. Towers.

Mr. Brooks

A genteel neighbor of Mr. B. in Bedfordshire.

Mrs. Brooks

The wife of Mr. Brooks.

Mr. Chambers

A genteel neighbor of Mr. B. in Bedfordshire.

Mrs. Chambers

The wife of Mr. Chambers.

Mr. Carlton

An acquaintance of Mr. B. in Lincolnshire who dies shortly after the wedding. His distress at the end motivates Mr. B. to make arrangements that will provide for Pamela in the event of his early death.

Farmer Nichols's wife and daughters

Neighbors in Bedfordshire from whom Pamela buys material to make a gown and petticoats.

A gypsy fortune-teller

The agent who delivers to Pamela a note from Mr. Longman warning her of Mr. B.'s plans for a sham-marriage.

Rachel, Cicely, and Hannah

Maidservants at the Bedfordshire estate.

Harry, Isaac, and Benjamin

Manservants at the Bedfordshire estate.

Richard, Roger, and Thomas

Grooms at the Bedfordshire estate.

Robin

The coachman at the Lincolnshire estate.

Abraham

A footman at the Bedfordshire estate.

Miss Dobson

Miss Goodwin's governess at the boarding school.

Miss Booth, Miss Burdoff, and Miss Nugent

Peers of Miss Goodwin at the boarding school.

Narration and Structure

Fifteen-year-old Pamela Andrews, the protagonist, tells the story in first-person point of view in (1) letters she writes to her parents and other characters and (2) in a journal in which she reports daily happenings as well as the contents of letters written to her. An omniscient narrator intrudes briefly to inform the reader of events outside the scope of Pamela's purview. The author presents the chapters in the form of letters or journal entries. The rising action and development of the conflict take place at Squire B.'s Bedfordshire estate. The conflict intensifies after Pamela is taken against her will to the squire's Lincolnshire estate. The conflict reaches its climax when Pamela is at an inn between Lincolnshire and Bedfordshire and receives a letter in which the squire declares his love for her. The long denouement of the story takes place mainly at the Lincolnshire estate after Pamela returns to the squire. The story concludes when the newlyweds return to the Bedfordshire estate. After the conclusion, the author presents observations intended to instruct the reader.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Epistolary Writing

In *Pamela*, the central character reveals in her journal and letters the intimate details of her everyday life in language that is simple, straightforward, and conversational. This approach makes the novel easy to read and understand. Moreover, it creates a closeness with the reader, as if he or she were the recipient of the letters or the reader of the journal. There are obvious drawbacks to epistolary narration, however. As in other first-person accounts, the narrator cannot enter the minds of other characters (as in third-person omniscient narration). In addition, the narrator must be present for all the action or report it in accounts she receives secondhand. Finally, since the narrator writes her letters or journal entries after an event, the storytelling loses at least some of its air of immediacy. Nevertheless, Richardson's approach was popular with readers, and the novel sold out quickly.

The Integrity of the Individual

Richardson's fiction commonly portrays individuals struggling to balance incompatible demands on their integrity: Pamela, for instance, must either compromise her own sense of right or offend her Master, who deserves her obedience except insofar as he makes illicit demands on her. This highly conscientious servant and Christian must work scrupulously to defy her Master's will only to the degree that it is necessary to preserve her virtue; to do any less would be irreligious, while to do any more would be contumacious, and the successful balance of these conflicting claims represents the greatest expression of Pamela's personal integrity. Meanwhile, those modern readers who dismiss Pamela's defense of her virtue as fatally old-fashioned might consider the issue from the standpoint of the individual's right to self-determination. Pamela has a right to stand on her own principles, whatever they are, so that as so often in English literature, physical virginity stands in for individual morality and belief: no one, Squire or King, has the right to expect another person to violate the standards of her own conscience.

Class Politics

One of the great social facts of Richardson's day was the intermingling of the aspirant middle class with the gentry and aristocracy. The eighteenth century was a golden age of social climbing and thereby of satire (primarily in poetry), but Richardson was the first novelist to turn his serious regard on class difference and class tension. Pamela's class status is ambiguous at the start of the novel. She is on good terms with the other Bedfordshire servants, and the pleasure she takes in their respect for her shows that she does not consider herself above them; her position as a lady's maid, however, has led to her acquiring refinements of education and manner that unfit her for the work of common servants: when she attempts to scour a plate, her soft hand develops a blister. Moreover, Richardson does some fudging with respect to her origins when he specifies that her father is an educated man who was not always a peasant but once ran a school.

If this hedging suggests latent class snobbery on Richardson's part, however, the novelist does not fail to insist that those who receive privileges under the system bear responsibilities also, and correspondingly those on the lower rungs of the ladder are entitled to claim rights of their superiors. Thus, in the early part of the novel, Pamela emphasizes that Mr. B., in harassing her, violates his duty to protect the social inferiors under his care; after his reformation in the middle of the novel, she repeatedly lauds the "Godlike Power" of doing good that is the special pleasure and burden of the wealthy. Whether Richardson's stress on the reciprocal obligations that characterize the harmonious social order expresses genuine concern for the working class, or whether it is simply an insidious justification of an inequitable power structure, is a matter for individual readers to decide.

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