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“Poor Creature:” Class Subjugation in Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*

In Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, published in 1740, the struggles of the novel’s heroine, Pamela, reveal significant marginalization of both class and gender. As the literary audience witnesses Pamela’s journey from maid to prisoner, one watches with angst her attempts to protect her chastity against the advances of her master, Mr. B. Due to repeated assaults on her virtue ranging from seduction to attempted rape, this novel is often read as an exploration of gender marginalization; however, to reduce this novel to merely one mode of marginalization is simplistic. Pamela’s primary marginalization is due to her class status as a servant. However, according to the social hierarchy and tenets of The Great Chain of Being, Pamela’s station as a servant is pre-destined and not to be challenged. Nevertheless, Pamela’s motivation to marry Mr. B., despite his trespasses against her virtue, can be explained as a result of her desire to alleviate her class marginalization through marriage, gaining admittance to an elevated class status from which she has previously been forbidden. Her motivation and behavior can be substantiated through a linguistic and literary analysis of a peculiarity, the excessive use of the word “creature,” which I believe Richardson intentionally employs to reveal the source of

Pamela's feelings of marginalization. Analyzing the word "creature" through a semantic lens, I will prove that Pamela's primary marginalization is due to her class status as a servant.

Richardson's repeated overuse of the word "creature" is neither coincidence nor linguistic negligence. Richardson deploys the speech of Pamela and others, when speaking of Pamela, through the use of the word "creature" as a motif which signals class subjugation.

Furthermore, Pamela's ascent in station, enabled by Mr. B., appears to prove to a privileged upper class that virtue transcends class divide. Indeed, Pamela's virtue serves as a catalyst for upper class repentance and altruism which morally benefits the upper-class while mitigating, but not alleviating, Pamela's class marginalization. Through the novel's usage of "creature," Richardson warns that despite Pamela's desire to alleviate her class subjugation through marriage, class mobility is not feasible and, therefore, Pamela is destined to remain a marginalized, inferior "creature."

The etymology of the word "creature" reveals Richardson's theme of privileged upper- class subjugation of the lower, servant class. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "creature," as of 1300, was defined as "a living 'creature' or created being, an animate being; an animal; often as distinct from 'man'" (Simpson and Weiner 1136). In 1400, the term was further qualified as a means of "expressing reprobation or contempt" (Simpson and Weiner 1136). Most significant to our interpretation, the definition was amended in 1587 to

include “one who owes his fortune and position to a patron; one who is actuated by the will of another, or is ready to do his bidding; an instrument or puppet.” (Simpson and Weiner 1136).

The context in which Pamela most often uses the term “creature,” which I will discuss and prove later in this paper, reveals that the semantics of her usage align with the 1587 definition which accounts for her belief that she is one who owes her position to another. Indeed, Pamela was educated above her station due to the good will of her benefactress (Richardson 47). Thus, she truly does owe her position to another. As Mr. B. is the son of her benefactress, it is possible that Pamela believes she is inherently indebted to him and thus she habitually remains in a position of victimization. While gender is at play in her subjugation as an object of desire for Mr. B., her true marginalization lies in that she belongs to the working-class. Nowhere in the novel do we witness an upper-class woman being assaulted by a male. Rather, the only cases of assault and sexual abuse within the novel are committed upon the waiting maids of Mr. B’s neighbors and Pamela, representing assaults on the lower-class. Reflecting on the pregnancies which result from the neighboring assaults Pamela asks, “How many ways are there to undo poor creatures?” (Richardson 116). Richardson answers her question with an answer of class and gender. The gender of both Pamela and the neighboring female servants is primarily marginalized because of their inferior social class.

In fact, analysis of the surrounding adjectives and nouns affixed to the word “creature”

provides evidence that Pamela's feelings of marginalization are indeed primarily due to class and not gender. In Richardson's text, the word "creature" is used one hundred fifty-nine times. Of those one hundred fifty-nine times, one hundred twenty-six are directed at Pamela. Furthermore, Pamela refers to herself as a "creature" sixty times. She typically uses the term during periods of distress, isolation, or loneliness. Of those sixty-times, she precedes "creature" with the adjective "poor" twenty-two times. To investigate whether or not "poor" referenced a general 'lowly' state, potentially in comparative terms to God or men, versus a possible socio-economic class, frequency was evaluated. Not including the times Pamela refers to herself, the word "creature" is used ninety-two times referring to individuals of lower-class, primarily servants, including Pamela by others, and only seven times when referring to members of the upper-class. Taking into account Pamela's usage towards herself, "creature" is utilized one hundred fifty-two times to identify members of the lower-class versus a mere seven times to refer to an upper-class individual. In light of this data, character use of the word "poor" defines an economic and social class within this text. Furthermore, Pamela self identifies as a "poor creature" most frequently during her experiences of abuse at the hands of her master. Thus, she views herself as a subject of marginalization because she belongs to the lower-class. However, Pamela's recognition and dissatisfaction with her oppression contradicts the prevalent eighteenth-century social hierarchy, the Great Chain of Being.

Christianity's Great Chain of Being is a hierarchy in which everyone and everything is destined to a position, a station, which is immutable and responsible for determining the course of one's life. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European Christian leaders adamantly taught the concept of the Great Chain in an attempt to ward off the dissatisfaction of the lower class and prevent rebellion. Of this great chain, Alexander Pope warned in his *Essay on Man*, "Vast chain of being! which from God began, / Natures ethereal, human, angel, man, /Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see, /...Where, one step broken, the great scale's destroyed/" (Pope 1.8. 5-7.12). According to both the Great Chain of Being and Pope, a society's survival is dependent on every individual remaining securely within their station. Both Pamela and Mr. B's acknowledgement of this hierarchy determines how they react towards one another. According to Mr. B., his inability to legally marry or mingle with Pamela due to her servant class, despite his attraction to her, is the repugnant reason he uses to justify his atrocious behavior towards her. "My pride of birth and fortune (damn them both! Said he, 'since they cannot obtain credit with you, but must add to your suspicions) will not let me descend, all at once" (Richardson 116-117). If Mr. B. acknowledges his feelings towards Pamela, he would, according to the tenets of the Great Chain, unravel the rigid social structure of eighteenth-century British society. Indeed, Pamela's acute awareness of her 'unworthiness' and their inability to share a future is the reason why Pamela is fearful he intends to violate her.

She writes, "I hope I shall never find him to act unworthy of his character; for what could he get by ruining such a poor young creature as me?" (Richardson 47). Pamela believes Mr. B's elevated status on the Great Chain requires a greater sense of moral responsibility. However, Mr. B. privileges his status to exploit those lower on the chain, without attracting censure. Conversely, Pamela's obsessive self-identification as a "creature" not only reveals her self-awareness as to her station but, also, her feelings of marginalization and oppression, at the hands of Mr. B., as a result of her lowly station. Thus, in order to alleviate her oppression, rather than returning home to escape Mr. B's assault, Pamela accepts his offer of marriage, potentially rising to a higher-class status.

Despite Pamela's superficial attempts to descend to an even lower station in order to avoid her master's assaults, Pamela repeatedly chooses to remain or return to the upper-class sphere in which she has been groomed. According to Laura Rosenthal in her article "Pamela's Work," Pamela chooses to resist Mr. B's sexual advances out of concern for her future, especially her anticipated Christian salvation, versus an inherent regard for her virtue. According to Rosenthal, Pamela's rejection of her benefactress' clothing bundles represents her rejection of Mr. B's suggestion that she become his mistress, choosing instead to descend from her station as a favored waiting-maid to an even lower position of manual labor. Rosenthal writes that the novel "seriously confronts Pamela's class alternative. Here Pamela laments that

she has been ‘brought up wrong’; she has only learned to sing, dance, and embroider; she has not learned to ‘wash and scour, and brew, and bake’” (Rosenthal 250). According to Rosenthal,

Pamela is grieved that she does not have the skills necessary to mimic the lower-class.

Nevertheless, Rosenthal claims that Pamela chooses to ‘descend’ to her parents’ lower station as

defined by manual labor. However, Rosenthal’s argument is not substantiated because Pamela

never successfully returns to her parents. Pamela “laments” not because she does not know how

to perform as a lower-class individual, but rather because she will miss the privilege she has

experienced as her benefactress’ waiting maid. Rather than return home and ‘descend’ to an

even lower station, she chooses to return to Mr. B. In fact, Raymond Hilliard’s article “Pamela:

Autonomy, Subordination, and the “State of Childhood” argues that Pamela’s decision to return

to Mr. B. is the first step of her coming-of-age and finding her own voice as symbolized by her

returning carriage ride (Hilliard 209). Pamela’s return signifies ownership of her preference to

remain within the confines of the upper-class. Likewise, when Pamela contemplates returning to

her parents she reveals her true desires, writing “woe to my proud heart, if I find it so on trial; for

I will make it bend to its condition, or break it” (Richardson 109). Despite her desire to protect

her chastity by returning to her parents, she admits that to leave the realm of the upper-class will

be an act of obedience which may require her to break her heart and will. Both Pamela’s

hesitancy to ‘descend’ and her desire to alleviate her class subjugation through imitation of the

upper class, although not explicitly stated, is why Pamela stalls her return to her parents and, ultimately, returns to Mr. B. upon his proposal of marriage. However, continued analysis of the novel's usage of "creature" reveals that Pamela's marriage into the upper-class does not relieve her marginalization.

The novel's persistent usage of "creature" reflects Pamela's admittance as an inferior subject into the upper-class domain. Pamela's virtue gains access to a society in which she has only been allowed to serve, despite having received an identical 'accomplishments' education. Mr. B. explains that Pamela's virtue rectifies the censure brought upon her due to her lower class. Speaking of Pamela's virtue, Mr. B. says, "I glory in being able to distinguish so much excellence; and my fortune is the more valuable to me, as it enables me, in the world's eye, to do credit to your virtue, and to make you happy" (Richardson 367). Mr. B. believes that by embracing Pamela and her virtue he is redeeming the upper class and himself. Indeed, Pamela's virtue enables her to attempt to make amends for the harms done by the upper class through acts of altruism. She prays, "Make me a delight in dispensing to others a portion of that happiness [Mr.B's money] which I have myself so plentifully received at the hands of thy gracious Providence...This, as I conceive, is the indispensable duty of a high condition" (Richardson 388). Thus, Pamela not only attempts to reduce her class oppression through her marriage, but also, by sharing money with the poor, she attempts to minimize the oppression of others. As the text

progresses, and Pamela not only finds the agency to resist Mr. B. but to transform Mr. B. by her example, her will to rise above her subjugation is evident as her phrase “poor creature” is supplanted with “happy creature.” While one could surmise that the removal of Pamela’s self-identification as “poor” indicates a removal of her class marginalization, the persistent labelling of Pamela as a “creature” prevents us from doing so. Mr. B. begins to use it as a term of endearment once he marries Pamela. Of the twenty-three instances in which he calls Pamela a “creature” he prefaces it with either the word “sweet” or “dear” twelve times. Other adjectives include “excellent” and “lovely.” Likewise, Mr. B’s neighbors also affix terms such as “charming” and “young” as they, likewise, label Pamela a “creature.” While one immediately notices that the adjectives are complimentary, note that the term “creature, “implying subservience to another,” is reserved for Pamela and no other. Thus, even though Pamela marries into the upper class, she continues to be labelled and identified as inferior to the company which surrounds her. Lady Davers uses the term “creature” to belittle Pamela. As Lady Davers begins to feel threatened by Pamela’s ascent, she uses the term frequently to remind Pamela of her lowliness, even going so far as to connect the term “creature” to immorality as a particularly painful insult to Pamela’s integrity and worthiness. Lady Davers calls Pamela a “creature” twenty-six times accompanied by her favorite labels of “wench,” “whore,” and “undone.” Lady Davers attacks Pamela, altering the previous

usage of the word “creature,” as a means of conjoining low class with immorality. Lady Davers realizes that Mr. B. has fallen in love with Pamela’s virtue and this virtue is what has provided her access to the upper echelon of society, a privilege previously claimed only by birthright. Despite Pamela’s attempts to rectify the subjugation of both herself and others, the upper-class persists in prohibiting her from wholly doing so. Lady Davers rejects Pamela’s ascent while other members of the upper-class regard Pamela as a novelty rather than an equal. Although Lady Davers later accepts Pamela as her sister-in-law, the continued labelling of Pamela prevents her from ever seeing herself as an equal. In fact, when Mr. B. asks her to stop calling him “Master,” Pamela replies, “that is a language I shall never forget. He shall always be my master; and I shall think myself more and more his servant” (Richardson 337). Thus, the language of “creature” is not easily forgotten. Although Pamela may walk among the upper-class, imitating an elevated station, the feelings of inferiority are forever etched on her soul.

Thus, Richardson proves that class mobility during the eighteenth-century was an illusion. Although marriage afforded the opportunity of equality, the opportunity was not realized. Despite Pamela’s apparent ‘redemption’ from an inferior class based on her virtue, Pamela continued as a labelled “creature,” “one who is actuated by the will of another” (Simpson and Weiner 1136). Thus, Pamela’s attempt to relieve her oppression was not permitted by those higher in station. Despite marriage, Pamela continued as a servant to her husband, her master.

The power of language as a tool of marginalization, as in the use of *Pamela's* “creature,” thwarts equality.

Honor code: I swear R. Fowler

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