



# Samuel Richardson

(1689-1761)

## Life and works

Samuel Richardson was born in Derbyshire in 1689 into a **Puritan commercial middle-class family**. In 1706 he was apprenticed to a printer and he did so well in the job that, at the age of 32, he was able to set up his own **printing shop**. When he was 50, he was asked to write a volume of model letters to be used on various occasions by 'country readers', who were not educated enough to write them themselves. So Richardson showed maid-servants how to negotiate a proposal of marriage, apprentices how to apply for a job, and even sons how to plead for their father's forgiveness. While working on this volume he had the idea of using the epistolary technique to tell a story he had heard about a serving maid whose virtue had been unsuccessfully challenged by an unscrupulous man. So he started writing *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740), his first 'epistolary novel'. It was a great success, like the two novels which followed, *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* (1747-48) and *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-54).

## Characters

In Richardson's work there is a **psychological analysis**, missing from most of the previous fiction. The reader is taken inside the minds of the characters and is invited to share their innermost thoughts, feelings and moods. In contrast to Defoe's novels, there is also a **sense of individual development** within the story: characters are far from being static and the reader is almost a witness of their gradual development. Richardson's **heroines** have much in common with each other: **youth and charm**,

considerable **self-will** and **knowledge**, together with **Christian piety**; they profess and **venerate truth**, defend **virtue** and perish when they find they are unequal to the conflicting demands of experience.

## The epistolary novel

*Pamela*, *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison* are written in the form of letters exchanged between the main characters. This new type of literature was largely a reflection of the **fashion for letter-writing of the period** and was later to be taken up by foreign writers, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) in *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832) in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), and Ugo Foscolo (1778-1827) in *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1798-1802). The epistolary novel slowly fell out of use in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially when Jane Austen (→ 4.16) made the technique of the omniscient narrator popular.

## Style

The 'epistolary way' chosen by Richardson uses **the first person narrative technique** through personal letters and journals and provides different individual points of view on the same event, which is fully explored; moreover, it has much in common with the dramatic technique, since the characters introduce one another, using letters instead of speech, and the action is made up by a series of 'scenes' with no general summaries. Another aspect of this literary form is its **immediacy**: the reader is invited to believe that the letters are as if they were in the very act of composition, while reading them.

### Key idea

### The moralising aim

All Richardson's novels are set in a realistic domestic middle-class environment and are the dramatic representation of the ethics preached by *The Spectator* (→ Across Cultures, p. 196): common sense, good manners and modesty. In fact, there is a heavy moralising

tendency within Richardson's novels, which reflects the Puritan middle-class scheme of reward for virtue and punishment for sins. He avoided episodic plots by basing his novels on a single action, a courtship.



# *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*

Samuel Richardson  
(1740)

## PLOT AND SETTING

The title of this novel is significant: not virtue for itself but for what it brings about, 'virtue rewarded'. *Pamela* is a **collection of letters** written by a virtuous girl to her parents, who live in the country. Her letters record her **various moods and feelings** as she resists her late mistress's son's attempts at seducing her and gains from him, as a reward, a proposal of marriage which she accepts, becoming rich and obtaining the social position that, according to the Puritan bourgeois ideal of the age, was the highest achievement in life.

The **plot is very simple** and it is probably the first time that a novel is not based on a long chain of events, but it is built around the interrelation between the two main characters, their belonging to different social classes, the difficult balance between sexual instincts and a moral code. In keeping with the plot, **the setting varies little** and the scenes mostly take place **indoors**: Pamela is generally confined to a house and she goes outdoors only when her conflict with Mr B. comes to an end.

## CHARACTERS

*Pamela*, who is a 'round character', is **practical**, **passionate**, **humble** with everyone, but she is **intolerant**

of **injustice** both to herself and to her fellow-servants. Mr B., the son of her mistress, is another **round character** and reflects contemporary **male superiority**: he tries to seduce Pamela several times, but her resistance arouses his passion and gradually changes his behaviour which **becomes more mature** and responsible.

## STYLE AND POPULARITY

The form which Richardson adopted for *Pamela* is directly indicated on the title-page: it is 'a series of familiar letters'.

The **writer** places himself in the position of an **editor**, arranging and publishing, without comment, a series of thirty-two letters followed by a long journal which Pamela herself wrote while cut off from her friends at B-Hall: this journal also includes letters written both by Pamela and other characters.

To us today the novel may seem tedious and unconvincingly moralising. Yet it was **immensely popular** and it was a remarkable breakthrough, a breach into a rigid and discriminating class system. The novel also comments on the sexual and social inequality in the position of women.

## Key idea

### The Cinderella theme

The story of *Pamela* is a variant of the age-old 'Cinderella theme'. Both stories offer compensations for the monotonous work and limited perspective of ordinary life. By projecting themselves into the position of the heroine, the readers of *Pamela* could change their impersonal, boring world into a gratifying pattern where each element

gave excitement, admiration and love. These are the attractions of romance but here the fairy god-mother and the prince are replaced by morality and the social importance marriage had in Richardson's age, since it was the only way open to women to improve their social status.

## COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

### 1 READ the text and answer the following questions.

- 1 What kind of novel did Richardson create?
- 2 What was the aim of his novels?
- 3 What sort of characters did he create?
- 4 What narrative technique did he employ?
- 5 Who are the protagonists of *Pamela*?
- 6 What is the setting of the novel?



## The rich despise the poor

*Pamela's following letter to her parents includes another letter she has casually discovered. It is the message to Mr B. written by his sister, Lady Davers.*

Samuel Richardson  
**Pamela**  
**(1740-41)**

Tuesday Morning, Book I

BROTHER,

'I am very uneasy<sup>1</sup> at what I hear of you; and must write, whether it please you or not, my full mind. I have had some people with me, desiring me to interpose<sup>2</sup> with you; and they have a greater regard for your honour, than, I am sorry to say it, you have yourself<sup>3</sup>. Could I think, that a brother of mine would so meanly run away<sup>4</sup> with my late dear mother's waiting-maid<sup>5</sup>, and keep her a prisoner from all her friends, and to the disgrace of your own? But I thought, when you would not let the wench<sup>6</sup> come to me on my mother's death, that you meant no good<sup>7</sup>.—I blush for you, I'll assure you. The girl was an innocent, good girl; but I suppose that's over with her now, or soon will. What can you mean by this, let me ask you? Either you will have her for a kept mistress<sup>8</sup>, or for a wife. If the former, there are enough to be had without ruining a poor wench that my mother loved, and who really was a very good girl: and of this you may be ashamed. As to the other, I dare say you don't think of it; but if you should, you would be utterly inexcusable<sup>9</sup>. Consider, brother, that ours is no upstart<sup>10</sup> family; but is as ancient as the best in the kingdom! and, for several hundreds of years, it has never been known, that the heirs of it have disgraced themselves by unequal matches<sup>11</sup>. And you know you have been sought to by some of the best families in the nation, for your alliance<sup>12</sup>. [...]

'If I have written too sharply<sup>13</sup>, consider it is my love to you, and the shame you are bringing upon yourself; and I wish this may have the effect upon you, intended by your very loving sister.'

This is a sad letter, my dear father and mother; and one may see how poor people are despised<sup>14</sup> by the proud and the rich! and yet we were all on a foot originally<sup>15</sup>. And many of these gentry, that brag of their ancient blood<sup>16</sup>, would be glad to have it as wholesome, and as really untainted, as ours<sup>17</sup>!—Surely these proud people never think what a short stage life is; and that, with all their vanity; a time is coming, when they shall be obliged to submit to be on a level with us. And true said the philosopher, when he looked upon the skull of a king, and that of a poor man, that he saw no difference between them. Besides, do they not know, that the richest of princes, and the poorest of beggars, are to have one great and tremendous judge, at the last day; who will not distinguish between them, according to their circumstances in life?—But, on the contrary, may make their condemnations the greater, as their neglected opportunities were the greater<sup>18</sup>? [...] And, perhaps, such is the vanity, as well as changeableness<sup>19</sup>, of human estates, in their turns set up for pride of family, and despise the others!

These reflections occurred to my thoughts, made serious by my master's indisposition, and this proud letter of the lowly<sup>20</sup> Lady Davers, against the high-minded<sup>21</sup> Pamela. Lowly, I say, because she could stoop<sup>22</sup> to such vain pride; and high-minded I, because I hope I am too proud ever to do the like<sup>23</sup>!—But, after all, poor wretches that we be<sup>24</sup>! we scarce know what we are, much less what we shall be!—But, once more pray I to be kept from the sinful pride of a high estate.

- 1 am ... uneasy. Sono molto in pensiero.
- 2 to interpose. Di parlare.
- 3 they ... yourself. Hanno a cuore il tuo onore più di quanto l'abbia tu stesso.
- 4 would ... away. Sarebbe fuggito meschinamente.
- 5 waiting-maid. Cameriera.
- 6 wench. Poveretta.
- 7 you ... good. C'era qualcosa sotto.
- 8 kept mistress. Mantenuta.
- 9 utterly inexcusable. Assolutamente non scusabile.
- 10 upstart. Arricchita da poco.
- 11 unequal matches. Matrimoni inadeguati.
- 12 for your alliance. Per un'alleanza; qui: per offerte matrimoniali.
- 13 sharply. Duramente.
- 14 despised. Disprezzata.
- 15 we ... originally. Eravamo tutti uguali.
- 16 brag ... blood. Parlano troppo del loro antico sangue.
- 17 as wholesome ... as ours! Sano e veramente puro come il nostro!
- 18 their ... greater. Le opportunità che hanno trascurato erano maggiori.
- 19 changeableness. Mutevolezza.
- 20 lowly. Meschina.
- 21 high-minded. Ambiziosa.
- 22 stoop. Cedere.
- 23 I ... the like. Essere troppo superba per agire così (come lei).
- 24 poor ... be. Noi siamo delle miserabili creature.

**VISUAL ANALYSIS**

**1 READ** the text and divide it into four parts. Then write a heading to each section.

**2 LOOK** at the visual analysis of the text and write down what each highlight and colour represents.

	.....		.....
	.....		.....
	.....		.....
	.....		.....
	.....	<b>But</b>	.....

**3 DISCUSS** the following questions in pairs.

- 1 From whose point of view are the events narrated?
- 2 What effect/s does the epistolary form create?
- 3 What aspects of Pamela's personality are underlined here?
- 4 What was the reason for the great success *Pamela* had?

**4 COMPLETE** the summary with the words from the box.

moral	brother	apparent	honour	parents
contempt	highlights	charity	colloquial	refusal



The text includes two letters: Lady Daver's letter to her **(1)** ..... and Pamela's to her **(2)** ..... The former starts with the Lady's affectionate apprehension for her brother and **(3)** ..... benevolence for Pamela. However, the proud exponent of the upper class is not actually worried about her brother: she is afraid about her family's **(4)** ..... Similarly her **(5)** ..... towards Pamela turns out to be nothing but hypocrisy and **(6)** ..... for the poor who, according to her, may destroy the purity of the upper class.

Pamela's letter **(7)** ..... some of the most important beliefs of the Enlightenment: the destruction of any social barriers, the blame for the mentality of the upper class, the **(8)** ..... of the aristocracy's arrogance and the **(9)** ..... integrity of the poor considered inferior beings by aristocracy.

Even the language of the two letters is different: Lady Daver's language is linked to her social pride, while Pamela employs a more spontaneous, **(10)** ..... language.