

Pamela: A Narrative

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Abstract:

Jacques Lacan's theory of narrative self-creation provides a framework within which to interpret Samuel Richardson's Pamela. Using Lacan's "Beyond the 'Reality Principle,'" "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire," and "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function," this analysis interprets the ways in which Pamela creates a narrative, and, consequently, her self through the letters she writes and how Mr. B. recognizes this. Specifically, this examination analyzes the dichotomy between Pamela's self as is demonstrated in her interaction with others and the self as it is related in its entirety in her letters.

In the process of studying literature, one often begins to see connections between disciplines. Literature often lends itself to psychoanalytical interpretation. Jacques Lacan's theory of narrative self-creation, or creation of self, provides an especially interesting framework within which to interpret Samuel Richardson's Pamela. The primary character, Pamela, creates a narrative, and consequently, her self through the letters she writes. These letters can be examined to reveal a dichotomy between Pamela's self as it is demonstrated in her interaction with others and the self as it is related in its entirety in the narrative format.

To begin such a discussion, one must first have an understanding of Lacan's theory of the creation of self through narrative. In "Beyond the 'Reality Principle,'" he begins to outline this idea in terms of language. The narrative "is expressed, but not understood by the subject, in what his discourse relates about his lived experience" (63). It is what can be inferred about the subject that is important in this statement. First, the subject is not necessarily conscious of all that his or her writings reveal about the self. A subject may indeed express his or her true self without realizing it. In fact, the narrative created by the subject may demonstrate a split between the conscious and unconscious selves. The conscious self is to be found in the story the subject is purposefully relating to the psychoanalyst; this is usually the self that one associates with reacting to the social mores and customs of the subject's environment – a social self. The unconscious self is the one in which the analyst can begin to see the true nature of the subject. This is the self that is associated with what is referred to as the true self of the subject.

Lacan's statement implies one other factor that is extremely important to the idea of self-creation: the veracity of the subject's narrative in terms of reality is not important to the process of creating a self. Lacan further clarifies in "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire" that the psychoanalyst's role in listening to the subject's narrative is "to interrogate the unconscious...to the point at which it gives a reply that is not some sort of

ravishment or takedown, but is rather a ‘saying why’” (673). Thus, the unconscious self is the one using the social self as its presentational self. In essence, the narrative and the words chosen to create it are what is important in determining a subject’s creation of self.

The choice of words used to create this narrative are a key factor in the analyst’s determining of the true self of the subject. Lacan writes, “And language, being approached via its function of social expression, reveals both its significant unity in intention and its constitutive ambiguity as subjective expression, admitting something that contradicts thought or using thought to lie” (“Beyond” 67). In this assertion, Lacan details how the words used to construct the narrative give insight into the subject’s self. Language is a form of “social expression” (67) and can be used consciously to express one’s self in day-to-day interaction; however, language inherently carries connotations and other elements that make the choice of specific words useful in ascertaining the subject’s true self, not simply the social self.

The idea of finding one’s true self, as opposed to the social self, is elaborated upon further in Lacan’s essay entitled “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function.” The mirror stage is essentially the recognition of one’s self as it is experienced from outside of the subject; the analogy of looking into a mirror suggests that the self that one narratively creates is external and other. The reflection is the self seen by the person which is both identical to the person and yet other. It is a representation. Lacan relates, “But the important point is that this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject’s becoming” (76). Maria Bachman further clarifies, “Within Lacan’s mirror phase, the subject-in-process, moving through the imaginary stage of identification and duality, sees an ideal image reflected back at her and simultaneously recognizes and misrecognizes that image” (18). Turning back to the concept of a social self, one may begin to see that it is represented in the analogy by the reflection. The true self, the one that is in place prior to social determination, is found in the subject’s narrative.

With this foundation firmly established, one may now move to applying this theory to Samuel Richardson’s Pamela. The question to start this discussion should be whether or not Pamela indeed creates her own narrative. The first important notation to make in regard to this question is that Pamela is an epistolary novel, and the letters are written almost exclusively by Pamela. The fact that Pamela’s letter writing is really more of a creation of narrative rather than simply writing to relay information is noted in her continuous writing regardless of outside input. As Richard Hauer Costa remarks, “She [Pamela] begins to keep a continuous record which is relatively independent of the receipt and delivery of letters” (43).

This argument cannot solely be based in secondary criticism or an analysis of form; it is also necessary to investigate why Pamela says she is writing in the first place. Pamela writes to her parents even when they shall not receive the letters in a timely manner and, in other instances, when she believes the letters will be brought by her own hand to them. Pamela says in one letter that she writes even though “I may not have opportunity to send again soon” (75). She continues by concluding that the letters “may be some little pleasure to me, perhaps, to

read them to myself, when I am come to you, to remind me what I have gone through” (75). In this way, one begins to learn that these letters carry more significance than simply being a means of communicating with her parents.

The first aspect of self-creation through narrative is introduced in the concept of the social self as separate from the narrative self. This dichotomy is revealed by Pamela’s acting one way in her interaction with others and writing her from her true self in her letters to her parents. One may find a basic example of this split in Pamela’s encounter with the local gentry that come to visit Mr. B. Pamela is critical of the women and their tossing “their jests about, and their *double meanings*, as they own them, as freely as the gentlemen” (84). This opinion she owns in her letters, but acknowledges her social impropriety of taking “these freedoms with my betters” (84). The difference in expression between narrative and interaction is shown most clearly as Pamela prepares to leave the room. After revealing the values and characteristics that make up her true self, ones that demonstrate her lack of regard for these women, Pamela acts from her social self, leaving “with one of my best court’sies to each lady” (86). The self that these women have actually encountered is not truly Pamela, but a social construct that represents Pamela, which according to Lacan would have been constructed for her by her unconscious self.

Once one begins to see the dichotomy between these two distinct selves, he or she may also turn to diction, or Pamela’s choice of words, and glean from them insight into Pamela’s true self. John Preston relates that Richardson’s characters “reveal themselves in the form of language, indeed in the form of writing” (45). During the encounter above described, one of the ladies insinuates that Mr. B. must be in love with Pamela, or at least lust for her because of her beauty. Pamela’s choice of words when relating her reaction to this statement reveals more than her interaction ever does. Speaking of Mrs. Brooks, Pamela says, “She looked with such a malicious sneering countenance, I cannot abide her” (86). In this statement, Pamela reveals a sense of indignation and anger that she certainly does not translate into action. This expression of indignation also lends itself to another interesting interpretation. Pamela does not see her true self as unworthy of these ladies’ attentions; in fact, she feels her true self to be better than theirs. Her social self directly contradicts her unconscious self as she excuses her rushing from the room by pleading that “the sense I have of my unworthiness, renders me unfit for such a presence” (86). This instance further demonstrates that Pamela’s true self is to be found in her narrative.

Another way in which one can see that this unconscious self is the true self is that Pamela expresses emotions and thoughts that she cannot reveal in any way through her social self. As John Richetti writes, “Pamela’s interiority is functionally subordinate to the external social and political drama that she insistently keeps in front of us and her would-be seducer” (92). Pamela is constantly refusing Mr. B.’s advances, yet she does feel an attraction to him and has a willingness to accept that he may not be irredeemable. This attraction and willingness to forgive is something that Pamela does not feel can be translated into any action that would be socially acceptable. In lieu of acting on her desires, Pamela expresses them in her letters. When speaking of Mr. B.’s aversion to her, Pamela notes, “Is it not strange that

love borders so much upon hatred?” (86). This is an interesting question for Pamela to wonder about, especially given that both she and Mr. B. claim to feel hatred toward the other. In this way, Pamela’s narrative self is able to reveal the love she has for Mr. B., without incurring the risk of his misinterpreting any action as permission to take her virginity.

Pamela writes from her true self in her narrative in a way that is sometimes jarring to the reader that does not realize that there is a distinct split that is in place between Pamela’s social self and her true self. One must realize that the action of the novel is Pamela’s narrative. She expresses both her social self in interaction and her true self in commentary and description. An illustration of this intriguing twist in the reader’s perspective can be found during an argument between Pamela and Mr. B. in his garden at the Lincolnshire estate. In the midst of her describing Mr. B. as “haughty” and “threatening,” she notes that he looked “taller than usual...and he is a tall, and very majestic man” (248). This description is both that of the social self that must reject Mr. B. and find his advances distasteful and the narrative self that loves Mr. B. and desires his love.

This encounter leads one to see another interesting piece of Lacanian theory – the recognition of the social self as other. Pamela begins to recognize, although full understanding does not come until much later for the novel’s heroine, that she is a dissociative self. In her interaction with Mr. B. in the garden, Pamela takes action from the social self, yet comments upon the situation through her unconscious self. In her account of turning her letters over to Mr. B., Pamela actually demonstrates that she is beginning to recognize that she has a socially constructed self and a true self that is more likely to be expressed in her letters. She describes her previous letters as containing a recounting of her “hopes of his [Mr. B.’s] being good at last” and of how she “began to be afraid of my own consideration for him, though he had used me so ill” (273). The significant portion of this letter is that she refers to all of this collectively as “my free reflections upon this trying occasion” (273). In recognizing that these thoughts, which could not be translated into acceptable action by the social self, Pamela is beginning to understand the dichotomy that is in place between her presentational self and the self that truly is her.

Pamela’s narrative is not simply a way of revealing the split between the narrative and social selves. The dichotomy between the two selves pushes Pamela’s narrative to take action in a way she cannot realize in actual day-to-day interaction. As John Zhang elaborates, “her [Pamela’s] writing serves to reach both back and beyond – to predetermine what happened and to shape what is to come in her stories” (par. 20). Pamela is creating her own story, or narrative, which not only determines the way past actions are perceived, but also the ways in which action, on her part or others, will be taken. It is this idea that Pamela’s social and unconscious selves converge in her writing of and interacting with Mr. B.

On the Lacanian model, Mr. B. fulfills the role of the psychoanalyst. The psychoanalyst is supposed to fill the role of audience for the subject’s narrative as well as being the person that attempts to see what the narrative is actually saying about the nature of the subject’s true

self. Mr. B. both listens to Pamela's narrative, and then, through interaction with the social self, attempts to understand Pamela's true self.

In order to see Mr. B. as the psychoanalyst, one must first ascertain whether or not he is fulfilling the role of audience for Pamela's narrative. Proof that Mr. B. is Pamela's audience can be found in her realization that he has been reading her correspondence and that, in light of such circumstances, she does not stop writing. Even after she is forced to turn over all of the letters she has written, Pamela takes Mr. B. at his word when he says, "I will not ask you for any papers after these" (275). She writes, "This hope a little encourages me to continue my scribbling" (275). Most audiences find it difficult to understand that Pamela would simply take the word of the man that has now been revealed to have violated the privacy of her correspondence with her parents. Costa's argument offers an explanation for this seeming lapse in judgment: "It is my contention that...she *depended* on their being intercepted" (43). As Pamela has reached a point in the novel that such simplistic naiveté is not a part of her character, one may infer that Costa is correct in his assessment. After she realizes that her letters are being read by him, Pamela consciously decides to use Mr. B. as an audience for her narrative.

With Mr. B. established as the audience of Pamela's narrative, one now turns to how Mr. B. operates as the psychoanalyst attempting to garner an understanding of Pamela's true self. Prior to the reaching of this goal, however, one must verify that Mr. B. does indeed recognize that there is a distinct split between Pamela's unconscious and social selves. Mr. B. demonstrates that he has this knowledge during a confrontation with Pamela regarding the things she has written about him in her letters. She begins to protest that if she were equal to him in social status, she would upbraid him for his behavior toward her. Mr. B.'s response shows that he sees a distinction between the woman with whom he is arguing and the one that he encounters in her letters: "You must have thought yourself my equal, at least, by the liberties you have taken with my character, in your letters" (268). In this statement, Mr. B. reveals that he understands that the true Pamela is not the woman standing before him proclaiming her unworthiness but the one in her letters that certainly sees herself as his equal.

Mr. B. not only recognizes that there is a difference between the self that Pamela presents to the world and the self that is truly Pamela, but he also comes to understand that the true self of Pamela is the woman that he should be attempting to attract. At first, Mr. B. pursues a course of brute force and social pressure to attempt to make Pamela acquiesce to his desires. In recognizing Pamela's unconscious and social selves in her narrative, he realizes that he must behave in an appropriate, gracious manner to obtain the object of his desire, which is not simply sexual relations with Pamela but Pamela as a partner. As Zhang writes, "if it were not for Pamela's letters, Mr. B. would not have taken actions toward Pamela and treated her reasonably though passionately" (par. 13).

In both his role as the psychoanalyst of Pamela and his capacity as suitor, Mr. B. cannot be content with simply noting the dichotomy between Pamela's social and narrative selves. Mr. B. must use the narrative to attempt to approach Pamela's true self; this is the only way to truly

win Pamela's affection. He is faced, however with the difficulty of acting on Lacan's notion of being able to "to interrogate the unconscious" and reach the point of its giving an idea that is a "saying why" (673). He begins to work with Pamela's narrative by interacting with her social self and attempting to make her realize that her unconscious self is the Pamela in which he is really interested.

Mr. B. forces Pamela to turn over her letters to him, hoping to gain more insight into both the situation with Parson Williams that has aroused so much jealousy and the nature of Pamela's true self. He points out to Pamela that he realizes the importance of her self-creation through narrative, and notes the importance of her narrative to his life:

I long to see the particulars of your plot, and your disappointment where those papers leave off. As I have furnished you with a subject, I think I have a title to see how you manage it. Besides, there is such a pretty air of romance, as you tell your story, in *your* plots, and *my* plots, that I shall be better directed how to wind up the catastrophe of the pretty novel. (268)

This statement is particularly revealing of Mr. B.'s role as the psychoanalyst. First, Mr. B. is pointing out to Pamela that he appreciates that she is creating a narrative that embodies both her social self and her true self. Most importantly, however, Mr. B. demonstrates a desire to see her narrative so that he may determine how to act toward her. The psychoanalyst's goal is to use the narrative of the subject to ascertain what is necessary to allow the subject to function in a healthy manner. That process is, in essence, what Mr. B. is attempting to do by reading Pamela's letters.

Mr. B. has a two-fold goal, however, in learning about Pamela's true self and endeavoring to bring that part of her to the forefront. He wishes to help Pamela attain happiness, much like the psychoanalyst, but he also wishes to be part of that happiness; he wants to be incorporated into Pamela's narrative. He reads her letters even though he is part of the events taking place "because what counts is her interpretations of them" (Zhang, par. 16). He wants to know how to act in his interaction with the social self such that Pamela will allow him to communicate with her unconscious self. In his letter asking her to return to him, Mr. B. draws Pamela's attention to the sections of her letters that reveal her true self, the self that is in love with him. He notes that he was "greatly affected" by "your [Pamela's] generous concern for me" and her confession that she "could not *hate* me" (285). In this moment, Mr. B. approaches Pamela's true self; he sets aside all regard for social custom and societal expectation and asks her to return to him because he loves her and wishes do act honorably toward her. In response to such an open plea to her unconscious self, Pamela decides to return to Mr. B. Subsequently, she incorporates him into her narrative by marrying him and reforms her presentational self so that he is no longer a force to be repelled.

The application of Jacques Lacan's theory of narrative self-creation to Samuel Richardson's Pamela is an extremely useful tool for understanding the psychological motivations of the main characters. By utilizing this psychoanalytic theory to determine the

reasoning behind the Pamela's and Mr. B.'s actions, one begins to see the complicated nature of Richardson's novel. Pamela creates her narrative in her letters, and this narrative reveals a distinct separation between her unconscious and social selves. Mr. B. recognizes the dichotomy between Pamela's selves and attempts to help her see it as well. By approaching Pamela's social self and eventually gaining access to her unconscious self, Mr. B. helps Pamela to adjust the reactions of her social self. As a result, she is able to attain happiness for herself, and Mr. B. finally obtains his happiness as well – marriage to Pamela and being incorporated into her narrative.

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Biographical Sketch

Mary Leigh is a graduate student in the Master of Liberal Arts program at Henderson State University. She completed her B.A. in English at Henderson State University in 2006 with a major in English and a minor in Philosophy. She served on the organization committee for The Third International Conference on the Works of Joss Whedon and is the co-organizer of OZ 2009: The Yellow Brick Road in the 21st Century. She has presented papers at both the 2007 and 2008 meetings of the Arkansas Philological Association as well as participating as a member of panel presentations at the 2007 meeting of the International Writing Center Association and the 2008 South Central Writing Center Association. Currently, Mary is a graduate assistant in the Writing Center, teaching both Basic English and Introduction to Philosophy.