

The effects of the
social hierarchy in
caleb williams and
pamela or virtue
reward...



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Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* and William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* are both novels that deal with the influence of social hierarchy on the characters' psychologies. In *Caleb Williams*, the protagonist is a young man who learns the horrifying truth about his master (Squire Falkland) and spends the entire novel being hunted down. *Pamela* narrates the story of a young waiting maid who is subject to the unwanted attentions of Squire Brandon. These two novels depict the respective protagonists being pursued by a person of a higher social hierarchy, and touch upon the conscious abuse of power by authorities. The master-servant relationship that exists however, makes it hard for the protagonists to do anything about their current situation and they are forced to make the best of their situations- *Caleb Williams* is forced into an isolation because of how Falkland has effectively turned " a million of men, in arms against (him)(Godwin, p. 259)"; *Pamela Andrews* is even more limited in her options because of her status as a female, but she continues to resist Squire B even after being locked up by him. The theme of corrupt political authorities in *Caleb Williams* draws heavily from the real life events that William Godwin was experiencing when he was writing the novel. At a time when the English government was at the height of their paranoia about revolution, this mistrust resulted in the arrests and executions of various political radicals, many of whom were considered Godwin's acquaintances. First published in 1794, *Caleb Williams* represents Godwin's attempts to explore English political and social issues that were considered radical, and at the same time, criticize the English authorities for their oppressive rule against their tenants. This is represented through the character of Caleb, who is a servant that is unfairly persecuted by the law because of the influence of a powerful English aristocrat. The <https://assignbuster.com/the-effects-of-the-social-hierarchy-in-caleb-williams-and-pamela-or-virtue-rewarded/>

character of Falkland continuously displays behavior that is not expected from a gentleman with his social standing, by sending Caleb to prison and relentlessly hunting down him down wherever he goes. Godwin demonstrates how the hypocrisy of the acts contradicts the behavior expected from Falkland's social class- he frames Caleb of robbery and takes extreme measures to make sure that Caleb is driven into isolation. The exploitation of power is also a prominent theme in Pamela, when Squire B uses his power and influence to hide Pamela away in an attempt to force her into becoming his mistress. Similar to Godwin's depiction of Falkland, Samuel Richardson depicts the character of Squire B as an authority that abuses his power in order to bend his servants and tenants into obeying him. Despite knowing the master-servant boundary, he continually crosses the line and then uses his power to keep his servants silent (" And he charged Mrs Jervis to say not a word of what had passed; and on that condition he would forgive her for what she had said and done"[Richardson, p. 96]). Richardson was not the radical that Godwin was nor did he draw from his own experiences when writing about the authority in Pamela, but his portrayal of power abuse in authorities also echo those found in Caleb Williams, albeit to a lesser degree. The lack of moral and social restraints described in Squire B has been widely criticized however, because of its apparent encouragement of such behavior from the upper social class. To understand Pamela and Caleb's psychology, it is necessary to examine the social hierarchy that is present in the time setting of both novels. Both the protagonists are servants to an authority, and are living in a time when there were few laws to protect the peasant class and the tenants and servants were subject to the whims of their landlord. One of the more prominent examples in Caleb Williams is the <https://assignbuster.com/the-effects-of-the-social-hierarchy-in-caleb-williams-and-pamela-or-virtue-rewarded/>

character of Hawkins, who after offending Tyrrel, was tormented to the extent that he is forced to pack up his entire family and leave in order to escape Tyrrel. This also holds true in Pamela, where Farmer Monkton and his family are shown to be completely under the rule of Squire B, because he was “ under great obligations to their landlord, they added, and they expected repairs, and other favours from him...” (Richardson, p. 143). This dependency on Falkland and Squire B was not just limited to the tenants; it also applied to the servants. Pamela recognized this dependency on her master, which is part of the reason why she does not expose his actions to the rest of the servants, out of fear of implicating them: “‘Thank you, Mr. Jonathan,’ said I; ‘ but as you value your place, don’t be seen speaking to such an one as me’ I cried too; and slipt away as I could from him, for his own sake, lest he should be seen to pity me (Richardson, p. 80).” The existing social hierarchy led to the expectation for servants and masters to act in ways that befit their title. Harvey Gross attributes this to the force of society acting upon the “ the characters are projected as individuals acted upon by the forces of society; and, as in the novel, strong class feelings motivate their action” (Gross, 1959). Caleb states that Falkland’s servants regard him with “ veneration as a being of a superior order” and “ by the benevolence of his actions and the principles of inflexible integrity by which he was ordinarily guided”. Caleb as well, becomes Falkland’s service with the determination to please him and willingly adapted himself into the servant role, which is revealed in Falkland’s first confrontation with Caleb: Sir, I could die to serve you! I love you more than I can express. I worship you as a being of a superior nature. I am foolish, raw, inexperience, — worse than any of these; — but never did a thought of disloyalty to your service enter into my

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heart. (Godwin, p. 117) This speech demonstrates how deeply embedded these feelings were; the character of Falkland is above the character of Caleb and anything that goes wrong is obviously Caleb's fault. Pamela also displays the same social hierarchy mindset as Caleb, which is why Squire B's attentions leave her so agitated. The character of Squire B is also conscious of the social gap between the two and frequently remarks on it: "I know better what belongs to myself; but I was bewitched by her, I think, to be freer than became me... (Richardson, pp. 66-67)" Godwin presents a situation where social order is deeply embedded into the minds of the characters in Caleb Williams, much more than what Richardson's characters show. The feelings of superiority that the upperclassmen display causes the lower class people around them to regard those in power with reverence and superiority. Even the character of Tyrrel was initially regarded by young men "timid respect, conscious of the comparative eminence that unquestionably belonged to the powers of his mind... (Godwin, p. 17)" and women were taught that "the hand of Mr Tyrrel (was) the highest object of her ambition (Godwin, p. 17)" despite all his shortcomings and violent tantrums. Caleb himself also has this social order embedded deeply into his mind at the beginning of the novel, but after the unfair accusations by Falkland, he is forced to defend his position and go against social order to challenge his master. When Caleb finally gets the chance to make his stand against the social hierarchy at the final trial, he ultimately falls back into the expected role of the servant and actually blames himself for attempting to disgrace his master. Richardson however, focuses less on the individual versus the society and the expected roles of servant and master, than Godwin does with his characters. This is evident by the behavior displayed by Mrs. Jervis, <https://assignbuster.com/the-effects-of-the-social-hierarchy-in-caleb-williams-and-pamela-or-virtue-rewarded/>

Jonathan and Longman, who step out beyond their obligations to Squire B in an attempt to help Pamela. Mrs. Jervis even goes out of her way to openly defy Mr. B several times, such as when she steps out of her servant role to refuse Mr. B's commands to leave the room and leave Pamela alone with him. In fact, the characters of Pamela and Mr. B themselves seem to be the two characters in the novel that follow the servant-master obligation most closely: I lost all fear, and all respect and said, " Yes, I do, sir, too well! Well may I forget that I am your servant, when you forget what belongs to a master." I sobbed and cried most sadly. ' What a foolish hussy you are!' said he: ' Have I done you any harm?' ' Yes, sir,' said I, ' the greatest harm in the world: You have taught me to forget myself, and what belongs to me; and have lessened the distance that fortune has made between us, by demeaning yourself, to be so free to a poor servant (Richardson, p. 55).

Squire B's attraction to Pamela causes an upheaval in that method of thinking. Though Richardson was a conservative, scholars have noted that he seems to empower the lower class by perfectly embodying " a bourgeois class that was consolidating its power, challenging aristocratic institutions of control, and transforming cultural as well as economic means of production" (Flint, 1989). That someone from the working class should be the model example of what it is to be virtuous directly challenges the social hierarchy mindset throughout the whole novel. The whole novel of Pamela itself depicts Pamela and Mr. B's struggles to overcome the distance in their social class; Mr. B's continued ill treatment of Pamela partly results from his inability to accept that he has fallen in love with someone below his social standing, his failed attempts to shake off his attraction, and Pamela's refusal to become his mistress. Godwin and Richardson both play with the idea of <https://assignbuster.com/the-effects-of-the-social-hierarchy-in-caleb-williams-and-pamela-or-virtue-rewarded/>

empowering the lower class and challenging the order set by the upper class. However, their two protagonists reach quite opposite conclusions after challenging the social order. Caleb ultimately falls back into the social order mindset when he finally faces Falkland in a fair trial and declares that: Mr. Falkland is of noble nature. Yes; in spite of the catastrophe of Tyrrel, of the miserable end of the Hawkinses, and of all that I have myself suffered, I affirm that he has qualities of the most admirable kind. It is therefore impossible that he could have resisted a frank and fervent expostulation, the frankness and the fervour in which the whole soul was poured out. I despaired, while it was yet time to have made the just experiment; but my despair was criminal, was treason against the sovereignty of truth (Godwin, p. 300). Caleb's speech makes excuses for Falkland's momentary lapse of behavior and blames himself for revealing the truth and having to condemn Falkland with it. His declaration takes him into the social order-oriented mindset, because even though Caleb has done nothing wrong by exposing Falkland, he is somehow made to feel that his actions are cruel and unjust and even Falkland's praise of him only serves "to aggravate the baseness of my cruelty" (Godwin, p. 302). Richardson on the other hand, takes the opposite approach with this, by alleviating Pamela so that Mr. B finally offers her marriage as an equal, not as her master in any way: "I will endeavor to defy the world, and the world's censures, and, if it be in the power of my whole life, make my Pamela amends for all the hardships she has undergone by my means" (Richardson, p. 276). Despite Pamela's attraction to Mr. B, she initially refuses his offer because a large part of her misgivings is still based on the social boundaries between her and Mr. B. It is only after she leaves that she begins to reflect upon her feelings and realizes that she is also in

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love with Mr. B. Mr. B's letter and request to Pamela finally gives her the freedom to act outside the servant role- her choice to return to Lincolnshire is not due to her bond to Mr. B as a master-to-servant, but as an equal person. With this choice, she closes the social gap between the two and is able to marry Mr. B as a person of equal standing at last. While Caleb Williams and Pamela both deal with the theme of social hierarchy, Godwin and Richardson paint very different endings for the struggle that both Caleb and Pamela go through in each respective novel. Both go through a conflict with an authority that uses their social standing and power to manipulate the two protagonists into desperate situations. Caleb, however, ultimately gives way to the social order and feels guilt for being the one to bring dishonor to Falkland, whereas Pamela is finally able to overcome her reservations regarding the servant-master border and marry Mr. B as person with equal standing.