

# [Clarissa’s way of death](https://assignbuster.com/clarissas-way-of-death/)

In Clarissa, Samuel Richardson finds “ an exemplar to her sex.” But her story does not provide a model to live by, as such a qualification may lead one to expect. Only in the afterlife does Clarissa presumably receive what she deserves. The life suggested by her example is untenable. Clarissa’s death is the inevitable result of her unrealistic, unimpeachable virtue ­ a virtue that is defined less by what she does than by what she will permit. Her death serves not only a narrative end in the novel, but the demands of psychological realism. Richardson respects the conclusion made inevitable by the very “ divinity” of Clarissa’s personality. This heroine can have no other conclusion. Her death-drive is a fundamental aspect of her character, one present since the very beginning of the book. Though she is an extremely rational heroine, she is not necessarily reasonable. Like all young people, she wants happiness ­ but her idea of it is impossible to live, an almost childish fantasy. Her devotion to “ the single life” is not only a resistance to an unwanted match, but a refusal to have her purity blemished. Her purity and her virtue are the building blocks of her selfhood, but these elements have been formed in her childhood, and thus are not directly transferable to the exigencies, and duties, of adult life. In defense of this virtue, Clarissa has an almost morbid streak that prefigures her conclusion. There can be no worldly happiness for Clarissa. Lovelace’s crime, in a certain sense, is only incidental. Clarissa can never be married, as she can never accept its corollary, adulthood. Growing up implies a change of state that she cannot reconcile with her established identity. It is a shock, upon looking again into Clarissa and knowing her fate, to find in her first letter to Anna Howe, among the first things we hear from her, an intimation of her reluctance to live. “ I have sometimes wished that it had pleased God to have taken me in my last fever, when I had everybody’s love and good opinion” followed by “ but oftener that I had never been distinguished by my grandfathersince that distinction has estranged” her from her brother and sister (2). We see her wishing for a state in which she is universally loved, a state she once existed in, and that she would eagerly regain. Alongside this, she decries that very exceptionalness that earns her acclaim. She finds that she cannot be “ an exemplar” and also be universally loved. This is the essential paradox of her personality. It becomes necessary for these death-wishes to be in earnest, as only death could preserve the unblemished state she once existed in. What sets Clarissa apart is what damns her. “ Your merit is your crime” Anna Howe tells her (74), “ You can no more change your nature than they can theirs.” But this intractability is Clarissa’s inheritance from the Harlowes. Anna Howe says, significantly, of Clarissa: “ I am fitter for this world than you; you for the next than me” (19). Not only is this an apposite description, it sets up the incontrovertible opposition between the two “ worlds” that determines the impracticability of Clarissa’s life. Howe might as well be saying, you are fitter to be dead than I. Anna’s observation describes the difficulty of persisting in a state of grace. Innocence, and purity, decrease almost logarithmically as we grow older. Life will not allow us to be inviolate. Clarissa, though, must ­ to remain Clarissa.” How I am mortified ­ I that was proposed for an example, truly, to others” (136) she laments, in recounting her flight from her family estate. The choice of the word “ mortified” is significant. It implies a shame concomitant to death. Her reputation cannot admit blemish ­ even if there are exigent circumstances. Perfection cannot be qualified. There is a morbid incompatibility between being suited for the next world and being an actor in this one. This sheds light on the untenability of Clarissa’s position. She is persistently referred to as “ divine”; to everyone, she is an “ angel”. Her tragic flaw is the obvious one: she is not divine. Anna asks, “ Where indeed is the man to be foundthat dares to look up to Miss Clarissa Harlowe with hope, or anything but wishes?” (25). Part of this difficulty in finding a partner arises from fastidiousness, excusable when making a decision of such import. Anna goes on to describe the cast of thought that encourages this situation: “ persons of discretion are generally single. Such persons are apt to consider to much, to resolve. Are not you and I complimented as such?” Anna continues, “ And would either of us marry if the fellows, and our friends, would leave us alone?” (88). Of course, Anna will, and does, marry: Mr. Hickman, a kind, but unexceptional fellow. She is “ fit for this world.” Clarissa is as adamant a marriage-hater as Lovelace is, though for different reasons. Her reluctance to wed is more than over-discretion. She has rejected several suitors already. It may be the case that Clarissa is, initially, at least, in love with Lovelace, as Anna avers, and she herself comes close to admitting (“ a conditional kind of liking”). But this is beside the point. She can never admit this love to herself; it is fundamentally at odds with her self-conception. When Lovelace asks, “ Is then the divine Clarissa capable of loving a man whom she ought not to love?” (157) the answer is no; she cannot allow herself to be capable of this. In so doing, she would no longer be “ the divine Clarissa.” In describing her aversion to marriage, Clarissa is given to histrionics. She makes repeated oaths that she would rather die than marry Solmes, even while in his presence (102). Her “ death threats” can be interpreted as an adolescent affectation. After all, death is not a viable option, given her religiosity, in light of the biblical prohibition against suicide. The theatricality of her language in general points to a disposition rather “ mother-spoiled,” as Mr. Lovelace puts it later. However, when we consider her fate, her insistence on her preference for death takes on a much more ominous tone. She is profligate with these oaths, frequently swearing a death-wish. She has a fixation on death even if only as a rhetorical device. As her oath, “ I would rather die than” takes several objects, it seems the general pattern for her willfulness. In her April 11th letter to Anna Howe, where she describes the circumstances of her flight with Lovelace, she accounts herself having told Lovelace, “ I would sooner die than go with you” (129) and shortly thereafter, “ I will die sooner than be Mrs. Solmes” (130) which she repeats again (131). Threatening death, though she is certainly not aware of it, is her strategy of avoidance, of postponing fate. Her peculiar combination of intense self-scrutiny simultaneous with a denial as intense is a dangerous one, one that creates blind spots she cannot be aware of. She refuses to compromise. This stubbornness is not entirely pejorative ­ it is a fundamental part of her virtue. A sense of right and wrong must of necessity be unwavering, without doubt. But it is this very certainty, this refusal to compromise anything that makes her own death an option to bargain with. It may be pointed out that she offers various compromises to her parents, and later, to Lovelace. But these are merely strategies of avoidance, of postponement, that are in keeping with her adamant inviolability. Though Clarissa offers compromise, she offers compromise on the wrong terms. One must distinguish between the stated motives and the actual motives of the Harlowe’s insistence on her engagement to Solmes. Her family wants her nuptials to enhance their property and reputation. But Clarissa, as an alternative to marrying Solmes, swears to marry nobody, declares that she will live single. This is hardly a concession, as it is precisely what she desires. She offers to relinquish the property that she has inherited from her grandfather. Both of these actions, large sacrifices, miss the point. Even if her family’s desire for her to wed were entirely material, neither of these pledges serves their designs. Clarissa assigns her family’s designs for her to wed to material aims. There is certainly a large amount of truth in this suspicion; her family is fairly concerned with the particulars of the marriage contract. However, for Clarissa’s choices to be so clearly demarcated between material and spiritual happiness only serves to emphasize the rift between physical and spiritual that already exists in her. She describes herself to her mother as “ a person preferring happiness to fortune” (30). But to her parents, the grounds she demands for her happiness are unreasonable. After her she has sent down another rejection of Solmes, she recounts that her father “ would have come up in his wrath. I wish he had! And, were it not for his own sake, that he had killed me!” (63). This invocation is perhaps melodramatic, but it properly dramatizes the incompatibility of her parent’s expectations and her own stubbornness. It is clear that something must change, but Clarissa will not permit change. “ If I could flatter myself that my indifference to all the joys of this life proceeded from proper motives, and not rather from the disappointments and mortifications my pride has met with, how much rathershould I choose to be wedded to my shroud than any man on earth!” (190). She closes her letter to Anna Howe this way, after recounting the extreme disappointment she met with upon receiving her sister’s reply to her request for her clothing to be sent. This expression displays several things about Clarissa, not least her concern for propriety. Though she is intensely conscious of the prohibition against suicide, she still cannot but consider the option of death, or rather, the option of being dead, as a pleasurable one. What would lead one to believe that a non-existence would be more to be desired than one on earth? Perfection, purely, cannot compromise, therefore, cannot perpetuate. “ Wedded to her shroud” is a rhetorical flourish, but this marriage is indeed the only that Clarissa could tolerate. “ How willingly I would run away from myself, and what most concerns myself, if I could!” (74) she confides to Anna. Her existence is intolerable because her self-conception is impossible. Even though Solmes is uncommonly repulsive, if we give full credence to her descriptions, the adamance of her denial of him leads us to suspect that more than a mere repulsion of his person informs her reluctance. For Clarissa, marriage has its attendant terrors. Her disgust at Solmes is mostly at his appearance, his body, his awkwardness with “ splay feet” and “ ugly weight”. Reading her description of him, we shudder more at the thought that she must share a bed with him than a silent dinner table. A typical girl would act as her Aunt Hervey would: “ I asked what she would do, were she in my case? Without hesitation she replied, Have Mr. Lovelace out-of-hand, and take up her own Estate, if she were me; and there would be an end of it—And Mr. Lovelace, she said, was a fine gentleman;—Mr. Solmes was not worthy to buckle his shoes.” Taking the hint of Anna Howe, besides, it is clear that Lovelace would be a very desirable husband for her. If she were typical, then, this novel might be an entirely different sort of tragedy. Clarissa refuses to be fit for this world. Indeed, she is badly used by Lovelace, but she is unable to reconcile herself with an identity that may be tarnished. One can add: if this is true, then why does she not begin to die until she is physically violated? Her reputation is tarnished the moment she passed through the gate with Lovelace, if not before: the moment she became subject of public talk because of Lovelace’s fight with her brother. Note, though, that the day of her death on her coffin is the day she left her father’s house. In her view, her death was the inevitable result and conclusion of that action, the action that, by mortifying her reputation, destroyed her. She could have chosen another date: that of her rape, June 12th. She hopes that her death shall affect a restoration. By naming the date the day that she ran away, she is effectively turning the time between then and the actual day of her death into one contracted action. In a sense, she is erasing it. By asking to be laid at the feet of her grandfather, she is asking for a restoration to a state before she had fallen, when she was still universally favored. The split came in his death, and in the subsequent revelation of his favoritism. When Lovelace writes his (subdued) letter of triumph to Belford, it reads “ And now, Belford, I can go no farther. The affair is over. Clarissa lives” (305). As though to lead a maculate existence is impossible for her, is untenable. That Clarissa lives may also be an assertion that she, indeed, is mortal, that she is a woman. Something that Lovelace, if only rhetorically, repeatedly doubts. Consider the scene where Lovelace breaks in on Clarissa in her deshabille under the pretense of fire. “ Kill me! Kill me! If I am odious enough in your eyes to deserve this treatment; and I will thank you! Too long, much too long, has my life been a burden to me! Or (wildly looking all around her), give me but the means and I will instantly convince you that my honour is dearer to me than my life!” Lovelace’s response to this is: “ By my soul, thou artan angel and no woman” (264). Clarissa’s terror is doubtless intense, but that her preference for death is conflated with her divinity, to Lovelace and to herself, demonstrates the difficulty of her situation. Honor, if honor is virginity, once lost cannot be restored. Virginity is a binary, with no intermediate shades. Circumstances serve to explain, but one is either a virgin, or one is not. This incontrovertible logic is at the root of her desperation, at the root of the formula that equates death with the preservation of honor. This is only if virginity is considered as a state of the body and not the spirit. We have already seen how the presence of the material world is a burden to Clarissa. Lovelace, in trying to prove the woman behind the angel, tries to use her body to drag her to a common, approachable level: “ When all’s done, Miss Clarissa Harlowe has but run the fate of a thousand others of her sex ­ only that they did not set such a romantic value upon what they call their honour” (306). Lovelace refuses to believe that Clarissa’s being can be so entwined with the preservation of this honor that its abridgement would kill her. Clarissa cannot be a woman. “ Belford, this is an angel. And yet, had she not been known to be female, they would not from babyhood have dressed her as such, nor would she, but upon that conviction, have continued the dress” (235). Clarissa’s material presence, her undeniable femininity, hinders her unearthly aims. Clarissa’s beauty is another paradoxical construct; it adds to her perfection, but yet it causes her downfall. Lovelace, in his attempts at Clarissa, has another aim in mind ­ he wants to make her “ fit for this world”. “ Oh, the consecrated beauty! How can she think to be a wife!” (239) he laments after a description of a particularly virulent fight he has with her. “ And should not my beloved, for her own sake, descend by degrees from goddess-hood into humanity?” he asks Belford later (253). His assessment of her character is in many respects correct. However, that he attempts to remedy this by means purely physical is to his detriment, and off the mark. Lovelace calls the rape, and Clarissa’s loss of purity, merely a “ notional violation” (319). This corresponds with the doctor’s diagnosis of Clarissa’s malady as “ mental”. But yet this mental sickness causes her actual death. “ Death by grief is the slowest of deaths” she She doesn’t eat in prison, nor on her birthday. She taxes her energy by writing compulsively. Belford remarks to her “ despair of recovery allowed not room for cure” (398). This is a repetition of what the physicians have told her before, when Goddard the apothecary advises her, “ you will require very little of our assistance. You mustbe your own doctress. Cheer up your spirits. Resolve to do all in your power to be well; and you’ll soon grow better” (382). By putting her recovery in her power, Richardson is establishing a correspondence between her violation and her death that is more than just incidental. Are we to read it, therefore, as the will of God? It seems that we are also to acknowledge the part of Clarissa’s nature that drives her to this morbidity. Her violation becomes the proof of her purity, achieving an identity for Clarissa that would otherwise have been unreachable. As though she is a disputed compound, Lovelace tests her to see if her element is in any way corrupted. It is only after he has committed his final trespass that she is found irreproachable. She is adamantine ­ the passing of “ the worst” gives her a strength, a willfulness, and an integrity that she lacked before, when her future actions were still in doubt. The defense of her honour, therefore, has precisely the opposite result of self-defense ­ as the defense of her honour demands her threatening her life, her body. It is as though body and soul are irremediably split in her ­ the life her soul demands is one that is incompatible with the duties of an adult. Therefore, such paradoxical statements such as “ perhaps my bad health may be my protection” (357). The death of her body, (“ death by grief is the slowest of deaths” (464)) is subsequent to the death of her mind. Her beatification, then, is contingent upon her martyrdom. Her preparations for death take up the better part of two months. But there is something even then unfit about how she goes about it. Though she has looked towards death as peace, she looks towards it with an anticipation that makes it difficult to believe that she would be able to accept any other result. Lovelace, tries to figure her malady as a cliché ­ “ a broken heart”. Her delicacy, in that case, would be her weakness, a fallibility, rather than an unconquerable strength. He longs for her to be among the common, the classifiable. For him, for rakes, women are all the same ­ variants of the same type. Admitting that she is an “ angel” means that she is not a type that he has encountered before, that she defies all the rules that he has derived from his experimentation on and observation of women. Lovelace would like to drag her down into the level of commonality, to signify his trespass against her as a near favor ­ but her death, as a response to his actions, is what preserves her exceptionality. Lovelace using “ unnatural arts” ­ drugs ­ to accomplish his rape allows Clarissa to continue to value herself and her virtue. He says he used it mercifully, availing himself of the fact that opiates are after all medicinal. To Clarissa, his success at achieving his aims is possibly the exception that proves the rule of her virtue. She can persist in the security that she has done everything she can to prevent this trespass, and that therefore she shall be shriven. She writes to Mrs. Norton: “ When my story is known I shall be entitled to more compassion than blameyet have I this consolation left me, that I have not suffered either for want of circumspection, or through credulity or weakness” (343). She is preternaturally concerned that she not appear to be doing anything to make herself worse. Though writing is admittedly taxing, and the recapitulation of her story exhausts her, she sees it as a duty that she has. It is not as though, then, she is renouncing her role in the world entirely by seizing upon death as an escape. Rather, she tries to rig a situation such that her influence will continue to be felt after her demise, that her demise may be profitable and fruitful. She is, as far as she can be, certain of her apotheosis. She can be said to be determined to go to heaven, and in this, is sure of her friends’ forgiveness and future repentance. “ Depend upon it,” she threatens Lovelace, “ that some of those who will not stir to protect me living, will move heaven and earth to avenge me dead!” (318). Her value will be restored by her death, which cannot but make her an object of compassion. She is certain enough of this forgiveness to base economic transactions on it: “ I have friends will pay you liberally,” she assures her jailer, “ when they know I am gone” (369). Clarissa is warned repeatedly against despair, which is seen to be the cause of her physical decline. This despair, though, morphs into something else when she becomes more assured of her position in the next life. Rather than looking upon death with peace, or with a forbearance towards the will of god, she assumes an attitude that is rather too anticipatory. She relishes her misery; it is her misery that makes her. She replies to Belford, “ She said she neither despaired nor hoped. My countenanceis indeed an honest picture of my heart. But the mind will run away with the body at any time” (398). There is a definite willfulness in her death. Death is the only way she can regain her reputation; she uses her illness, her state in extremis, as an element to bargain for her forgiveness. But by being explicit that she neither “ despairs nor hopes”, she is ensuring that her actions are sanctioned by religion. When she asks, “ with smiling earnestness,” how much longer she has to live, she responds with disappointment to find that it is longer than ten days. Death is “ to be released from all [her] troubles” and “ the shorter you tell me my time is likely to be, the more comfort you will give me” (435). “ Her glory has been established by her sufferings” (320). Her conduct defies the normative results of such a trespass. She could not have been beatified had she not been sacrificed, martyred (423). The security that she feels in her own salvation is subsequent to her rape; before it, all that is apparent is her disobedience. She gives up hope of reconciliation with her family after the rape for several reasons. Firstly, it is undeniable that she used this as a tactic to delay what must have been clearly inevitable: her marriage with Lovelace. Secondly, that reconciliation is no longer necessary. She, instead, adopts an attitude that allows her to pity her parents and family preemptively for the regret they shall feel when she has passed on. On August 30th, before her Sept. 7th death, she refuses the opportunity for her parents to be informed of her sickness, so that they may forgive her beforehand, as “ if they should make me wish to live” (442). When Anna Howe asks, “ Comfort yourselfin the triumphs of a virtue unsullied; a will wholly faultless. Who could have withstood the trials that you have surmounted?” (358). Her passage through these “ trials” is the confirmation of her “ divinity”. “ The fall of a regular person, no doubt, is dreadful” she writes to her uncle Antony (426). But this is not her situation, not her crime. She herself is not a “ regular person”, and her fall was not a typical fall: “ would to Heaven,” she implores later in the letter, “ that I had had the circumstances of [my fall] inquired into!” (426-7). Her death is the manifestation of her blamelessness. Death recreates her as immaculate, by proving that a blemished existence is not consistent with her nature. Though she asserts, “ I am ruined in my own eyes; and that is the same to me as if all the world knew it” (316), it becomes proof of her transcendence that “ all the world” know it. By agreeing to publish her tale after her demise, she has transformed the circumstances of her disgrace into a proof of her greater purity.