Not of this Earth

Clarissa showcases the stark contrast of agency between members of different social classes, genders, and moral alignments in eighteenth century England. By making the two main characters into oppositional binaries, Richardson explores the futility of an honest woman’s actions, and the dastardly influence of a determined aristocratic male. Our honorable protagonist is constantly under siege by her selfish family, a manipulative suitor, and the entire world beyond them. In spite of this, Clarissa sets herself apart from the material world, channeling divine qualities to survive her ephemeral existence. With an utter disregard for material possessions and a heart that constantly yearns for virtue, Clarissa becomes the Queen of Morals in a world full of plebeians. Richardson utilizes this overwhelming goodness to highlight a number of class and gender-based inequalities, and in a poetic sense, argue that there is no place in our world for a truly pure, virtuous human being.

For Clarissa, her literal imprisonment serves as a turning point of the novel; she begins to regain stability after Lovelace’s vile affront, and assert some degree of control over the rest of her tragically short life. However, this is nothing new - confinement is a constant theme within Clarissa, whether it is her aggressive family, the conniving Lovelace, or fate itself that is determined to lock her up in a small space. This incessant oppression is necessary to meet the dramatic and literary demands of the story – the entire world is against Clarissa, luck included, and as such her life follows a predetermined course that is independent of her own will. Though she attempts to cling to her virtuous ways her society does not cherish the same values, leaving her “fate” to destroy Lovelace from the inside, and ultimately receive her accolades in heaven. Her resolute virtuousness carries a greater impact because of the terrible conditions that she suffers – she is Christ-like in this sense, enduring temptation and suffering to legitimize their self-sacrifice. By repressing Clarissa both physically and socially, Richardson offers his audience an opportunity to empathize with her, and question the cultural structures that allow for such constriction.

Clarissa’s constant physical confinement also mirrors the restrictions of both her gender and social class within eighteenth century England. Though her family is wealthy they are unestablished in the aristocratic circle, and their desire to move into the social stratosphere is one of the initial conflicts in the novel. As a female, she is generally considered to be a living, breathing bargaining chip for the family to utilize to their own ends, without concern for her wants or opinions. By contrast Lovelace occupies the opposite end of the spectrum; superior wealth and social standing, paired with devious charms and good looks, make Lovelace the ultimate social force of eighteenth century England. His status and gender afford him mobility and agency that Clarissa simply does not have access to, and this is once again reflected by his effortless movements across the city. My depiction of Clarissa’s imprisonment strives to reflect the literal and figurative restrictions that follow Clarissa throughout the novel. One could adopt a modern perspective and argue that the simple act of drawing Clarissa confines her to a single space and time, but I won’t. I found that a sense of isolation or confinement is much more immediately tangible within the visual format, and this made me appreciate Richardson’s ability to slowly and subtly make Clarissa’s situation more dire and restrictive.

Belford studies the room that holds Clarissa upon entering, noting the decrepit state of the walls, ceiling, and furniture. Once again, the broken environment is used to contrast the perfect cleanliness of Clarissa herself who sits in the corner,“lovely in spite of all her griefs and sufferings”. Though the world seeks to bring her down, Richardson allows Clarissa to continue radiating beauty, as if her angelic gentleness helps protect her from the corruption of the moral realm. She rests, “sunk with majesty … in her white flowing robes… spreading the dark, though not dirty, floor, and illuminating that horrid corner”. Despite the terrible events that she has endured, her face remains beautiful and her clothing “beyond imagination white” – here, outward appearance truthfully conveys the state of her inner being. This is also opposite of Lovelace, who is able to conceal his inner evil by donning disguises or leveraging his masculine beauty. Lovelace has to hide who he is, while Clarissa cannot hide who she is. My print attempts to convey this difference by making Clarissa distinctly white against her environment, leaving her as “clean” as possible while the rest of the print is shaded or hatched in some fashion. This pushes the notion that Clarissa is more akin to the light of the candle or moon that can be seen – she remains ethereal among the literal and figurative filth that surrounds her.

The only other character that I represent in my work is Belford, who stands out in this novel as somewhat realistic in comparison to the living stereotypes of Clarissa and Lovelace. Belford serves a number of important literary functions, acting as a foil to Lovelace’s roguish and unchanging arrogance, while helping the protagonist finish up her earthly business on her way to heaven. As the executor of her will, he severs the last of her ties to the mortal realm, completing her transformation from paragon to angel. The first time Belford sees Clarissa after her rape is he is filled with awe and sorrow. His reaction is described explicitly in the scene, “Up then raised the charming sufferer her lovely face… with such a significance of woe overspreading it … I could not, for the soul of me, help being visibly affected.”This begins Belford’s own transformation, where he shows us that a rake is not necessarily doomed to a life of cavalier, chauvinistic mischief. While Clarissa must leave this world to fulfill her literary purpose, she is able to save others through her saintly example, and leave the world in a slightly better state than she found it in. In this sense Belford becomes a genuine example of the human spirit, not entirely pure and angelic like Clarissa, or demonic like Lovelace, but one grapples with his human nature to achieve a life worthy of respect and admiration.

Part of the reason Clarissa must die is that she has no place in this world – her perfection is always at odds with the flaws, misgivings, or outright ill will of others. In addition, her gender and social standing prevent her from taking any course of action that could stop such determined evil as Lovelace, despite her steadfast adherence to virtuous principles. As a female she is inherently dependent upon her “male counterpart” in English society, although her defiance of this convention sets a powerful example even in contemporary times. Attempting to depict Clarissa in a visual form proved incredibly difficult because no matter how long I spent, I did not feel that I could accurately depict her inherent holiness, nor the amount of torment that she had endured. By building Clarissa into a character that is too perfect for this world and then sacrificing her, Richardson makes a powerful pathos play, urging his audience to consider their own opportunities for redemption, and the cultural infrastructure that would deny her a place on this Earth.