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Creator:	Laurence Sterne
Published:	December 1759
Full title:	*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*
Forms:	Prose
Genre:	Novel, Prose fiction
Literary period:	18th century

Tristram Shandy

Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is an innovative, digressive, challenging, humorous and philosophical investigation into the relationship between literature and life.

The work is a fictional autobiography. However, Sterne's rambling text - comprising nine volumes published over the course of several years, from 1759 to 1767 - is also an experiment in form and structure containing nested narratives and self-reflexive textual jokes (including, famously, a blank page), as well as bold innovations in tone and style. As well as being extensively intertextual, Sterne combines the sentimental with the bawdy, the philosophical with the silly and close character studies with rambling essays. Sterne's work modelled a new kind of literary form, one that even he could not characterise easily. The work ends with Tristram's mother asking the local parson, Yorick:

L..d! said my mother, what is all this story about? -
A Cock and a Bull, said Yorick - And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard.

Tristram Shandy's conception

Tristram Shandy recounts the story of its protagonist's life, beginning with the moment of his interrupted conception. His parents almost fail to conceive him when his mother suddenly asks if his father had remembered to wind the clock.

One of the peculiarities of *Tristram Shandy's* narrative structure is that, despite the fact that Tristram's conception opens the work, the retelling of his birth does not occur until almost half way through the book. This may be because of Sterne's commitment to providing the rich background that he feels is necessary to understand an individual's life; or it may be an attempt to disorient the reader; or it



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may be both. Tristram is birthed by the 'man-midwife' Dr Slop, who squashes Tristram's nose with forceps as he yanks the baby out. Noses, whether mutilated, short, or impressively long, are important throughout the novel. Tristram's name is also shortened and mangled from the more magisterial Trismegistus that his father Walter intended to give him. Such flirtation with philosophical seriousness characterises the book as a whole.

A family drama

Like many other 18th-century novels, *Tristram Shandy* is a family drama, staging the foibles, contradictions and affectations of the members of the Shandy household. Tristram's father, Walter, is quick-tempered, controlling, opinionated and predisposed to obscure philosophical debate. Walter spends much of Tristram's youth absorbed in writing the *Tristrapædia*, a system of education, while neglecting his son's actual education. Despite his irritability, Walter maintains a tender relationship with his brother Toby. Tristram's Uncle Toby is a gentle character who was wounded in battle and, perhaps partly because of a groin injury, remains intimidated by women well into middle age; he spends much of the novel ducking the assertive advances of the Widow Wadman. Uncle Toby most enjoys mocking up historical battles and discussing the fine points of fortifications with his loyal servant Corporal Trim. Trim is a remarkably eloquent character, given to lucidly discussing the unjust suffering of his fellow humans in a register that typifies Sterne's own unique voice of sincere sentiment and gentle mockery. One of Trim's monologues would later become the subject of an epistolary exchange between Sterne and Ignatius Sancho, in which the two writers discuss using literature to advocate for the abolition of slavery.

Mrs Shandy proves central to the plot at various junctures, including (in a roundabout way) when her trusted maidservant Susannah accidentally allows a window to fall on the young Tristram while he urinates from the house into the garden. The resulting circumcision is another example of the novel's double entendres, many of which map psychological traumas onto humorous, but nevertheless mutilating, mishaps. The novel's blend of seriousness and silliness is perhaps most clearly embodied in Parson Yorick, a close friend of the Shandy family and a sentimental hero in his own right who will go on to feature in many of Sterne's other writings, including *A Sentimental Journey* (1768).

Tristram Shandy's reputation

Tristram Shandy was a surprise commercial success. After failing to find a publisher for his first two volumes, Sterne was forced to publish them at his own expense. However, the work sold so well that the second edition featured illustrations by the



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renowned engraver William Hogarth. In the 18th century, *Tristram Shandy's* popular success outstripped its reputation among critics. Since then, however, its reputation among critics and artists has steadily grown. In the 20th century, in particular, the work became venerated by modernist and postmodernist writers for its rule-breaking form, language play and blend of philosophical seriousness and humane comedy.

About *Tristram Shandy*

Introduction

In many ways and for various reasons, *Tristram Shandy* is one of the great books of prose fiction. In its humor, universality, and insight into humanity, it reminds one of Petronius, Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift, and Joyce. In its concern with motives and with the psychology of the individual, in the writer's approach to the problems of novel writing, it makes great sense to the modern reader.

Perhaps the key to the enjoyment of *Tristram Shandy* is literalness. If we believe everything we are told in the book, understand it in the way we are told to understand it, we will not become angry and frustrated the way most past readers have. The secret is not to bring usual attitudes or traditional judgments to the book, but rather to surrender to the writer. As the author himself says, "I would go fifty miles on foot, for I have not a horse worth riding on, to kiss the hand of that man whose generous heart will give up the reins of his imagination into his author's hands, – be pleased he knows not why, and cares not wherefore."

There is great fun in *Tristram Shandy*, but it comes from being in harmony with the author rather than from being contrary and rebellious. Most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers loved the tender, sentimental passages in the book, but they disliked the fun. They lost their tempers at the many calculated twistings and turnings of the story, at the many jokes (bawdy and shaggy-dog types) – in short, they disliked the author because he didn't write the kind of book they wanted. Many modern readers have felt the same.

There are certain problems in reading this novel, but they present a kind of complexity that can be pleasurable for the modern reader. The problems are these: the identity of the author, the point of the story, and many, many digressions from the apparent story.

The full title of this book is *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. In spite of this very explicit title, most people have taken for granted that it is really the story of Laurence Sterne, the author of the book. Sterne complained that the world considered him more Shandean than he actually was, and conversely the world has



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considered *Tristram Shandy* more Sternean than it actually is. In most people's minds, author and book have interpenetrated to such an extent that one is considered an extension of the other. Nothing but confusion is gained from this idea about the book: if we think that we're sometimes reading autobiography, sometimes fiction, and sometimes a blend of the two, we cannot help but be uncertain and nervous about it.

The fullest and deepest meaning is gotten from the book only by assuming that Sterne created a fictional character named Tristram Shandy and that he made him a writer. He gave him a mind that knows of all the happenings in the book, and this mind is independent of the artist Sterne's mind. It is an artistic mind, somewhat like Sterne's, and it is a lucid and consistent one in spite of all the inconsistencies it shows. For the purposes of the reader, it is the mind of an individual named Tristram Shandy, not Laurence Sterne.

The thoughts and the opinions of Tristram Shandy, however much they may coincide with what we know of Laurence Sterne, belong primarily to the man who is the legitimate offspring of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Shandy and the nephew of Captain Toby Shandy. One could even say that Sterne created no other characters. Tristram, once his mind has been set in motion, creates the rest of the individuals who people his world, meaning that all of them come through to the reader through the unfolding of Tristram's consciousness. This creation by Tristram is one of the most important of the dynamic processes of the novel. Sterne writes about a man who is writing a book, and this man presents for the reader's inspection the people who had significance in his life; all of their stories are told to us directly or indirectly by this man. His life is tied up with theirs before he is born because he is presented to us as remembering this relationship. Thus, the first point to be taken literally in the title is that the author *within the Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is Tristram Shandy. Whenever the term "author" is used hereafter, it will refer to Tristram and not to Laurence Sterne.

About 10 years before the publication of *Tristram Shandy* (1759), Henry Fielding published his *History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749). *Tom Jones* has always been the archetype of the "well-made novel," and for many readers and critics *Tristram Shandy* suffers by comparison with it. *Tom Jones* presents the "life and adventures" of its hero; everything happens in an orderly, progressive way. The hero appears as an infant in the third chapter, and the major part of the book deals with his adventures as a young man. But there is no such orderliness in *Tristram Shandy*: Tristram is born a third of the way through the book, and the last forty-five chapters of the book (many of them short) deal with the events that took place five years before his birth.



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The stories of Mr. and Mrs. Shandy, of Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim, of Uncle Toby and the Widow Wadman, and the story of Tristram's childhood and young manhood itself, are all picked up, dropped, and picked up again and again. The author unhesitatingly tells the end of a story first, then the beginning, and then the middle; sometimes he tells the beginning and then drops it for a hundred pages. He manipulates the years and the events; he places, displaces, and replaces the people of his family (including himself) as he likes, taking them from the context of their actions and putting them back according to the way they figure in his reflections about them. Their stories give way for his opinions – the opinions of an author at work – and they are picked up according to his will and inserted into the pattern of his history as illustrations of his opinions.

Everything, individuals and events, moves in direct response to the controlling consciousness of the author. He makes them move or he makes them stop in their tracks in mid-sentence; and when he thinks that it is time to go back to them, they start moving and they finish their sentence. The affairs of the lovable Shandy family and the goings-on at Shandy Hall are given to us piecemeal and topsy-turvy: now we see them, now we don't; we see them here, and suddenly we see them there.

But one person we always see and hear, no matter what happens to the Shandy family story, is Tristram, whose "life and opinions" continue unbroken. Whether or not anyone else is present, he is in *every* scene by means of his "my uncle Toby," "my father," "my mother." His presence is not merely a storyteller's point of view; writing of the components of his life at a distance as a mature man – and as a writer – he has the advantages of a mature man's outlook. Only he is alive at the time of writing; all the others have been long dead. The fact that he is able to conjure them up in all their vividness and move them backward and forward in "time" without impairing that vividness demonstrates and proves the reality and depth of the character that Sterne created for him: he belongs to the Shandy family and he is also a clever writer.

The Shandy ménages are important, but they are not more important than the thoughts they give rise to in the mind of this clever writer. And when these thoughts provoke a stream of thought that does not concern any Shandy other than Tristram the writer, goodbye to the Shandys for a while. And the Shandys whom the writer bids goodbye to every so often include even *little* Tristram himself; the writer is willing to tell (with a calculated attempt to frustrate the reader) about his own conception, his birth, his childhood accidents, his first breeches, and a couple of trips to the Continent, but nothing else. It is *big* Tristram he is concerned with, and the opinions, ideas, fancies, prejudices, and caprices of this Tristram. He himself is the subject of his book, and his inner life and his opinions are the material that interests him most. So, the next point to be taken literally in the title is that the book is about



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the life and *opinions* of Tristram Shandy – just as it says. The title is a clue to Sterne's intentions. Tristram views his life through the medium of his opinions, and his opinions control the presentation of his reminiscences.

The solution to the problem of the digressions follows from the above discussion of the problems of the identity of the author and the point of the story. Writing about his own life and his opinions, the author, Tristram, frees himself from the standard "life and adventures" approach. He is introspective about himself and his background and equally about the techniques of the book he is writing. He is the narrator of the "story," but he is also the conscious artist who is concerned with his ideas, with the ordering and significance of those ideas, and with the impact of those ideas both upon himself as artist and upon his "public."

The digressions of *Tristram Shandy* are of two distinct types: the first takes the reader from the immediate part of the story to antecedent or subsequent events that supposedly clarify or amplify the story; the second takes the reader from the immediate story to the private views of the author, either on that story or on completely diverse subjects. But all of these digressions finally have unity in the creative consciousness of Tristram. No matter how digressive he may get, his constant effort – he tells us regularly – is aimed at the harmonizing of these digressions with the "main work"; and no matter how vague the connection is between "digression" and "story," he always finally brings the two together.

In the meantime, how do you organize opinions? Unlike straight-line adventures, they resist coming to attention and forming orderly ranks. Further, how many opinions can fit into the book? As someone once said, "the fragments of the narrative have the appearance of interruptions to digressions." But this is Tristram's book, and that's the form he gave to it. We finally understand all about Tristram Shandy not only or primarily from the events of his life – his "story" – but from the book whose very structure reflects his mind and his character. Tristram says near the end of the book, "All I wish is, that it may be a lesson to the world, 'to let people tell their stories in their own way.'" The best thing of all in reading his book is to take his advice.

A Note on the Text

Tristram Shandy was written in five installments and published in these segments:

Book 1 and Book 2: December 1759

Book 3 and Book 4: January 1761

Book 5 and Book 6: December 1761

Book 7 and Book 8: January 1765

Book 9: January 1767

The following notes are based on this first London edition, considered the most authoritative. The quotes preserve the punctuation of this edition, an important matter because the great use Sterne makes of dashes gives us a good idea of



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how *Tristram Shandy* should sound. These dashes are more effective for his purposes than the standard use of periods, commas, and semicolons, for as he says, "Writing, when properly managed . . . is but a different name for conversation."

Character List

Walter Shandy Father of Tristram. A man who loves hypotheses, theories, and erudition, and hates interruptions. He is an easily disappointed man.

Mrs. Shandy (Elizabeth) Mother of Tristram. A singularly down-to-earth woman whose outstanding traits are her lack of imagination and her inability to ask an interesting question.

Captain Toby Shandy (retired) Uncle of Tristram and brother of Walter. His main interest in life is fortifications and military history, and his character is one of gentleness and amiability.

Corporal Trim (James Butler) Loyal servant and former companion-at-arms of Toby Shandy. An eloquent orator who shares his master's enthusiasm for past battles.

Susannah The Shandy maidservant. A young woman who bustles about, she is the unwitting tool of various small disasters that strike the Shandy household.

Obadiah The manservant. Another bustling, distinguished by frequent maladroitness and poor sense of timing.

The Scullion A fat, simple kitchen servant.

Bobby Shandy The older son of the Shandy family. Although he never appears in the book, his death is discussed in Book 4, Chapter 31.

Tristram Shandy No. 1 The "hero," who is born in Book 3, Chapter 23. Victim of small misfortunes that seem great ones to his father. We see him rarely; all there is to him is the series of accidents, the question of whether his parents should put him into trousers, and the mention of a trip he took to France with his father and his Uncle Toby.

Tristram Shandy No. 2 The author of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Laurence Sterne's chief character, he tells the story of the people listed above, he makes judgments about the events of their lives, and he gives us the step-by-step details of the problems and difficulties involved in writing this sort of book.

Parson Yorick The village parson. Friend and level-headed adviser of the Shandy family, his iconoclastic wit makes many enemies.

Widow Wadman A woman who has cold feet in bed. Disappointed in her first husband, she hopes to find a better one in Captain Toby Shandy.

Bridget Her maidservant. Sometime paramour of Corporal Trim.

Eugenius A man of the world. Friend of Parson Yorick, he tries unsuccessfully to teach him caution and prudence.

Dr. Slop The man-midwife. A very short, very fat obstetrician who attaches great importance to obstetrical instruments.

The Midwife An old woman who assists at the delivery of Tristram.

The Curate (named "Tristram") An officious person who baptizes Tristram.

Aunt Dinah The Shandy family scandal.



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Lieutenant Le Fever An unfortunate soldier, sustained in his last moments of life by Mr. Toby Shandy.

Billy Le Fever Son of the above and recipient of the generous bounty of Mr. Toby Shandy.

Kysarcius, Phutatorius, Didius, and Gastripheres Learned men and acquaintances of Parson Yorick.

Jenny A casually mentioned young lady friend of the author Tristram Shandy.