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## **Some important quotations explained**

1. *Give me credit for a little more wisdom than appears upon my outside.*

Tristram Shandy, Vol. 1, Chapter 6

Throughout the nine volumes of his autobiography, Tristram will insist on his status as a "wise fool" figure. He will repeatedly make fun of his own weaknesses as a narrator, such as his inability to pass up a chance to tell a funny story. At times he even invokes the metaphor of a jester's cap and bells to reinforce his "foolish" exterior.

All this, however, serves as the backdrop to what is arguably a very wise approach to life. Tristram is well aware of others' foibles, as well as his own, but he readily forgives them as he does himself. His attitude is one of good-natured amusement, not cynicism or judgment, and he goes through life unburdened by grudges or bitterness.

2. *So long as a man rides his hobby-horse peaceably and quietly along the King's highway ... pray, Sir, what have either you or I to do with it?*

Tristram Shandy, Vol. 1, Chapter 7

This is a strong early statement of Tristram's "live and let live" philosophy. "Hobby-horse," here as elsewhere in the book, means something like the modern word "hobby," but it implies a degree of passion or even obsession that "hobby" fails to capture. For Tristram, "hobby-horsical" pursuits—like music, butterfly collecting, or building model forts—are a healthy part of life, not a cause for scorn or embarrassment.

3. *Writing, when properly managed ... is but a different name for conversation.*

Tristram Shandy, Vol. 2, Chapter 11

Despite the narrator's sweeping claim, it would be more accurate to describe *Tristram Shandy* as a work that *mimics* conversation in a few specific respects. The novel is chatty and convivial in tone, and it leaps gleefully about from topic to topic, often without warning. These traits certainly make *Tristram Shandy* more of a "conversation" than, say, a lecture or a philosophical dialogue.

Still, like any novelist, Tristram is firmly in control of the supposed conversation between himself and the reader, who is, for the most part, merely along for the ride. To mitigate this, Tristram makes various attempts to involve his audience explicitly, by asking questions, "keeping score" of chapters yet to be written, and even inviting readers to fill in part of the story for themselves. This gives the novel a participatory if not necessarily "conversational" quality.

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**II SEM. ENG.(HONS.), Paper- CT3: 18 th Century Fiction & Non-Fiction,  
Topic- Tristram Shandy**

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4. *Of all the cants which are canted in this canting world—though the cant of hypocrites may be the worst—the cant of criticism is the most tormenting!*

Tristram Shandy, Vol. 3, Chapter 12

Literary criticism—especially over-serious and pedantic criticism—is one of Tristram's pet peeves. Consequently, he stops his narrative roughly once per volume to address himself to critics, either defending himself against their remarks or attacking them for missing the point.

Here, Tristram describes the language of critics as "cant," meaning jargon unintelligible to outsiders. In this sense the word was first applied to the secret languages of thieves and beggars, an image Tristram may be trying to invoke in these lines. By Sterne's time, however, *cant* could also mean the jargon of any specialized group, including a class of professionals or academics.

5. *His anger at the worst was never more than a spark.*

Tristram Shandy, Vol. 3, Chapter 22

It would be easy to see Walter Shandy as the "bad guy" in his arguments with others, since he tends (albeit briefly) to lose his temper when people fail to keep up with his longwinded explanations. Tristram, however, cautions the reader not to read too much into his father's little outbursts. In his view, Walter's irritability is a minor foible, not a serious character flaw.

6. *Don't be terrified, madam, this stair-case conversation is not so long as the last.*

Tristram Shandy, Vol. 4, Chapter 30

Shandy jokes with his reader about the length of his novel's many digressions, though the book would not be nearly as entertaining without them—and he knows it. When he makes this remark, a multi-chapter scene has just transpired in which, every time Walter and Uncle Toby start to descend the stairs, Tristram pauses the narration and goes off on a tangent of some kind.

7. *Come! cheer up, my lads; I'll shew you land.*

Tristram Shandy, Vol. 5, Chapter 41

Although Tristram half-boasts and half-admits to his ability to spin out an endlessly rambling narrative, he recognizes his reader may not always share his enthusiasm for long and meandering stories. Thus, he occasionally stops to reassure readers of his intention to rein things back in—and, equally importantly, to tie up some of the narrative's loose ends he constantly creates. Here, he adopts the persona of a ship captain and promises to bring his weary voyagers (i.e., readers) safely to the end of Vol. 5.



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**8.** *'Tis not my brother Toby's nature, kind soul! ... to insult any one.*

Walter Shandy, Vol. 6, Chapter 22

Walter may express his feelings in a somewhat patronizing way, but he's right on the money when he describes Toby as a "kind soul." This, after all, is the man who took care of his dying fellow officer just a few chapters ago, then offered to look after his orphaned son. Earlier, Toby was gallantly protective of Trim and Susannah when they faced blame for Tristram's window sash accident (Vol. 5). Toby, however, should not be mistaken for a weakling or a pushover. As Tristram reminds the reader from time to time, Toby showed great courage during his soldiering years, as attested by Trim's high opinion of his former commanding officer.

**9.** *So much of motion, is so much of life, and so much of joy ... to stand still, or get on but slowly, is death and the devil.*

Tristram Shandy, Vol. 7, Chapter 13

The desire for continuous movement and activity, voiced here as Tristram hurries through northern France, fits perfectly with the overall tone and structure of *Tristram Shandy*. As narrator, Tristram is constantly darting off on one tangent or another, ducking and dodging from topic to topic. He rarely moves "slowly," and he seldom if ever can be said to "stand still."

**10.** *But where am I? and into what a delicious riot of things am I rushing? I—I who must be cut short in the midst of my days.*

Tristram Shandy, Vol. 7, Chapter 14

This side remark, which Tristram utters while attempting to collect his thoughts, is one of the more poignant testaments to the narrator's awareness of his own mortality. By Vol. 7 Tristram's "consumption" (i.e., his tuberculosis) has begun to get the better of him, and the rest of his writing is suffused with the realization that time is short.

**11.** *For my own part, I am resolved never to read any book but my own, as long as I live.*

Tristram Shandy, Vol. 8, Chapter 5

This moment of false modesty echoes back to Tristram's earlier promises to cut back on literary allusions. In Vol. 5, Chapter 1 he recounts a promise to "lock up my study door ... and throw the key" into a deep well. Despite his protestation here, Tristram continues to make free and frequent use of many different literary sources in Vols. 8 and 9. Among the figures referenced in later chapters are Sterne's contemporaries Alexander Pope and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Jacobean scholar Robert Burton, and the ancient Greek philosopher Plato.



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**12.** *I declare, Corporal, I had rather march up to the very edge of a trench.*

Toby Shandy, Vol. 8, Chapter 30

Uncle Toby, as both Trim and Tristram have pointed out from Vol. 2 onward, is a brave and gallant man. When it comes to courtship, however, this courage seems to desert him completely. Fully aware of the horrors of war—and having himself been severely wounded in battle—Toby nonetheless describes his visit to the Widow Wadman as if it were a march into a potentially deadly ambush.

**13.** *Nothing ... can be so sad as confinement for life—or so sweet, an' please your honor, as liberty.*

Corporal Trim, Vol. 9, Chapter 4

As Toby gets ready for his chat with Widow Wadman, Trim offers an encouraging anecdote about his brother Tom, who has also married a widow. The story, however, ends on a somber note, as Tom has become a prisoner of the Spanish Inquisition. Moreover, in lamenting Tom's captivity, Trim fails to see the potential parallel to marriage, which could also be regarded as a sort of "confinement for life." Toby, however, picks up on this unintended implication, and Tristram, the narrator, praises Trim's speech as an excellent argument for never getting married.

**14.** *All I wish is, that it may be a lesson to the world, 'to let people tell their stories their own way.'*

Tristram Shandy, Vol. 9, Chapter 25

Tristram continues to defy his critics almost to the very end of the novel. He has, indeed, repeatedly insisted on telling his story his own way, no matter what the reviewers might say. Now, he takes things a step further by anticipating potential complaints, writing out the critics' probable insults, and forgiving them in advance for mistrusting him. Readers, Tristram says, might regard him as a "numscul" and a "nincompoop" for skipping two chapters only to reprint them later, but he has own aesthetic reasons for doing so.

**15.** *L—d! ... What is all this story about?*

Elizabeth Shandy, Vol. 9, Chapter 33

Mrs. Shandy's seemingly constant confusion is sometimes exploited for a laugh and has occasionally led critics to describe *Tristram Shandy* as a sexist work. In this scene, however, her question is a perfectly reasonable one—not only with regard to Obadiah's story about the bull but with regard to the novel as a whole. Finishing *Tristram Shandy* for the first time, a reader may well feel a similar sense of bewilderment at the novel's many twists and turns.