

Q. 4. Critically examine the structure of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

Or

Do you agree with Viktor Shklovsky's view that *Tristram Shandy* is "the most typical novel of world literature"? Substantiate your answer.

Ans.

Seeming Disorder

It is commonly insisted that *Tristram Shandy* is not a novel. In the book everything is displaced and transposed. The book seems to begin in the tone of an autobiography, but then strays to a description of the hero's birth, which is protracted through the intrusion of all sorts of material. The dedication turns up after the first two chapters in violation of the conventions of content, form, and place. The location of the preface is equally unusual. It occurs not in the beginning but in

Chapter 20 of Volume III. The author's motive for this displacement of the preface is explained thus: "All my heroes are off my hands;— 'tis the first time I have had a moments to spare,—and I'll make use of it, and write my preface."

The preface is, of course, written with every possible entanglement that wit can devise. But the crowning entanglement of the book is the displacement of Chapter 18 and 19 of Volume IX so that they follow Chapter 25. Again, Sterne states his motivation: *All I wish is, that it may be a lesson to the world, "to let people tell their stories their own way."*

### **"Time-shift"**

But this displacement of chapter lays bare Sterne's other basic device, "the time-shift", which brakes whatever action may seem to be developing.

In the beginning Sterne tells the anecdote about the interruption of the sexual act (in which Tristram was begot) by Mrs. Shandy's question. The anecdote is devised as follows: Tristram's father sleeps with his wife only on the first Sunday of each month; that same evening he winds up the clock in order to get "out of the way at one time all family concernments, and be no more plagued and pestered with them for the rest of the month." As a consequence, an irresistible association of ideas becomes established in his wife's mind, and the other way around. That is the reason for her question, "Pray, my dear, have you forgotten to wind up the clock?" and the interruption of Tristram's father's activity.

The anecdote is introduced into the work as follows: first reflections about the irresponsibility of parents, then the mother's question without an explanation of its full significance. We think at first that the question interrupted what the father was saying. Sterne plays with our misconception:

*—Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question? Pray, what was your father saying?—Nothing.*

Then comes the reasoning about the homunculus embellished with reference to its legal rights. And only several pages later do we get the explanation of the strange punctiliousness of the father's daily habits.

## Manipulating the Novel's Structure

The chronology of the story is presented out of sequence—II-I-III. But we see the motivation for his “time-shift”. Sterne, however, lays bare his “time-shifts” with no pretence of motivation from the story-line. Manipulations are for their own sake.

What I have to inform you comes, I own a little out of its due course;— for it should have been told a hundred and fifty pages ago, but that I foresaw then 'twould come in pat hereafter, and be of more advantage here than elsewhere.

Laid bare too is Sterne's device of sewing together the novel from distinct short stories. In general, Sterne seems to manipulate and expose the novel's very structure: formal devices and structural relations made perceptible by violating their ordinary employment make up the very content of the novel.

### Interruptions and Intrusions

The description of Tristram Shandy's birth is the material developed in the first part, occupying many pages, almost none of which is devoted to the account of birth itself. What is developed, in the main, is the hero's conversation with Uncle Toby. Then begins the reflection on constancy, which is followed by the insertion of the history of Aunt Dinah. Then, after a long gap, begins the description of Uncle Toby's mania, his hobbyhorse. It appears that Uncle Toby, after being wounded in the groin, became absorbed in building toy fortifications. But finally, in Chapter 6 of Volume II Uncle Toby is able to complete the activity he began seven chapters earlier—taking his pipe out of his mouth, and striking the ashes out of it.

obsessions. Tristram's father is subject to the following idiosyncratic notions: the grave danger of pressure upon the infant's head during labour, the influence of a man's name on his character (a theme dealt with in great detail), and the influences of the size of a man's nose upon his abilities. The "nose" theme is developed with great flourishes, and following it, after a small interruption, comes the development of the material involving the curious tales of men with big noses. Most remarkable is the story of Slawkenbergius and Tristram's father knows ten versions of this tale. The noseology continues until the Second Chapter of Volume IV, a digression from the digression.

Developmental material intrudes again; the sentence is repeated a fourth time, now by Walter, in the next chapter: "What prodigious armies you had in Flanders"; and again, a fifth time, in Chapter 6, "What prodigious armies you had in Flanders." The repeated sentence to mark the continuity of an exaggerated set of developmental devices is only one of Sterne's methods. Here is another:

The moment my father got up into his chamber, he threw himself prostrate across his bed in the wildest disorder imaginable, but at the same time, in the most lamentable attitude of a man borne down with sorrows, that ever the eye of pity dropped a tear for it.

Mr. Shandy's despair is caused by the fact that his son was delivered with a nose crushed by the man midwife's instrument. Half a volume further, we are brought back to the prostrate father lying "stretched across the bed as if the hand of death had pushed him down".

## ***Le Fever and the Abbess of Andoüillet***

Sterne introduces Le Fever's story according to the conventional manner. The choice of a teacher is discussed at Tristram's birth. Uncle Toby suggests Le Fever's son, and so begins the inserted narrative *told by the author*. Le Fever's story, a separate unit, then takes over the narrative.

The description of Tristram's journey—later developed, motif by motif, step by step in the *Sentimental Journey*—constitutes a unit in itself, but it too is interrupted by the inserted story of the Abbess of Andoüillet.

### **Motifs in the Novel**

Now, all this heterogenous material, laden with lengthy quotations from works of various pedants, would have shredded the novel to bits had it not been held together by the motifs that run through it. No single motif is fully developed and made real; the motifs merely reappear from time to time, and their realisation is postponed into an ever-receding future. But their presence throughout the full length of the novel holds its episodes together.

There are several such motifs. One of them is the motif of the knots. Dr. Slop's bag of obstetrical instruments is tied with several knots.

... 'Tis God's mercy, quote he, (to himself) that Mrs. Shandy has had so bad a time of it. —else she might have been brought to bed seven times told, before one half of these knots could have got untied.

The following chapter begins with a discussion about knot loops, bows, and so forth without end. Dr. Slop gets his knife and cuts the knot; but through carelessness he cuts his hand. He begins to curse. The elder Shandy, with a "Cervantes-like earnestness", suggests that he curse not haphazardly but according to all rules of fine art, offering as a model the formula for excommunication used by the Catholic Church. Slop accepts the suggestion and reads the formula. The reading takes up two pages. The material concerning the christening before the infant's

birth and the droll legal quarrel whether or not a mother is related to her son are totally adventitious to the father's character as father.

In Chapter 8 of volume V the motif of the chapter concerning knots (more specifically, "buttonholes" and chambermaids appears. But instead of developing their connection, another chapter is offered concerning chambermaids, green-gowns, and old hats. The question of the knots is not forgotten, however. It reappears again at the very end of the book (IX, 14) in the form of a promise to write a special chapter about knots.

The references to Jenny are another recurrent but passing motif. After introducing Jenny, "as she stood cheapening a silk of five-and-twenty shillings a yard," Tristram plays with the reader's curiosity about Jenny's relationship to him: "my dear, dear Jenny" is not his "kept mistress". The Jenny motif appears again at the end of Volume IV, where he promises to tell the reader of his exact relationship to Jenny, but he keeps it under wraps till the end of the novel.

Sterne is beyond compassion. For example, when Walter Shandy's older son Bobby dies at the moment that the father is considering whether to use a lucky windfall to send his son abroad or to make improvements on the estate. While Mrs. Shandy is listening at the door, Sterne creates a parallel action in the kitchen. For Sterne, Bobby Shandy's death serves primarily as motive for the development. The novel is then constantly interrupted and the narrative emerges only in the form of hints. By the end of Volume VII this is exhausted and we return to Toby's amour.

## **Delaying Tactics**

And so, in the development of Toby's romance with the Widow Wadman the wound in the groin is introduced as a delaying device because of the impossibility of a woman's inquiring about it. After a solemn promise to relate the history of Uncle Toby's love adventures without digression, Sterne retards the action by means of digressions within the digressions tied together by the repetition of one and the same sentence, "It is with love as with Cuckoldom."

Then comes the metaphorical reference to love as a warm cap, love as a pie. The history of Widow Wadman's attacks upon Uncle Toby follows. But the description of these attacks is again interrupted by Trim's long narration of the "tedious tale" about "The King of



**Bohemia and His Seven Castles**". This narrative is of the same type as the one told by Sancho Panza to his master in the night of the adventures with the fulling mill, when he had tied Rosinante's legs. The story is constantly interrupted by Uncle Toby's technical military remarks and comments on style. Like any "shaggy dog" tale it consciously employs the device of delay and must be interrupted by the listener. In this instance it functions to retard the movement of the basic love story. At last, Trim drops the tale of the King of Bohemia and turns to the history of his own love; finally, Widow Wadman returns again to the scene. It is here that the motif of the wound reappears.

Again other diverging strains reappear; the motif of the knots returns. Finally, the motif of the wound. We are plunged, as is usual in Sterne, into the midst of things. But something interesting happens. Uncle Toby thinks that the widow is interested in the geographical location where he was wounded and not in the wound's place on his body. And the reader himself is not sure which is involved. Here the aim of the plot shift is realised—delay.

Trim brings the disappointed widow a map of Namur, where Toby was wounded. Again there occurs a play on the topic of Uncle Toby's wound. Tristram does it in his own person, circling the topic, reflectively. Then comes the famous time-shift. After the 25th Chapter of Volume IX come the 18th and 19th. The interrupted action moves only with Chapter 26. The matter is finally resolved when Trim speaks about the captain's wound to Bridget, the widow's maid and ends by giving her a kiss.

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**Q 5. Write a character sketch of Parson Yorick.**

**Ans.** Parson Yorick, one of the major characters in *Tristram Shandy*, has been seen as the portrait of Sterne himself: the malice directed against York is reminiscent of the personal and political difficulties that Sterne had with some of the important people in the church politics of York. Sterne relates Yorick to the jester Yorick in *Hamlet* and to Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. According to Tristram, Yorick is descended from that same Yorick who supposedly was a part of Hamlet's Court in Denmark. The jester in Yorick is in fact very much

like Laurence Sterne, but that biographical information plays no significant part in the construction of the book and we are free to ignore it.

### **Sponsors the Town Midwife**

Simple-hearted and innocent of the ways of the world, Parson Yorick rides about on a "lean, sorry, jack-ass of a horse even though he owns a very handsome silver-studded saddle. On his horse he is the scandal of the parish and the target of jests and malice. Years before, however, he had owned fine horses, fit for the handsome saddle, but since the nearest midwife lived seven miles away, people in distress borrowed his horse constantly. The result was inevitably a broken-down horse, one after the other.

At the suggestion of his wife, Parson Yorick sponsors the training of the midwife, a widow, as a service to the town. He actually stands to benefit from this benevolent gesture, and in order to secure himself against charges of ulterior motives, he has vowed always to ride the decrepit old horse on which we now see him. But malice is always present, and his parishioners maintain that selfishness and pride are his reasons. The malice persists to his death ("about ten years ago").

When, while Tristram is being born, the maid Susannah, a "leaky vessel," is the instrument of misnaming him "Tristram" instead of "Trismegitus" (as desired by Walter), the curate christens the baby as "Tristram." Parson Yorick is sent for, in order to inquire whether a rechristening is possible. At a gathering of local scholars, the issue of un-naming is put off by a comic incident in which a roasted chestnut falls into Phutatorius's lap and burns him. He blames Yorick for the incident, demonstrating the parson's tendency to make enemies unwittingly. When Yorick picks it up—he considers "a good chestnut worth stooping for" and that one "not a jot worse for the adventure"—Phutatorius is convinced that Yorick had somehow managed to drop the chestnut into his breeches. Thus, Yorick has another enemy. After treating the burn by wrapping it in a page just off the printing press, the learned men resume the question of renaming the child. Trismegitus is proposed, but the discussion comes to nothing.

**Q. 6. Why is Walter Shandy prejudiced against small noses? What does Slawkenbergius's Tale insinuate?**

**Ans.** Walter Shandy is grief-stricken when he learns that the man midwife Slop's forceps have flattened the infant Tristram's nose while helping in his birth. Tristram describes at great length his father's elaborate and melodramatic posture of grief as he sprawls across the bed. Walter's distress is compounded, we learn, by a history of small noses in the family—a phenomenon that has had significant financial consequences.

**Family History**

Tristram's great-grandfather was forced to settle upon his great-grandmother a jointure ("widow's portion") of 300 pounds a year, even though his entire dowry was a mere 2,000 pounds. The reason she insisted was that he had "little or nose", the size of the nose apparently being directly proportional to the size of a man's penis. (By "nose," Tristram seeks to clarify here that he means *Nose*, "nothing more, or less". If there are two senses, they are like two roads, one dirty and the other one clean. "Which shall we take?" is the question Tristram asks the reader to decide.)

His great-grandfather signed the agreement. The great-grandmother not only outlived her husband, but her son, by twelve years; and her grandson. Walter Shandy had to pay her the 300 pounds a year during all that time. All because of short noses. It is easy to understand Walter's prejudice against small noses, says Tristram. "He would often declare ... that he did not conceive how the greatest family in England could stand it out against an uninterrupted succession of six or seven short noses. (Again Tristram tells the reader not to let his fancy carry him away: "I mean the external organ of smelling, or that part of man which stands prominent in his face.")

Walter becomes obsessed with noses, and his opinions on the subject are very important to him. He collects every book and treatise on the subject, just as Uncle Toby did on fortifications. He is fortunate to get a copy of Bruscombille's prologue on long noses. Then he gets hold of other learned works on the subject—above all, that of the "great and learned Hafen Slawkenbergius". He believes that all civilisation could be reconstructed from Slawkenbergius's "rich treasury of inexhaustible knowledge, and although Tristram doesn't consider it with the same reverence as his father, he admits that he likes the "tales", and he promises to tell the reader "the ninth tale of his tenth decad".

### Slawkenbergius's Tale

Tristram tells the tale from Slawkenbergius's "great book". On facing pages he presents the "Original Latin" (for several pages): a stranger with a very large nose passes through the town of Strasburg and sets the townspeople on their ears. The people are aflame with curiosity about him and about his nose; all of his gestures are carefully noticed and commented upon. He mutters to his mule and refers to an unfortunate affair with "Julia". Among others, many nuns are troubled and stirred up by the sight of his nose. The tale, after furnishing a discussion of Luther and his theology, ends with the encounter between the long-nosed stranger (Diego) and the brother of Julia, who has been pining away with love for Diego.

The tenth tale of Slawkenbergius, the one following the tale that Tristram has just translated, is a masterpiece. Tristram tells the reader. He merely hints at its contents, leaving the reader (the lady reader) eternally in doubt as to whether the stranger's nose was a true one or a false one.

The sexually suggestive story from Slawkenbergius reopens the question of whether a sexual innuendo is implied in Tristram's damaged nose. Tristram plays with his audience here: he wants the reader to feel the ridiculousness of the conventional assumption that everything in a story must have a hidden meaning. To create this effect, Tristram must simultaneously encourage and disappoint that expectation. Tristram cultivates this ambiguity in a variety of ways, including the sexual overtones in the description of Uncle Toby's wound to the groin and the incident in which the hot chestnut lands in Phutatorius's open fly.

**Q. Comment upon and discuss Sterne's obsession with "hobby-horses" in *Tristram Shandy*.**

**Ans.** *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "hobby-horse" as a child's toy consisting of a stick with a model of a horse's head at one—"a person's favourite topic of conversation". The idea of the hobby-horse, introduced casually at the beginning of *Tristram Shandy*, gradually becomes a major thematic concern of the book. There is nothing inherently sinister about these hobby-horses; most people have them, and Tristram confesses readily to having a few of his own (we are clearly to assume that this writing is one). But the novel dramatises the way they can lead into a state of total self-absorption when they become such a constant pre-occupation that everything in the world gets subordinated to a single, all-consuming idea. In exploring this possibility, Sterne seems to see it simply as an extreme instance of what is already our innate psychological nature: drawing on Locke's chapter on association in the *Essay on Human Understanding*, he dramatises the way ideas that seem to be unrelated become connected in our minds. *Tristram Shandy* explores the implications of these associations for scientific knowledge, for our everyday understanding of cause and effect, and for our social interactions.

First, we begin to see that Tristram is treating his writing as a hobby: he does it just the way he wants to, and it gives him a lot of enjoyment. The digressiveness of the narrative, in the way it follows chains of association rather than sticking to a rigid, formal structure, is a manifestation of this principle. The open form of Tristram's writing, then, is an effort to take in the world in all its variety and flux. It remains for the reader to decide whether Tristram's approach offers any more objective window on reality, or whether Tristram's own set of hobby-horses gives rise to distortion.

Second, everyone of importance in the book has a hobby. Obsessively formal thinking can be a kind of hobby-horse. Walter is the prime example of this deluding approach to the world: "like all systematic reasoners, he would move both heaven and earth, and twist and torture everything in nature to support his hypothesis."

Walter Shandy's hobby consists of theories and hypotheses. He holds forth by the hour, orating on one subject after another, throughout the book with regard to his insistence on certain ideas (such as his theories about the politics in France), Tristram tells us about his father's theory of good and bad names and his skill in argument. One of his theories is that the child's name influences his fortunes: Trimegistus and Archimedes are powerful names, Simkin and Nick are deadly names ("Nick," he said, was the DEVIL"), Jack, Dick, and Tom are neutral and worthless. But of all the names in the universe, he has "the most unconquerable aversion for Tristram". "Who" asks Walter, "ever heard tell of a man, called Tristram, performing any thing great or worth recording?" "Tristram... was unison to Nincompoop". Tristram calls the readers attention to the title page of the book, and he asks the reader to sympathise with his father. Walter hates the name Tristram above all other names, and yet his son comes to be named Tristram. Two more of Walter's theories never get told: On the Right and Wrong Ends of a Woman, and On Economics.

The scenes in which Walter reaches for his handkerchief with the wrong hand may seem to be merely humorous trivia; they are that, but they serve another important purpose as well. All he had to do is to put his wig back on his head, take it off with his left hand, and take his handkerchief from his right pocket with his right hand. But not Walter Shandy. This is the physical counterpart of intellectual gymnastics: everything is twisted around as needed to fit in with his hypotheses, and once he sets out with his left hand, he intends to succeed. Somehow he manages to, but the process is unnatural, as Tristram suggests. Walter's movements are described so that we can imagine every second of the contortions and feel the ridiculousness of the situation.

The Lockean concept of Duration, which Walter pompously and elaborately paraphrases, is that "men derive their ideas of duration from their reflection on the train of ideas they observe to succeed one another in their own understandings". He grieves over Tristram's flattened nose and becomes obsessed with noses. He read every available book and treatises on short noses, which leads to Slawkenbergius's Tale. The discussion of Tristram's renaming comes to nothing, and even though Walter is " hugely tickled with the subtleties

of these learned discourses," he is as unhappy as before about Tristram's name. His project for providing proper education to the child in order to compensate for all his misfortunes, *Tristra-pedia*, remains incomplete.

The dual nature of Walter Shandy's hobby-horse is portrayed here: his theories and his oratory with which he tries to convince the people of his theories. The most important thing in the world to Walter is a hypothesis; everything takes second place to it. He is a man with a ruling passion, dominated by one of his humours, and is the source of some of the subtle but rollicking comedy of *Tristram Shandy*. Walter has his theories, but no one can understand them but him. He never convinces anyone of anything, but he never stops trying. He will go to any lengths to persuade: he is as eloquent as the great orators of antiquity, and he instinctively knows all the tricks of elocution and delivery. But nobody is ever persuaded.



## Uncle Toby's Obsession

Tristram tells us that Toby's character can best be illustrated by his uncle's strange hobby-horse. He relates how Toby, a man of overweening modesty who cannot even hurt a fly, after being wounded in the groin at the siege of Namur, Toby was confined to bed for four years; since there was so much brotherly love between them, Walter took him to his house in London where sympathetic visitors frequently called upon him to hear the story of his injury, a fact that caused Toby some consternation. Toby's trouble was that the military manoeuvres in question were so intricate and technical that nobody could understand him; indeed he sometimes even confused himself as well. It then occurred to him to get a large map of the environs of Namur, which relieved him of his difficulty and also set him off on his hobby-horse.

Uncle Toby's obsession with the map grows, and he launches into a detailed study of fortification and military science that becomes his ruling passion. He soon grows restless after his recovery. His servant, Corporal Trim, plants the suggestion in his mind that they should move to the country in order to construct a replica, built to scale, of the battle and fortifications. This idea pleases Toby so intensely that he can hardly wait to begin. As Tristram reveals more about his uncle's hobby-horse, the reader sees the ridiculous behaviour into which his obsession with fortifications carries him. With the allusion to Toby's modesty and to