

The Life and Opinions Tristram Shandy The Gentleman

ABOUT THE TITLE :The full title of the novel is *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Tristram Shandy is the protagonist and narrator of this supposedly autobiographical novel. The title promises to deliver both his life story and his opinions on various subjects, but the latter almost always upstage the former.

Context:

Predecessors: Rabelais and Cervantes

Tristram Shandy makes reference to an encyclopedic array of earlier literary works, from ancient Greek and Roman philosophical tracts to the writings of Sterne's contemporaries. Two authors, however, had an especially pervasive influence on Shandy's storytelling style: 16th-century French satirist François Rabelais and Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes. Rabelais is best known for his *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532–64), a series of five novels whose protagonists are a family of giants. The works are notable for their bizarre humor, which is sometimes crude, sometimes highly learned, and—like Shandy's most sophisticated jokes—often a bit of both. The narrator of Rabelais's novels also anticipates Shandy in his fondness for digressions and anecdotes, though Shandy takes this tendency even further than Rabelais. Altogether, there is a decided family resemblance between the French novels and their English descendant, especially in the third *Gargantua* book (entitled simply *Le Tiers Livre* or *The Third Book*), where Rabelais manufactures opportunities for satire and

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philosophizing by sending his protagonists on a quest for wisdom.

In a concession to the tastes of his era, Shandy pretends to be prudishly unwilling to discuss such allegedly vulgar topics as sex and the various bodily functions. The narrator of the *Gargantua* novels, in contrast, has no compunction about doing so. This gave Rabelais's works a reputation for naughtiness among early modern readers, including those who encountered them in English translation. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the characters of Sterne's novel, mostly educated 18th-century Englishmen, are familiar with Rabelais's writings, or at least know of them. Walter Shandy (Tristram's father), for example, is well aware of the ribald nature of these novels and regards them as a frivolous, even dangerous, distraction. When Uncle Toby begins courting the Widow Wadman in Volume 8, Walter—a constant and eager giver of advice—counsels him to "suffer her not to look into Rabelais."

Cervantes is best-known worldwide as the author of the episodic novel *Don Quixote* (1605 and 1615), whose titular character is an aging Spanish knight with delusions of grandeur. Having read about the bygone days of chivalry and romance, *Don Quixote* sets out to relive them among his more modest, more modern surroundings. Whether Cervantes invented the novel or merely popularized it is a matter of critical opinion, but in either case, *Don Quixote* was an extremely influential work whose structure was widely imitated by 17th- and 18th-century authors. Works in the Spanish picaresque tradition, which related the adventures of fictional rogues, or pícaros, provided Sterne with further precedents for the narrative structure of his first novel. Like *Tristram Shandy*, picaresque works—including the many

French and English adaptations of the style—tend to comprise a series of vivid but largely independent episodes, told in the first person, and only loosely connected to a central plot.

In modern English to describe someone as quixotic is to call them idealistic and impractical, or to suggest they are preoccupied with a foolish, romantic quest. Both labels surely apply to Tristram Shandy in his vain attempt to write his entire life story. Tristram, however, takes full ownership of this identity and imagines himself as a spiritual descendant of Don Quixote. Toby Shandy, the narrator's eccentric uncle, is quixotic in a more immediate sense: like Cervantes's old knight, he has addled his brains somewhat by reading too much on a single subject. Immersed in his library of military works, Toby develops a kind of tunnel vision, seeing his quiet countryside

life in terms of sieges and skirmishes.

Sterne, Shandy, and Enlightenment England

Sterne's novel is also, in part, a comical counterpunch to some of the prevailing habits of thought in Enlightenment Europe (1685–1815). During the Enlightenment reason was valued as a means to understanding God, nature, and humanity. Sterne mocks this tendency to account for life via overarching systems and theories, as Walter Shandy repeatedly tries to do. "[Walter's] way," notes Tristram, is to "force every event in nature into an hypothesis," a habit that leads him away from the truth rather than closer to it. Other inveterate systembuilders include the theologians in Vol. 4, Chapter 26 and many of the learned authors in Walter Shandy's library. Throughout the novel Tristram jokingly adopts the language of scientific inquiry and then laughs at the way it is over-applied to trivial subjects. People who pretend to think scientifically, he says, often suffer from unconscious prejudices, which today would be called confirmation bias: "It is the nature of an hypothesis, when once a man has conceived it, that it assimilates every thing to itself, as proper nourishment; and, from the first moment of your begetting it, it generally grows the stronger by every thing you see, hear, read, or understand. This is of great use." Tristram is not, however, anti-intellectual.

As narrator, Tristram does not critique major Enlightenment authors directly; rather, his interest is in the way their ideas have been popularized, oversimplified, and misapplied. Often, he finds, people claim to be conversant with these thinkers without having read them at all. This is the case with English philosopher John Locke, whose *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) was arguably the foundational work of Enlightenment philosophy in Britain. In this treatise Locke sought to define the limits of human knowledge, challenging the notion that such knowledge could ever be perfect or boundless. Shandy, accordingly, praises Locke as one who is careful not to jump to conclusions in his attempts to arrive at the truth. This trait, for Shandy, makes Locke the virtual opposite of the typical literary critic, whose judgments are overconfident and incurably biased. Sterne would, no doubt, be amused to discover that in the 21st century his work has become a classic in just the same way as Locke's *Essay* was in the 18th century. "Most people of taste and a vague pretension to learning," wrote Telegraph columnist Martin Rowson in 2006, "will, of course, have heard of [Tristram Shandy]; will have every intention one day of reading it, ... but will admit, under gentle pressure, to be waiting for the ... TV adaptation."

The structure of *Tristram Shandy* likewise sets it apart from the other English novels of its time—so far apart, in fact, that Sterne's book is sometimes described as an anti-novel. For one thing Tristram Shandy rejects the tightly controlled plotting that other early novelists seem to have upheld as an ideal, and

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Critical Reception:

The first few volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, though published anonymously, made Sterne an almost overnight celebrity, praised for his wit by some and ridiculed or even condemned by others. Sterne's detractors, as Guardian literary correspondent Robert McCrum (2013) notes, described his work as "obscene, preposterous and infuriating, the opposite of what a novel should be." Pamphleteers of the day, themselves often writing anonymously, mocked almost every distinguishing feature of the work, from the narrator's fondness for pseudonyms to the extensive use of asterisks and dashes. Sterne acknowledges this harsh reaction in a series of rebuttals from Vol. 3 onward, assuring the English literary world of his intention to keep tabs on his critics—and to go on ignoring them.

Despite its many detractors the work was widely popular from the first volumes onward, prompting widespread speculation as to the author's identity. When Sterne finally traveled to London in March 1760, he was welcomed and heralded a literary phenomenon. Moreover, like many popular works then and since, *Tristram Shandy* soon became the subject of a thriving fanfiction industry: unofficial sequels and other *Shandy*-themed literature crowded London bookshops from 1760 onward. First to appear was *Explanatory Remarks upon the Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* offered in April 1760 under the pseudonym "Jeremiah Kunastrokius," a name itself borrowed from an extremely minor figure in Sterne's book. Other authors, bolder or perhaps just less scrupulous, came forward with works purportedly written or approved by Sterne, including unauthorized *Shandy* tributes and sequels. In 1766, with eight authentic volumes of *Tristram Shandy* already published, a book purporting to be "Vol. IX" began to circulate in London. When Sterne's own Vol. 9 was published in 1767, the spurious Vol. IX was re-titled "Vol. X" and continued to sell.

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the works of American novelist Thomas Pynchon, British novelist Salman Rushdie, American writer David Foster Wallace, and others. *Tristram Shandy*, it seems, was not so much "odd" as ahead of

Early Life

Laurence Sterne was born in Clonmel, County Tipperary, Ireland, on November 24, 1713, to Roger Sterne, an English army officer, and Agnes Nuttall. Because of his father's career, Sterne grew up on the march: the family, never prosperous, moved frequently as Roger was deployed to various parts of Ireland. At age 10 Sterne went to live with his uncle, Richard Sterne, who arranged for his education at a nearby grammar school in Hipperholme, Yorkshire. Sterne's surviving notebooks suggest a precocious boy with an ear for humorous language, a fondness for drawing, and a tendency to daydream. Roger Sterne, meanwhile, was deployed to Jamaica, which was then a British colony. In 1731 he fell ill and died there, leaving Laurence reliant on the care and financial support of his paternal relatives.

Education and Career

After his years at Hipperholme, Sterne matriculated at Jesus College, Cambridge. There, he was enrolled as a sizar, or scholarship student; family members defrayed his other educational expenses. He graduated in 1737 and took holy orders a year later. Soon after his ordination Sterne became the vicar of the small parish of Sutton-on-the-Forest through the influence of his uncle, Jacques Sterne, a prominent Anglican cleric. In his early postgraduate years Sterne seemed poised to climb through the ranks of the church: he became a canon of York Minster (i.e., a member of the cathedral's governing body) and later succeeded to the vicarage of Stillington in northern Yorkshire. He married Elizabeth Lumley in 1741, but the relationship seems to have been vexed and antagonistic almost from the wedding day. Sources vary as to the cause of the strife, but Sterne's extramarital affairs—one of which is commemorated in his late *Bramine's Journal* or *Journal to Eliza* (not published until 1904)—almost certainly contributed to the tension.

Literary Fame and Decline

Sterne's talent as a writer was evident in his early sermons, but his efforts to branch out into other types of literature were hampered by controversy. In the early 1740s Sterne's political views alienated his uncle Jacques, who until that point had

been a powerful benefactor. *Political Romance* (1759) was a satirical jab at various high-ranking Anglican clergymen, a move that cost him any further opportunity to advance in the church hierarchy. Later that year he set aside the majority of his vicarial duties in order to begin the lengthy satirical novel later known as *Tristram Shandy*. The work brought him immediate, though not always favorable, critical recognition, leading to the publication of new installments at a rate of roughly one volume per year. A prequel of sorts, entitled *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), capitalized on the popularity of *Tristram Shandy* and of Parson Yorick, one of the novel's best-loved characters.

Sterne's tuberculosis, of which he had experienced intermittent symptoms since his college years, became more severe during the *Shandy* years, with a near-fatal episode in 1762. Extended trips to France—fictionalized in Vol. 7 of *Tristram Shandy*—brought temporary relief, but on the whole his health continued to decline. Sterne died on March 18, 1768, shortly after publishing *A Sentimental Journey*, and he was eulogized by the actor David Garrick, a personal friend who is frequently and fondly mentioned in the pages of *Tristram Shandy*. In his epitaph for Sterne, Garrick describes the late novelist

as a man of great "genius, wit, and humor," an opinion now widely shared by literary critics. Most of Sterne's remaining writings, including three volumes of sermons and a selection of his correspondence, were published by his daughter Lydia in the mid 1770s. Tristram Shandy, however, remains his most noteworthy contribution to English literature.

h Characters

Tristram Shandy

Tristram Shandy, whose autobiography the novel purports to be, is the hapless son of an English country squire. From his conception onward Tristram is the victim of a series of minor accidents, which he does his best to recount with good humor and mild self-mockery. Tristram's conception, birth, and baptism are the ostensible subjects of Vol. 1–4, though the novel ends up being pretty light on autobiographical details. Later in life Tristram contracts tuberculosis, which was at the time a generally fatal illness. He spends Vol. 7 on a trip through France in an attempt to cheat death—and, more practically, recover his health via a change of climate.

Walter Shandy

Walter Shandy is the patriarch of the Shandy family and the father of the protagonist. Having worked as a merchant in Turkey, he retires to his countryside estate, Shandy Hall. There, he spends much of his time attempting to raise his two sons according to his own detailed theories of childhood education. He is foiled at every turn: Bobby, the elder son, dies suddenly, and his younger son, Tristram, proves to be accident-prone and physically frail. Walter has peculiar opinions on a wide variety of subjects, reinforced by his extensive reading of philosophical and scientific writings. His typical approach to a problem is to go to his library and dredge up all the information he can find on the subject, even if decisive action is called for. Tristram tends to regard his father as a harmless, well-meaning eccentric.

Toby Shandy

Captain Toby Shandy, alias Uncle Toby, is a retired army captain who fought in the Nine Years' War. He was discharged from service after receiving serious injuries at the Siege of Namur. Once he has recovered sufficiently to walk about, Toby moves to Shandy Hall, where he spends most of his time researching and building model fortifications. A pair of extended flashbacks further develops Toby's character. In Vol. 6 he is shown tending to a dying soldier and later caring for his orphaned son. Vols. 8 and 9 focus on Toby's ill-fated love affair with the Widow Wadman, an episode that reveals his total inexperience in romantic matters.

Yorick

Parson Yorick is something of an anomaly: a village priest who loves jokes and pranks, shunning the excessive seriousness of his fellow clerics. He is humble and genuinely concerned for his flock, though he suffers from the same pedantic tendencies as most of the men in the novel. Like Tristram, Yorick has many traits which seem borrowed directly from Sterne's own life, such as a keen and sometimes controversial sense of humor. His sermon on conscience at the end of Vol. 2 is, in fact, one that Sterne composed for his own congregation.

Corporal Trim

Corporal Trim (his real name, James Butler, is seldom used) once fought overseas under Uncle Toby's command. Like Toby, he has had his military career cut short by an injury, but he remains a soldier and a patriot at heart. After his retirement from the army, he serves Toby as a valet and relocates with him to Shandy Hall. Most of the servants at Shandy Hall are minor characters who function simply to advance the plot and provide a laugh here and there. Trim is the exception: appearing in almost every volume of the novel, he emerges as a well-rounded character who is notable for his loyalty, thoughtfulness, and unpretentious ways.

Elizabeth Shandy

Mrs. Shandy appears much less frequently in the novel than her husband and his brother. She is portrayed in an affectionate but rather unflattering light and is often the butt of jokes. Her relationship with Walter is a quarrelsome one: although she is sometimes willing to placate her husband's odd whims, she stands up for herself at other times, as when she insists on choosing the midwife who will deliver Tristram.

Dr. Slop

Of the major recurring characters in *Tristram Shandy*, Dr. Slop is the closest to an unflattering caricature. Walter pays him to be on call during Tristram's birth and to take over when the other midwife fails to complete the job. In the process of delivering Tristram, he accidentally smashes the boy's nose flat with a pair of medical forceps. As a doctor, Slop is incompetent if not outright harmful. Physically, he is described as a "little, squat, uncourtly" fellow; the name Slop gives him a further air of piggishness. Fond of coarse jokes, the doctor fits uneasily into the Shandy family circle..

Character Map

Tristram Shandy English gentleman; amused by his own bad luck

Hires

Elizabeth Shandy Practical, longsuffering mistress of Shandy Hall

Walter Shandy Retired merchant; country squire

Toby Shandy Former army captain; loves building forts

Yorick Well-meaning but incurably witty parson

Dr. Slop Bumbling physician; "man-midwife"
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In Context

Predecessors: Rabelais and Cervantes

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Author Biography

Early Life

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Tristram Shandy, whose autobiography the novel purports to be, is the hapless son of an English country squire. From his conception onward Tristram is the victim of a series of minor accidents, which he does his best to recount with good humor and mild self-mockery. Tristram's conception, birth, and baptism are the ostensible subjects of Vol. 1–4, though the novel ends up being pretty light on autobiographical details. Later in life Tristram contracts tuberculosis, which was at the time a generally fatal illness. He spends Vol. 7 on a trip through France in an attempt to cheat death—and, more practically, recover his health via a change of climate.

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Walter Shandy is the patriarch of the Shandy family and the father of the protagonist. Having worked as a merchant in Turkey, he retires to his countryside estate, Shandy Hall. There, he spends much of his time attempting to raise his two sons according to his own detailed theories of childhood education. He is foiled at every turn: Bobby, the elder son, dies suddenly, and his younger son, Tristram, proves to be accident-prone and physically frail. Walter has peculiar opinions on a wide variety of subjects, reinforced by his extensive reading of philosophical and scientific writings. His typical approach to a problem is to go to his library and dredge up all the information he can find on the subject, even if decisive action is called for. Tristram tends to regard his father as a harmless, well-meaning eccentric.

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Parson Yorick is something of an anomaly: a village priest who loves jokes and pranks, shunning the excessive seriousness of his fellow clerics. He is humble and genuinely concerned for his flock, though he suffers from the same pedantic tendencies as most of the men in the novel. Like Tristram, Yorick has many traits which seem borrowed directly from Sterne's own life, such as a keen and sometimes controversial sense of humor. His sermon on conscience at the end of Vol. 2 is, in fact, one that Sterne composed for his own congregation.

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Mrs. Shandy appears much less frequently in the novel than her husband and his brother. She is portrayed in an affectionate but rather unflattering light and is often the butt of jokes. Her relationship with Walter is a quarrelsome one: although she is sometimes willing to placate her husband's odd whims, she stands up for herself at other times, as when she insists on choosing the midwife who will deliver Tristram.

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Character Map

Tristram Shandy English gentleman; amused by his own bad luck

Hires

Elizabeth Shandy Practical, longsuffering mistress of Shandy Hall

Walter Shandy Retired merchant; country squire

Toby Shandy Former army captain; loves building forts

Yorick Well-meaning but incurably witty parson

Dr. Slop Bumbling physician; "man-midwife"
ABOUT THE TITLE The full title of the novel is *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Tristram Shandy is the protagonist and narrator of this supposedly autobiographical novel. The title promises to deliver both his life story and his opinions on various subjects, but the latter almost always upstage the former.

d In Context

Predecessors: Rabelais and Cervantes

Tristram Shandy makes reference to an encyclopedic array of earlier literary works, from ancient Greek and Roman philosophical tracts to the writings of Sterne's contemporaries. Two authors, however, had an especially pervasive influence on Shandy's storytelling style: 16th-century French satirist François Rabelais and Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes. Rabelais is best known for his *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532–64), a series of five novels whose protagonists are a family of giants. The works are notable for their bizarre humor, which is sometimes crude, sometimes highly learned, and—like Shandy's most sophisticated jokes—often a bit of both. The narrator of Rabelais's novels also anticipates Shandy in his fondness for digressions and anecdotes, though Shandy takes this tendency even further than Rabelais. Altogether, there is a decided family resemblance between the French novels and their English descendant, especially in the third *Gargantua* book (entitled simply *Le Tiers Livre* or *The Third Book*), where Rabelais manufactures opportunities for satire and

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philosophizing by sending his protagonists on a quest for wisdom.

In a concession to the tastes of his era, Shandy pretends to be prudishly unwilling to discuss such allegedly vulgar topics as sex and the various bodily functions. The narrator of the *Gargantua* novels, in contrast, has no compunction about doing so. This gave Rabelais's works a reputation for naughtiness

among early modern readers, including those who encountered them in English translation. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the characters of Sterne's novel, mostly educated 18th-century Englishmen, are familiar with Rabelais's writings, or at least know of them. Walter Shandy (Tristram's father), for example, is well aware of the ribald nature of these novels and regards them as a frivolous, even dangerous, distraction. When Uncle Toby begins courting the Widow Wadman in Volume 8, Walter—a constant and eager giver of advice—counsels him to "suffer her not to look into Rabelais."

Cervantes is best-known worldwide as the author of the episodic novel *Don Quixote* (1605 and 1615), whose titular character is an aging Spanish knight with delusions of grandeur. Having read about the bygone days of chivalry and romance, Don Quixote sets out to relive them among his more modest, more modern surroundings. Whether Cervantes invented the novel or merely popularized it is a matter of critical opinion, but in either case, *Don Quixote* was an extremely influential work whose structure was widely imitated by 17th- and 18th-century authors. Works in the Spanish picaresque tradition, which related the adventures of fictional rogues, or pícaros, provided Sterne with further precedents for the narrative structure of his first novel. Like *Tristram Shandy*, picaresque works—including the many French and English adaptations of the style—tend to comprise a series of vivid but largely independent episodes, told in the first person, and only loosely connected to a central plot.

In modern English to describe someone as quixotic is to call them idealistic and impractical, or to suggest they are preoccupied with a foolish, romantic quest. Both labels surely apply to Tristram Shandy in his vain attempt to write his entire life story. Tristram, however, takes full ownership of this identity and imagines himself as a spiritual descendant of Don Quixote. Toby Shandy, the narrator's eccentric uncle, is quixotic in a more immediate sense: like Cervantes's old knight, he has addled his brains somewhat by reading too much on a single subject. Immersed in his library of military works, Toby develops a kind of tunnel vision, seeing his quiet countryside

life in terms of sieges and skirmishes.

Sterne, Shandy, and Enlightenment England

Sterne's novel is also, in part, a comical counterpunch to some of the prevailing habits of thought in Enlightenment Europe (1685–1815). During the Enlightenment reason was valued as a means to understanding God, nature, and humanity. Sterne mocks this tendency to account for life via overarching systems and theories, as Walter Shandy repeatedly tries to do. "[Walter's] way," notes Tristram, is to "force every event in nature into an hypothesis," a habit that leads him away from the truth rather than closer to it. Other inveterate systembuilders include the theologians in Vol. 4, Chapter 26 and many of the learned authors in Walter Shandy's library. Throughout the novel Tristram jokingly adopts the language of scientific inquiry and then laughs at the way it is over-applied to trivial subjects. People who pretend to think scientifically, he says, often suffer from unconscious prejudices, which today would be called confirmation bias: "It is the nature of an hypothesis, when once a man has conceived it, that it assimilates every thing to itself, as proper nourishment; and, from the first moment of your begetting it, it generally grows the stronger by every thing you see, hear, read, or understand. This is of great use." Tristram is not, however, anti-intellectual.

As narrator, Tristram does not critique major Enlightenment authors directly; rather, his interest is in the way their ideas have been popularized, oversimplified, and misapplied. Often, he finds, people claim to be conversant with these thinkers without having read them at all. This is the case with English

philosopher John Locke, whose *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) was arguably the foundational work of Enlightenment philosophy in Britain. In this treatise Locke sought to define the limits of human knowledge, challenging the notion that such knowledge could ever be perfect or boundless. Shandy, accordingly, praises Locke as one who is careful not to jump to conclusions in his attempts to arrive at the truth. This trait, for Shandy, makes Locke the virtual opposite of the typical literary critic, whose judgments are overconfident and incurably biased. Sterne would, no doubt, be amused to discover that in the 21st century his work has become a classic in just the same way as Locke's *Essay* was in the 18th century: many more people talk about it than have

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actually read it. "Most people of taste and a vague pretension to learning," wrote Telegraph columnist Martin Rowson in 2006, "will, of course, have heard of [Tristram Shandy]; will have every intention one day of reading it, ... but will admit, under gentle pressure, to be waiting for the ... TV adaptation."

The structure of *Tristram Shandy* likewise sets it apart from the other English novels of its time—so far apart, in fact, that Sterne's book is sometimes described as an anti-novel. For one thing *Tristram Shandy* rejects the tightly controlled plotting that other early novelists seem to have upheld as an ideal, and which Western literature in general has revered since Greek philosopher Aristotle. Rowson, who in 1996 produced a graphic-novel adaptation of *Tristram Shandy*, describes Sterne's work as "a direct satire on the whole idea of *The Novel As It Was Then Developing*." Unlike the highly selective narrative offered in, say, English writer Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), *Tristram Shandy* pretends to include every stray whim that has popped into the narrator's head. Moreover, *Tristram* takes a bold but not unheard-of step in addressing the reader directly, often stopping to joke with the "Sir" or "Madam" he imagines is reading his life story. The choice to address a novel to someone was not, in itself, unusual: in epistolary works, including the bestselling *Pamela*, the narrator reveals the plot by writing letters to other characters in the book. *Tristram Shandy*, however, flips this model on its head: rather than supplying a fictional character to serve as the reader, Sterne's anti-novel invites the reader—whoever he or she might be—to participate as a kind of honorary character.

Critical Reception

The first few volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, though published anonymously, made Sterne an almost overnight celebrity, praised for his wit by some and ridiculed or even condemned by others. Sterne's detractors, as Guardian literary correspondent Robert McCrum (2013) notes, described his work as "obscene, preposterous and infuriating, the opposite of what a novel should be." Pamphleteers of the day, themselves often writing anonymously, mocked almost every distinguishing feature of the work, from the narrator's fondness for pseudonyms to the extensive use of asterisks and dashes. Sterne acknowledges this harsh reaction in a series of rebuttals from Vol. 3 onward, assuring the English literary world of his intention to keep tabs on his critics—and to go on ignoring them.

Despite its many detractors the work was widely popular from the first volumes onward, prompting widespread speculation as to the author's identity. When Sterne finally traveled to London in March 1760, he was welcomed and heralded a literary phenomenon. Moreover, like many popular works then and since, *Tristram Shandy* soon became the subject of a thriving fanfiction industry: unofficial sequels

and other Shandy-themed literature crowded London bookshops from 1760 onward. First to appear was Explanatory Remarks upon the Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy offered in April 1760 under the pseudonym "Jeremiah Kunastrokius," a name itself borrowed from an extremely minor figure in Sterne's book. Other authors, bolder or perhaps just less scrupulous, came forward with works purportedly written or approved by Sterne, including unauthorized Shandy tributes and sequels. In 1766, with eight authentic volumes of Tristram Shandy already published, a book purporting to be "Vol. IX" began to circulate in London. When Sterne's own Vol. 9 was published in 1767, the spurious Vol. IX was re-titled "Vol. X" and continued to sell.

By the mid-1770s the "Shandy-mania" had cooled somewhat. Nearly a decade after the last installment of Tristram Shandy appeared, the eminent literary critic Samuel Johnson finally pronounced Sterne's novel dead. "Nothing odd will do long," he declared in 1776; "Tristram Shandy did not last." Modern critics are apt to disagree with Johnson on both points: Tristram Shandy has since taken its place among the classics of English literature, not despite its eccentric style but because of it. Instead of being seen as a mere curiosity—an anomaly in an otherwise serious and dignified literary culture—Tristram Shandy is now regarded as a trailblazing work, a precursor to the many subsequent forms of "experimental" fiction. Its relentless punning, typographical and visual playfulness, and refusal to stick to a single straightforward narrative are all characteristics alive and well in the postmodern novel, readily seen in the works of American novelist Thomas Pynchon, British novelist Salman Rushdie, American writer David Foster Wallace, and others. Tristram Shandy, it seems, was not so much "odd" as ahead of its time.

a Author Biography

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Early Life

Laurence Sterne was born in Clonmel, County Tipperary, Ireland, on November 24, 1713, to Roger Sterne, an English army officer, and Agnes Nuttall. Because of his father's career, Sterne grew up on the march: the family, never prosperous, moved frequently as Roger was deployed to various parts of Ireland. At age 10 Sterne went to live with his uncle, Richard Sterne, who arranged for his education at a nearby grammar school in Hipperholme, Yorkshire. Sterne's surviving notebooks suggest a precocious boy with an ear for humorous language, a fondness for drawing, and a tendency to daydream. Roger Sterne, meanwhile, was deployed to Jamaica, which was then a British colony. In 1731 he fell ill and died there, leaving Laurence reliant on the care and financial support of his paternal relatives.

Education and Career

After his years at Hipperholme, Sterne matriculated at Jesus College, Cambridge. There, he was enrolled as a sizar, or scholarship student; family members defrayed his other educational expenses. He graduated in 1737 and took holy orders a year later. Soon after his ordination Sterne became the vicar of the small parish of Sutton-on-the-Forest through the influence of his uncle, Jacques Sterne, a prominent Anglican cleric. In his early postgraduate years Sterne seemed poised to climb through the ranks of the church: he became a canon of York Minster (i.e., a member of the cathedral's governing body) and later succeeded to the vicarage of Stillington in northern Yorkshire. He married Elizabeth Lumley in 1741, but the relationship seems to have been vexed and antagonistic almost from the

wedding day. Sources vary as to the cause of the strife, but Sterne's extramarital affairs—one of which is commemorated in his late *Bramine's Journal* or *Journal to Eliza* (not published until 1904)—almost certainly contributed to the tension.

Literary Fame and Decline

Sterne's talent as a writer was evident in his early sermons, but his efforts to branch out into other types of literature were hampered by controversy. In the early 1740s Sterne's political views alienated his uncle Jacques, who until that point had

been a powerful benefactor. *Political Romance* (1759) was a satirical jab at various high-ranking Anglican clergymen, a move that cost him any further opportunity to advance in the church hierarchy. Later that year he set aside the majority of his vicarial duties in order to begin the lengthy satirical novel later known as *Tristram Shandy*. The work brought him immediate, though not always favorable, critical recognition, leading to the publication of new installments at a rate of roughly one volume per year. A prequel of sorts, entitled *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), capitalized on the popularity of *Tristram Shandy* and of Parson Yorick, one of the novel's best-loved characters.

Sterne's tuberculosis, of which he had experienced intermittent symptoms since his college years, became more severe during the *Shandy* years, with a near-fatal episode in 1762. Extended trips to France—fictionalized in Vol. 7 of *Tristram Shandy*—brought temporary relief, but on the whole his health continued to decline. Sterne died on March 18, 1768, shortly after publishing *A Sentimental Journey*, and he was eulogized by the actor David Garrick, a personal friend who is frequently and fondly mentioned in the pages of *Tristram Shandy*. In his epitaph for Sterne, Garrick describes the late novelist as a man of great "genius, wit, and humor," an opinion now widely shared by literary critics. Most of Sterne's remaining writings, including three volumes of sermons and a selection of his correspondence, were published by his daughter Lydia in the mid 1770s. *Tristram Shandy*, however, remains his most noteworthy contribution to English literature.

h Characters

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Character Map

Tristram Shandy : English gentleman; amused by his own bad luck

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Elizabeth Shandy: Practical, longsuffering mistress of Shandy Hall

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