

## **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 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 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.

**Source of the above material:** <https://www.bl.uk/works/tristram-shandy>