

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman

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Laurence Sterne was born in Ireland in November 1713 as the son of an infantry ensign, who was the impoverished grandson of the Archbishop of York. He spent his childhood in various army barracks across Ireland and England, where he developed an affection for military men. This feeling of his will take shape in the character of Uncle Toby later on.

After finishing with his schools in Yorkshire he went on to study at Jesus College, Cambridge. He became strongly influenced by the philosophy of John Locke during his university years. By this time he had contracted tuberculosis; his illness was another very important factor that appears in Tristram Shandy in the shape of the various injuries of the main characters .

In 1741 he became the prebendary of York cathedral and married Eliza Lumley in the same year. This marriage turned out to be unsuccessful later on and left its mark on Sterne's personality. The first significant literary work by him was 'A Political Romance', a satire on local ecclesiastical courts, which was actually so well-done that church authorities gave orders to burn it. It happened in 1759, the same year when he started The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman. The first two volumes of his main work were published in London the year after and brought an overnight success to their author.

Although his health was constantly deteriorating, Sterne came up with four more volumes in 1761 and with volumes VII and VIII in 1765. He went on an eight-month tour in Italy and France the same year and started 'Sentimental Journey through France and Italy'. This book was finished and published in 1767, similarly to

the 9th and last volume of Tristram Shandy. His main work remained unfinished because of his death in 1768.

The structure of Tristram Shandy was quite unusual and by all means revolutionary at that time. The novel had a wholly new concept of form in fiction. The story line is fragmented and delayed, the author digresses freely backwards and forwards in time creating a sense of timelessness. At the first approach the book seems to be a sentimental comedy told in first person by a narrator, a kind of patchwork of anecdotes, reflections, jests and dialogues centering on the characters and opinions of the narrator's father, Walter Shandy and his brother, the narrator's Uncle Toby. Although the title of the novel is 'The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman', the main character is only born in the end of the third volume. Since much of the story predates Tristram's birth, this choice for a title is rather ironic.

The author's own views are conveyed partly in the person of Tristram, partly in the person of the sentimental and jesting Parson Yorick, who is said to be the distant relative of Yorick, the fool in Shakespeare's Hamlet. As we know Sterne himself was a clergyman too, he identified with his hero to such an extent that he published his sermons in 1760 under the title 'The Sermons of Mr. Yorick'. We should also mention here that the Hungarian poet István Kormos also called himself 'Poor Yorick' in his poems.

Probably the most important thing Sterne learned from John Locke's philosophy was that the consciousness of every individual is conditioned by his private train of association, thus every man in a sense lives in a world of his own, with his own 'hobby horse'. In other words every man is the prisoner of his inner

world. In this novel both Tristram's father and uncle have their obsessions. Walter Shandy has got a theory of noses and noses, in both cases the longer the name or the nose is, the more bright career their owner can expect. According to him, all the significant members of the Shandy family had long names and noses. No wonder that from his point of view Tristram is a walking disaster. His nose got flattened at his birth owing to Dr. Slop's incompetent intervention and he got his name because the maid forgot

'Trismegistus', the name that was originally intended to be given to Tristram by his father. Concerning Dr. Slope we have to mention that his ludicrous character was a result of Sterne's private dislike of doctors.

Uncle Toby is interested in the science of siegecraft, he enjoys playing with his toy soldiers. Although both he and Trim, his man are obviously simpletons, while Walter Shandy is a philosophical, theoretical character, Uncle Toby represents common sense. In this way the two brothers complete each other's nature perfectly. However, the contrasts of characters in the novel are quite frequent: apart from the contrast between Walter's chilly logic and Toby's sensibility we could set in pair the theorizing Walter Shandy and his matter-of-fact wife or compare Toby's impulsiveness to Corporal Trim's stability as well.

The two most important problems for the contemporary reader concerning the book were the sexual content and the fact that such content was issued from the pen of a clergyman. Because of its exclusively male sexual interests and humour the novel was exposed recently to feminist criticism. On the one hand, it is true that women appear in Tristram Shandy as objects of erotic desire or more commonly sexual frustration. On the other hand, in defense of the author, we have to note that Sterne is not representing male oppression in order to endorse it, but to satirize it. Walter's

mechanical lovemaking and his wild theories of child development, Toby's infantile retreat to a world of toy soldiers, Tristram's inability to escape the whole catalog of male sexual anxieties (impotence, size, deformity, castration) - all this show that Sterne's intention is to make fun of men. He makes it clear that the whole crew of men is useless; they idly sit and smoke, their talk is mostly trivial and self-interested, they have nothing to do. In other words they are narcissists and bores.

Sterne was consciously employing nonsense on one level of meaning in order to ridicule the biographical structure of current novels. He also had an uncanny knack of catching the fragmentary repetitive movement of everyday speech. He made action come to life in the reader's imagination by combining dialogue with precise notation of gesture and posture, often inserting these in the middle of a spoken sentence. As soon as the

character
grew familiar to the reader, the book became essentially a novel in
spite of
lacking the accepted sort of narrative continuity.

Despite all the nonsense and exaggeration in *Tristram Shandy*, the book is essentially
realistic, not merely for its characterization but because in the
absence of
plot the reader's interest is maintained by the vividness of the
trivial
details. Sterne did more than any writer since Defoe to prove that a
work of
fiction could satisfy the reader through his recognition of familiar
things as
fully as by tragic crises or hair-raising dangers.

One of the ideas that Sterne adapted from Locke was that
time is a subjective, relative thing, governed by the succession of our
ideas
and therefore moving swiftly or slowly in response to our moods. At
some points
he tried to prove this to the reader by retarding or hastening the
speed of
narration. Apart from the virtuoso exploitation

of Lockian psychology, the
influence of Rabelais on Sterne is also very important, one of his
critics,
Leigh Hunt actually called him "Rabelais reborn at a riper period of
the
world and gifted with sentiment". In the character of Walter Shandy the
Sterne satirized the didactics of Rabelais, while in the character of
Toby he
was making fun of the romanticism of his other idol, Cervantes.

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