

Tristram Shandy Background

Tristram Shandy is, almost beyond argument, the most unusual, outrageously experimental and subversive novel that most people who possess basic literacy skills could ever read. While James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* definitely outstrips this novel in terms of experimentation, the inescapable fact of the matter is that even those with the most advanced of literary degrees probably do understand half of what they claim to understand in that book. *Tristram Shandy*, by contrast, uses basic language construction to tell a fairly straightforward story capable of being understood fully by a large chunk of the English-speaking population. That being said, the novel is narrated by Tristram himself and commences with the story of his birth, but the title character then proceeds to completely disappear from its narrative progression for a ridiculously long period of time. But then that's the whole point of *Tristram Shandy*: to point out the sham of the imposition of reality upon the distinctly unrealistic nature of the novel. Which was, at the time of its writing, a revolutionary new form of literary expression viewed with great suspicion and mistrust partly due to the lengths that many of its earliest proponents felt compelled to append onto their work in an effort to lend it an aura of factual authenticity.

By the time of its initial publication in 1759, the novel was still the stages of being the punk rock of literature. Prose was not considered as lofty a pursuit as poetry and the characters whose stories were being told in novels were not the usual suspects populating beloved plays: novels had sailors getting shipwrecked on nearly deserted islands rather than Lords and Ladies and Kings and Queens and mythical tragic heroes. In order to attract readers, the concept of prefatory material was created which stood both apart from and as part of the fictional construction of the story. The preface took on the tone of a non-fictional introduction and analysis of the phony story to come, complete with endorsements by figures sporting respectable titles and academic degrees. The only thing is that this prefatory material was every bit as much pure fiction as the story they were intended to lend some kind of realistic credence to. [Laurence Sterne](#) took to writing *Tristram Shandy* in part as a way to expose the inescapable reality that novels simply could not be realistic. Not in any real sense. And so, *Tristram Shandy* shuns, evades, challenges and parodies conventions of realistic expectations in a number of creative and entertaining ways.

The most immediately obvious flouting of novelistic conventions is the means by which the familiarity with existing birth-to-death style novels are upended. A novel titled *Tristram Shandy* would instantly result in the perception among readers of the time that they were going to open the book to read of Tristram's birth and close the book either upon his death or a major point in his later life at which all travails had been finally put behind him. *Tristram Shandy* fulfills the first part of this covenant, but almost instantly fails to follow through. The fact is that Tristram spends 90% of the time telling history story going on off on ever more unrelated digressions focusing on the wild adventures experienced by various forbears. The reader eventually learns more about the Shandy family than readers of other book ever learn about their titular character, but the knowledge gained of Tristram himself is in shockingly short supply. As readers make their way through the digressive nature of *Tristram Shandy*, they are confronted with an inventive literary smackdowns of convention that many young people might find surprisingly familiar. The experimental nature of the novel inspired the stream-of-consciousness fiction that marked the 1920s, but the digressions, blank pages, change in fonts, diagrams and robust use of symbols makes reading *Tristram*

Shandy an experience more akin to reading a blog or following someone on Facebook or Twitter than it does to trying to work one's way through *Finnegans Wake*. Ultimately, such a legacy is exactly what should have happened to Laurence Sterne's anti-novel. A book that set out to challenge every existing preconception of what a novel is or should be has never more righteously belonged to an age than the present one in which every existing preconception of what it means to communicate through publishing is being challenged in some new and exciting way nearly every day.

Tristram Shandy Summary

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, gentleman is about the life of the fictional character, Tristram Shandy. This is a psychological novel, in which Tristram Shandy is the narrator. The Book is divided into 9 volumes by Laurence Sterne, which is published between 1759-1767. This is a piece of 18th-century writing but still to readers, it feels like a postmodern literature. This novel has problems with communication as all the character of the novel are unable to communicate each other properly.

From the beginning of the novel, Tristram was very upset because of the interruption of his mother during his conception by asking a question to his father that he had remembered to wind the clock. Because Tristram believed that the moment of one's conception matters the most, it nurtures the mind, body, and character of the child. Later Tristram introduces the reader to the other character of the novel like his family, his father Walter Shandy, and his uncle Toby Shandy. He presented the stories of his family history, his uncle Toby's affection for military fortifications in a disjointed manner. He talked about his Uncle Toby's groin injury.

Then the day of his birth come, his father and uncle Toby were chatting in the living room. Finally, Susannah came to inform them, that Mrs. Shandy is about to deliver the child, Susannah calls the midwife, she arrives but to be extra sure Walter Shandy send Obadiah to call Dr. Slop. But the doctor did not bring his medicine bag, then; Obadiah brings the bag as Walter asks him to do so. Then both Toby and Mr. Shandy begin their conversation. Then, Tristram born and various disasters begin, Dr. Slop cuts Toby's skin during practice then he cuts his thumb accidentally, Susannah cuts her arm, the midwife falls on the floor; and eventually, Dr. Slop breaks Tristram's nose and then he makes a new nose bridge.

Then Tristram tells the story of Hafen Slawkenbergius, a fictional character's tale, who has a large nose. When his father was thinking the name of the newborn child, Susannah came to him and tell that the child may not live and he needs to be baptized. Walter tells her that the child's name is 'Trismegistus', but Susannah forgets the name and Yorick thought that she was trying to say "Tristram." Later his father asks Didius, church lawyer that if he can rename the child but the lawyer denied, and then they have to keep the name. Mr. Shandy wants to give the money, which he inherited as a legacy from Aunt Dinah to Bobby, his elder son for his Europe's trip but then he receives news that Bobby is dead. His father, Walter was very stunned by Bobby's death but then he

became very conscious about Tristram's education and he started writing *Tristram-paedia* in which he stated, how to teach his young child. But then he did not pay attention and ignore Tristram's education because he was busy in writing the book. Later, Tristram had to face an accidental circumcision. After his circumcision, he was crying in pain while everyone was thinking what to do. Mr. Shandy was concerned about his education and was looking for a tutor. He asked Toby, and Toby suggested Le Fever's son, Billy. Tristram then tells the tale of Le Fever's death and how Toby became the guardian of Billy Le Fever. He then tells the story of Toby's love affair with his neighbor, Widow Wadham.

Then Tristram begins his journey to Europe as he was concerned about his health. He traveled the whole France for his health reasons. When he was in Southern France he feels safe and was not feeling any need to run for death. He did not talk much about his trip but only tell the reader how he feels there and his dance with Nanette, village girl.

In last, Tristram tells the reader about the love of Widow Wadman for Toby Shandy when he stayed at her house for a few days and she falls in love with him, but Toby was unknown of her love. But when Toby came to know, he tried to win her and Walter helped him in this act, he tells him how to deal with ladies. When Toby and Trim arrive at Wadman's house, they had a little conversation. There Trim wins the heart of Widow's servant, Bridgett. Later, Toby came to know that she was worried about his groin injury and then Toby assured her that nothing has happened to him by letting her see and touch. But Toby became upset when he came to know that she is marrying him just to fulfill her sexual desire and not because of love. Then, he wants to talk to Walter, but Obadiah interrupted and complaint about Mr. Shandy's impotent bull.

Tristram Shandy Character List

Tristram Shandy

Tristram Shandy is the narrating voice in the novel and he is the Author of his autobiography too. He faced a series of accidents at the very early age such as his conception, his broken nose, christening his weird name. But being a narrator of the novel he gives a detailed account of other character and incidents.

Walter Shandy

Walter Shandy is the father of Tristram Shandy and brother of Toby Shandy. He is a philosophical man, who loves philosophical argumentation, reading and discussions. He is a sensible but honest and benevolent man. He was suffering from sciatica.

Mrs. Shandy

She is the mother of Tristram Shandy and also the one who is responsible for Tristram's nature as she interrupted his husband while they were having sex. She spies at the keyhole to find out his husband and others conversations.

Toby Shandy

He is Tristram's uncle and brother of Walter Shandy. He is a retired military man. As Tristram tells his reader, his uncle is a gentle and kind person. His only aim in life is the fortification and history of Military.

Yorick

Yorick is a clergyman, a good friend, and the adviser of Walter and Tristram Shandy.

Corporal Trim

He is a servant and a close friend of Toby Shandy. His name is James Butler. He likes to give speeches and advises people a lot.

Widow Wadman

She is a woman who is full of sexual desire. She was disappointed with her husband and was looking for another man who can satisfy her sexually. Later she met Toby and falls in love with him but she wants to be sure that he can function properly in bed too.

Susannah

She is the caretaker of Mrs. Shandy. She is responsible for many small disasters but she is the one who supports Mrs. Shandy for a midwife.

Obadiah

He is a butler to Walter Shandy.

Dr. Slop

He is Doctor of the village Tristram lives in. He was the one who broke Tristram's nose during surgery, and he leaves him in pain. He always bleeds people rather than curing them.

The Midwife

The lady who assists the delivery of Tristram.

Bobby Shandy

He is the older brother of Tristram. He dies in London, although he never appears in novel but his death was discussed.

Tristram Shandy Themes

Life is a Digression

Those wanting to discover much about the title character of [Tristram Shandy](#) will be disappointed. As with Grandpa Simpson, getting to the point—if, indeed, the point of the book really has anything to do with [Tristram Shandy](#)—and, what kind of a name is Tristram, anyway (betcha that half the people who've read the book refer to the title character as Tristan)—will be disappointed because the point for Sterne is clearly not to write a book like [David Copperfield](#) that tells the life story of a person from birth through death: he wants to have fun. If the previous sentence is not the kind of thing that you find worthy of reading, consider that Tristram Shandy reads something like that paragraph except spread out over hundreds of pages. The implicit promise of an author who titles a book after a character is that you will put the book down having learned something—usually a great deal—about that character. Sterne breaks his promise repeatedly, but does so with such great joy and has such fun that most readers don't mind.

The Impossibility of Knowing a Person

At every stop along the way, the reader gets subverted in his attempt to learn who this Tristram Shandy actually is. Some pages of the book are left blank while others are just blocks of blank ink. Even more so than the digressions that lead far away from what is

expected to be the point, these stoppages in the flow of narrative can be unsettling and seem pointless. In fact, they make perhaps even more a point than the narrative. Picking up a book—even an enormous book—to get a full portrait of a human being is as frustrating an endeavor as trying to get a full picture of any actual human being. Can you know a person? Sterne puts that question to the particulars of literature: can you really know a character?

What is a Novel?

The novel was still a relatively new mode of literary expression when Sterne set to working writing *Tristram Shandy*. To say that it had not yet become a victim to critical codification of rules and expectations is to ignore the fact that many critics still looked upon the novel as an illegitimate exercise in creative writing. Not enough novels of different types had yet been produced to create any genres, much less generic conventions. The door was still wide open and Sterne stepped through it with the intention of discovering and exploration. The novel is just as much about the writing of a novel as it is about absolutely anything else. Since so few writers until the rise of the postmodern movement followed his lead, one might well suggest that what Sterne might actually have accomplished is issuing a warning to other writers about what not to do when they were writing their novels. By showing what the novel had the capacity to do, Sterne might have ironically contributed to that developing codification of rules for what does constitute a novel.

Quotes

"But prithee, Trim, said my father, make an end,--for I see thou hast but a leaf or two left."

Tristram as Narrator, p. 109

This is an instance of Sterne using others' speech to make an observation about the novel itself. The lengthy sermon delivered in the chapter must conclude before the chapter ends, and Sterne makes reference to how much space other characters take up in the process of exposure to a dull sermon which was found in a book. This style of visual observation is something Tristram uses to conjure the position of his ideas, and the interchange depicted takes place in brackets; both the works of the sermon and the novel only contain such direct interactions instead of featuring them prominently, as might be the case in other novels.

"'Tis well, quoth my father, interrupting the detail of possibilities--that the experiment was not first made upon my child's head-piece."

Tristram as Narrator, p. 149

The phrasing of this sentence progresses from the naive-sounding phrase "detail of possibilities" to the sterile "experiment," which represents a component of the birthing process. Sterne processes mood for Shandy's aspirations at autobiography using phrases which mix small- and large-scale items. "Detail of possibilities" presents the graininess of the possibilities, which exist at such an intricate level, even at their inception, as to have minute characteristics. Shandy's father interrupts to create this moment, which serves to show the depth of Tristram's feelings about his deformity.

"The stranger had not got half a league on his way towards Frankfort before all the city of Strasburg was in an uproar about his nose."

Tristram as Narrator, p. 199

The feeling of this sentence is fantastical because of its decided tone and fairy-tale phrasing. The details of the road and the locations of cities bring the sincere trauma of Tristram to the mind of the reader in as large-scale of a way as it seems to him. The cities' sizes would be well-known to the contemporary reader, who would also know where the cities were positioned, relative to one another.

"He did indeed, replied my uncle Toby."

Tristram as Narrator, p. 317

The word "my" takes up a seventh of this sing-song sentence, and Tristram maintains this mode of involving Uncle Toby throughout the novel. His narrative thus includes Uncle Toby as someone to be shown - Tristram mentions "my" Uncle Toby and avoids the supposition that we remember who he is - and seen as an object of attention.

"- The other, that of Gordonius, who (in his cap. 15. *de Amore*) directs they should be thrashed, "*ad putorem usque*,"--till they stink again."

Tristram as Narrator, p. 436

Tristram Shandy comes across as well-read throughout the novel, at some points presenting pages of Latin, Greek, or French to prove a point. However, he claims never to have read another book other than the one he writes, seeming to find it endearing that he would so commit to the work he presents to be read. Here, we see the precision of the parenthetical notation for such references and a brief recognition of the central phrase, which is presented as though anyone could have read it.

Tristram Shandy Analysis

Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is the first post-modern novel, but he wrote it before the modernist movement. Thus, it ought to be considered apart from the modern literary consciousness; the biggest challenge for the modern reader is noticing the experimental aspects of the novel without placing it in line with the later works of post-modernism.

Tristram Shandy absolutely impacted the post-modern landscape, but it first impacted the literature of its era and the era after it. Because of the two paths to the modern-day influence - the direct and the indirect - the most effective analysis of the novel is of the novel itself. Tristram presents his content to the reader using digressions, and these first appear to be superfluous. However, these introduce entire narratives, so Shandy's drawing of the reader's focus to himself allows the expansion of storylines which recall time spent with the other individuals instead of a heavy-handed push to other moments. *Tristram Shandy* thus uses overtly clumsy narratorial techniques to direct the awareness of the reader throughout the novel without disruption.

The result of these transitions is a sense of how life and death can exist at once. A character who dies may resurface as alive in later passages, and this timeline is held as rational, even linear, through the mind of Tristram. Tristram threads his memories together not just as a series of impulses leading from one to the next but instead as an expansion of specific characters who he holds in his mind, with plot as something which occurs instead of something which creates individuals.

A key motif of the novel is Tristram's sense of misfortune concerning his own birth, and the fractured sense of his own self-conception supports the importance of this motif; from the beginning, Tristram shows himself to be the result of actions, even as he does not consider how the character of others may result from temporal and even external influences. The fictitious Tristram cannot continue to write his memoirs until he separates himself from his own trauma enough to consider himself as a person who exists outside of the presence of mistakes.

Tristram Shandy Irony

Irony of Autobiography

Tristram acknowledges this irony throughout the novel, even as he continues the ironic behavior. This usually might disqualify the style of irony, but Tristram gets so carried away with himself that this method of irony remains as such; Sterne deliberately adjusts the style of the novel when Tristram notices that his autobiography centers on other people. Moreover, Tristram never sees how the plot of his novel gradually adjusts itself using flashback to become a narrative of Tristram's Uncle Toby.

The novel is narrated by Tristram, a precocious gentleman who is eager to preserve his own life; in demonstrating this eagerness, he ironically captures very little about it.

Irony of Birth Name

The full name of *Tristram Shandy* is *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, without the comma when typeset. He endeavors to put forth his opinions yet cannot move beyond the opinions of others. Rather than seeing this concept as an un-ironic statement on how society affects us all, the reader witnesses how the opinions of those around him infringe upon Tristram's ability to have original opinions. He accepts his father's negative perception of Tristram's name and bearing to such an extent that he begins the novel with the wish that the center of his being might be changed.

The irony of "Tristram Shandy" is that this name roots the novel and often brings Tristram's narration back to himself, yet these words emblemize the entirety of the plot which Tristram neglects to provide otherwise.

Dramatic Irony of Yorick's Death

Laurence Sterne places the death of the character Yorick relatively early in the novel, but the characters progress through the rest of it in a flashback, unaware of his future demise. The presentation of Yorick's headstone develops the dramatic irony that allows Tristram's narrative to center even more sharply on Uncle Toby.

Verbal Irony of Shandy's Self-Perception

Tristram Shandy continually grapples with the fact his writing is abnormal, and his tone ranges from bashful to giddy as he reminds the reader what he requires that they experience through his words. The result of this is a web of verbal irony that enmeshes

over- with understatement and demonstrates the perceived lack of control in narration which, in moments without irony, Tristram fully understands. The purpose of the irony is to divorce the recognition that the book shies away from the narrative techniques that were used at the time from the sense of mastery over the novel's plot through rereading which accompanied many other 18th-century novels.

Situational Irony

The birthing technique used to bring Tristram into the world leaves his body damaged, and this ruins the pristine strength of a son his father had desired. Tristram's mother, as a woman in the 1700s, delivered Tristram in an atmosphere of danger, and the convoluted wishes of Tristram's parents vis-a-vis birthing procedures lead to a discrepancy between what could have gone wrong - the mutual death of Tristram and his parents - and the defect which instead results, causing the most extant sign of marred being to Tristram.

Tristram Shandy Imagery

Hobby-horse

Laurence Sterne uses sexual imagery to enhance his concept of the "hobby-horse," or the one topic each person wants to talk on and on about. His examples - Uncle Toby and war, for example - are incorporated into the plot, but Sterne's tactile words makes the concept more general than it would otherwise be. The choice of imagery prevents this generalization from losing its relation to the reader.

Tristram's Birth

Sterne provides mostly details of Tristram's surroundings, so the story of Tristram's grotesque entrance to the world helps center the novel. The strange mutilation of Tristram's nose is written with a dry sense of humor, but the visual description makes his characterization and thus narration real.

The Clock

Tristram's parents ritualize their clock, and the full transition of Tristram's narration to the clock itself helps the reader understand how the mechanics of this distraction works. The imagery of this clock creates a character trait of Tristram's parents as a unit through the tactile information of winding.

Window Sash

Another of Tristram's tactile events involves the dropping of a window sash when he was only an infant. Sterne's imagery demonstrates the breadth of the novel's narration and the extent to which the novel engorges the heretofore short life of the protagonist; the incident forever changes Tristram's body, which Sterne thoroughly describes.

Tristram Shandy Literary Elements

Genre

Fiction

Setting and Context

Britain, 1700s; Rural

Narrator and Point of View

First-Person Limited; written as an autobiography

Tone and Mood

Tone- Didactic, affectionate

Mood- Bemused

Protagonist and Antagonist

Protagonist - Tristram, his uncle, and parents; Antagonist - the circumstances of his birth

Major Conflict

Tristram is drawn to write his autobiography, but his name and physical bearing leave him with a defeat to his sense of self that he cannot easily overcome

Climax

During a flashback, when Tristram's mother gives birth to him

Foreshadowing

Shandy foreshadows the elements of himself that are considered to be unfortunate before they are fully introduced

Understatement

Tristram routinely uses understatement to enhance the scene he depicts; an example of this is Yorick's sermon

Allusions

The novel alludes to classical pieces of Latin and Greek, at some points including unedited paragraphs or pages

Imagery

Sterne uses imagery of ideas, imagery of Tristram's nose and birth, and imagery of Tristram's parents' rituals, particularly one involving winding their clock

Paradox

Tristram writes his life, but he spends so much time writing that more of his life is lived and must be written

Parallelism

The plot before Yorick's death has many parallels with the later plot of the novel, which is written in flashback. One of these is the similarity in path of Tristram's parents' relationship

Metonymy and Synecdoche

Metonymy - Toby uses metonymy throughout his rhapsodies of war to describe troops and troop movements

Synecdoche - noses as part of individuals

Personification

Because of Shandy's chatty tone, many objects throughout the text are personified.

"Triumph swam in my father's eyes, at the repartee--the Attic salt brought water into them--and so Obadiah heard no more about it" (284).

Laurence Sterne

BRITISH WRITER

WRITTEN BY:

- [Arthur H. Cash](#)
[See Article History](#)

Laurence Sterne, (born Nov. 24, 1713, [Clonmel](#), County [Tipperary](#), Ire.—died March 18, 1768, [London](#), Eng.), Irish-born English novelist and humorist, author of *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), an early [novel](#) in which story is subordinate to the free associations and [digressions](#) of its narrator. He is also known for the novel *A Sentimental Journey* (1768).

Life.

Sterne's father, Roger, though grandson of an archbishop of York, was an infantry officer of the lowest rank who fought in many battles during the [War of the Spanish Succession](#) (1701–14). In Flanders, Roger married Agnes, the widow of an officer, but of a [social class](#) much below Roger's. The regiment retired to [Ireland](#), and there Laurence was born. Most of his early childhood was spent in poverty, following the troops about Ireland. Later, Sterne expressed his affection for soldiers through his portraits in *Tristram Shandy* of the gentle uncle Toby and Corporal Trim.

At age 10, Sterne was sent to school at Hipperholme, near [Halifax](#), where his uncle, Richard Sterne, whose estate was nearby, could look out for him. He grew into a tall, thin man, with a long nose but likable face. Sterne attended Jesus College, Cambridge, on a scholarship. At college he met his great friend John Hall-Stevenson (Eugenius in his fiction) and also suffered his first severe hemorrhage of the lungs. He had incurable [tuberculosis](#).

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After graduating he took [holy orders](#) and became vicar of Sutton-on-the-Forest, north of York. He soon became a prebendary (or canon) of York Minster and acquired the vicarage of Stillington. At first he was helped by another uncle, Jaques Sterne, precentor of York and [archdeacon](#) of Cleveland, a powerful clergyman but a mean-tempered man and a rabid politician. In 1741–42 Sterne wrote political articles supporting the administration of [Sir Robert Walpole](#) for a newspaper founded by his uncle but soon withdrew from politics in disgust. His uncle became his archenemy, thwarting his advancement whenever possible.

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Sterne fell in love with Elizabeth Lumley, a cousin to [Elizabeth Montagu](#), the bluestocking. They married in 1741. According to the account of an acquaintance, Sterne's infidelities were a cause of [discord](#) in the marriage.

As a clergyman Sterne worked hard but erratically. In two ecclesiastical courts he served as commissary (judge), and his frequent sermons at York Minster were popular. Externally, his life was typical of the moderately successful clergy. But Elizabeth, who had several stillborn children, was unhappy. Only one child, Lydia, lived.

In 1759, to support his dean in a church squabble, Sterne wrote *A Political Romance* (later called *The History of a Good Warm Watch-Coat*), a Swiftian satire of dignitaries of the spiritual courts. At the demands of embarrassed churchmen, the book was burned. Thus, Sterne lost his chances for clerical advancement but discovered his real talents. Turning over his parishes to a curate, he began *Tristram Shandy*. An initial, sharply satiric version was rejected by Robert Dodsley, the London printer, just when Sterne's personal life was upset. His mother and uncle both died. His wife had a nervous breakdown and threatened suicide. Sterne continued his comic novel, but every sentence, he said, was "written under the greatest heaviness of heart." In this mood, he softened the satire and told about Tristram's opinions, his eccentric family, and ill-fated childhood with a sympathetic humour, sometimes hilarious, sometimes sweetly melancholic—a comedy skirting tragedy.

At his own expense, Sterne published the first two volumes of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* at York late in 1759, but he sent half of the imprint to Dodsley to sell in London. By March 1760, when he went to London, *Tristram Shandy* was the rage, and he was famous.

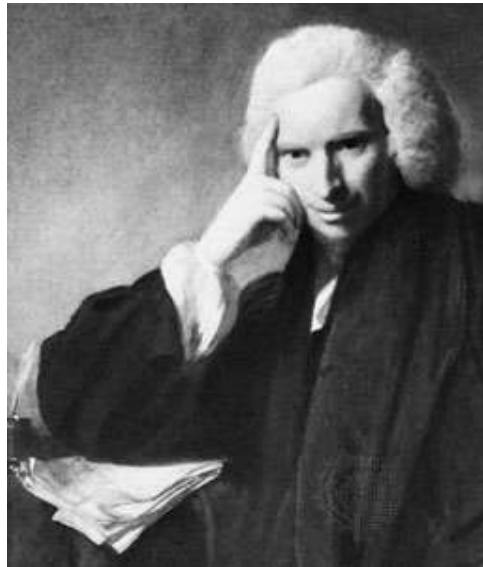
Dodsley's brother James, the new proprietor, brought out a second edition of the novel, and two volumes of sermons followed. The witty, naughty "Tristram Shandy," or "Parson Yorick," as Sterne was called after characters in his novel, was the most sought-after man in town. Although the timing was coincidental, Lord Fauconberg, a Yorkshire neighbour, presented him with a third parish, Coxwold. Sterne returned north joyfully to settle at Coxwold in his beloved "Shandy Hall," a charming old house that is now a museum. He began to write at Shandy Hall during the summers, going to London in the winter to publish what he had written. James Dodsley brought out two more volumes of *Tristram Shandy*; thereafter, Sterne became his own publisher. In London he enjoyed the company of many great people, but his nights were sometimes wild. In 1762, after almost dying from lung hemorrhages, he fled the damp air of England into France, a journey he described as Tristram's flight from death. This and a later trip abroad gave him much material for his later *Sentimental Journey*. Elizabeth, now recovered, followed him to France, where she and their daughter settled permanently. Sterne returned to England virtually a single man.

In 1767 he published the final volume of *Tristram Shandy*. Soon thereafter he fell in love with Eliza Draper, who was half his age and unhappily married to an official of the East India Company. They carried on an open, sentimental flirtation, but Eliza was under a promise to return to her husband in Bombay. After she sailed, Sterne finished *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy, by Mr. Yorick*, published it to acclaim early in 1768, and collapsed.

Lying in his London lodgings, he put up his arm as though to ward off a blow, saying, "Now it is come," and died. Soon after burial at London, Sterne's body was stolen by grave robbers, taken to Cambridge, and used for an anatomy lecture. Someone recognized the body, and it was quietly returned to the grave. The story, only whispered at the time, was confirmed in 1969: Sterne's remains were exhumed and now rest in the churchyard at Coxwold, close to Shandy Hall.

Laurence Sterne

QUICK FACTS



BORN

November 24, 1713

[Clonmel, Ireland](#)

DIED

March 18, 1768 (aged 54)

[London, England](#)

NOTABLE WORKS

- ["Tristram Shandy"](#)

- [“A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy”](#)
- [“The History of a Good Warm Watch-Coat”](#)

Works.

Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* was published in nine slim volumes (released in five installments) from 1759 to 1767. In it the narrator, Tristram, sets out to do the impossible—to tell the story of his life. He begins with the story of his conception—an innocent remark of his mother upsetting his father’s concentration and causing poor Tristram to be conceived a weakling. To understand that, Tristram must then explain [John Locke’s](#) principle of the [association of ideas](#). This, in turn, embroils him in a discussion of his parents’ marriage contract, his Uncle Toby, Parson Yorick, the midwife, and Dr. Slop. He has so much to tell that he does not get himself born until the third volume. Finally reality dawns upon Tristram: it takes more time to tell the story of his life than it does to live it; he can never catch himself.

At one level *Tristram Shandy* is a satire upon [intellectual](#) pride. Walter Shandy thinks he can beget and rear the perfect child, yet Tristram is misconceived, misbaptized, miseducated, and circumcised by a falling window sash. He grows to manhood an impotent weakling whose only hope of [transcending](#) death is to tell the story of himself and his family. Finally, Tristram turns to the sweet, funny story of his Uncle Toby’s amours with the Widow Wadman, concluding the [novel](#) at a point in time years before Tristram was born. A hilarious, often ribald novel, *Tristram Shandy* nevertheless makes a serious comment on the isolation of people from each other caused by the inadequacies of language and describes the breaking-through of isolation by impulsive gestures of sympathy and love. A second great theme of the novel is that of time—the discrepancy between clock time and time as sensed, the impinging of the past upon the present, the awareness that a joyous life inexorably leads to death. Modern commentators regard *Tristram Shandy* as the ancestor of psychological and stream-of-consciousness fiction.

Sterne’s second and last novel, *A Sentimental Journey*, is the story of Yorick’s travels through France; Sterne did not live to complete the part on Italy. He called it a “sentimental” journey because the point of travel was not to see sights or visit art collections, but to make meaningful contact with people. Yorick succeeds, but in every adventure, his ego or inappropriate desires and impulses get in the way of “sentimental commerce.” The result is a light-hearted comedy of [moral sentiments](#). *A Sentimental Journey* was translated into many languages, but the translations tended to lose the comedy and emphasize the sentiments. Abroad Sterne became the “high priest of sentimentalism,” and as such had a profound impact upon continental letters in the second half of the 18th century.