



# Laurence Sterne

(1713-1768)

## Life and works

Laurence Sterne was born in Clonmel, County Tipperary, Ireland, the son of an army officer. He was sent to school in Yorkshire, where he came under the protection of his father's relatives, upon whom he was dependent for the expenses of his education. He took his BA at Jesus College in Cambridge and later took holy orders and became vicar of Sutton-on-the-Forest in Yorkshire. Soon afterwards he married in York though his marriage was not a success because of the attention he paid to his many female friends in spite of being a clergyman.

Sterne **developed late as a literary artist**; his earliest writings were political articles and letters written for local newspapers. In addition to writing, he was a painter and a musician. In 1759 a local quarrel about ecclesiastical pre-ferments got him to write a witty allegory in the

manner of Swift, *A Political Romance*, later entitled *The History of a Good Warm Watch-Coat*. At the end of the same year he started publishing the first two volumes of his masterpiece, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, written over seven years.

After almost dying from lung hemorrhages, in 1762 he decided to move to France with his family to recover his health. Exhausted by his illness, he, however, succeeded in completing and publishing *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy, by Mr Yorick*, though a few weeks after its publication he died in 1768.

Sterne's literary production was modest in terms of quantity, and his reputation mainly rests on his masterpiece, *Tristram Shandy*. This work of eccentric genius brought Sterne fame and fortune, both in England and in France.

# *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

(1759-1767)

## PLOT AND SETTING

Sterne **breaks the rule of the conventional biography**: while Defoe (→ 3.10) and Fielding (→ Text Bank 22, Text Bank 23) begin *Robinson Crusoe* and *Jonathan Wild* with the protagonist's birth, the birth of Tristram appears in the third volume. He is baptised and given the wrong name. His father, Walter Shandy, slowly works on an encyclopaedia for the upbringing of his son. Aged five, Tristram is accidentally circumcised by a faulty sash window. It was faulty because Uncle Toby's servant had used the weights to make miniature cannons for their model fortifications, where they re-enacted the siege of Namur.

This is a short and inevitably incomplete summary for a very long novel, but what happens in *Tristram Shandy* hardly develops a storyline. The plot has really a complementary function, since the narrative consists of **episodes, personal observations and frequent flashbacks and digressions** which represent Tristram's mental life.

## INFLUENCES

Sterne was influenced by numerous earlier writers, even if *Tristram Shandy* is very original. Part of his comic method clearly derives from *Don Quixote* by Miguel Cervantes (1547-1616). Swift's satire (→ 3.11) greatly impressed Sterne, who imitated Swift's parodies of literary conventions. Their satire is very different, however, since Sterne is gentle and humorous. Sterne was also much indebted to the philosopher **John Locke** (→ CLIL Philosophy, p. 195) **for his theory of the association of ideas**, that is the irrational linking together of disparate thoughts without any apparent logical connection;

Tristram himself makes an explicit reference to 'unhappy association of ideas, which have no connection in nature' in Volume I. Sterne was indeed convinced that the **mind's workings were essentially irrational**, and that individual mental behaviour was in some measure eccentric. He suggested that human nature and the workings of the mind can never be fully known, and any notions that literature, and in particular the novel, is representative of an ordered reality are therefore questioned and overturned by Sterne.

## CHARACTERS

Sterne focuses much of his characterisation on the portrayal of a dominant trait or, rather, obsession, which to him is an accurate indication of personality. This obsession or ruling passion is called a **hobby-horse**: Uncle Toby is obsessed with war, Mr Shandy with names, etc. As a method of characterisation Sterne also concentrates on the description of external signs, gestures and attitudes of his fictional people. Walter and Toby Shandy, Tristram's father and uncle, are the other two principal male characters. Their lives are eventless but characterised by delusions of grandeur. While the **male characters** are always **portrayed with great sympathy** for their inconsistencies and faulty vision of the world, the **female ones** are **the object of his deepest scorn**. Women are neither important nor interesting, they do not have philosophies or opinions of their own, but they are created by the author only in terms of their relationship with men. Sterne never relates the conversation of a group of women and his approval of women in the novel is limited to those who excite men's sexual feelings.

If Walter Shandy represents intellect, and Toby Shandy emotion, women seem to represent sexuality, set against male impotence.



## THEMES

While optimism, happy endings and a moralising aim are the necessary implements of all the novels by Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, **pessimism is the dominant quality of Sterne's work**; even the name of the protagonist has a negative connotation: Tristram comes from the Latin adjective 'tristis' meaning 'sad'. All the characters undergo misadventures and accidents of every kind; irony, sarcasm and humour are the only means at their disposal to bear the burden of their lives and to gain the necessary mental energies to carry on living. *Tristram Shandy* is not a sentimental novel, but it is full of sentiment and feeling: indeed the necessity of love, sympathy and laughter is one of the central underlying themes of the novel.

## STYLE

*Tristram Shandy* is narrated in the first person singular, so that everything and everyone is seen through the eyes of Tristram himself. **Tristram's role is twofold**: he is both **chronicler/narrator** and a **dull, inconsistent character**. He never plays the role of the hero, since his life is

uninteresting and his nature and body are faulty; he lacks dignity, courage and social credibility.

The reader has an important role: Sterne addresses him and leaves out words, indicating them by asterisks or dashes, so that the reader is forced into active participation not only in the reading but also in the 'writing' of the novel.

If the content and the structure of the book are **complex**, the same can be said for the **language**: the sentences are long and contain several subordinate clauses. The clauses are separated by commas, semicolons, colons and several dashes and asterisks, with a use of punctuation which seems almost arbitrary. It is as if Sterne is writing as he thinks, following the wanderings of his mind, rather than working out what he wants to say beforehand and suiting his prose to his thought. There are complex philosophical debates, much vivid imagery, quotations from authors and books, English and Latin, ancient and modern, authentic and invented, blank or marble pages, so that a skilled reading is required to grasp its meaning. The chapters vary in length from several pages to a single short sentence.

## Key idea

## A new sense of time

Sterne does not deal with the concept of time in the same way as would a realistic writer, since **the narrative follows the order of the protagonist's free associations of ideas**. One of the fundamental problems of *Tristram Shandy*, both for Sterne and the reader, is that of 'chronology'. This novel differs from *Robinson Crusoe* (→ T35-37), *Pamela* (→ Text Bank 21) and *Jonathan Wild* (→ Text Bank 22, Text Bank 23) because its **events do not occur**

**in chronological order**: Sterne does not offer causes and does not provide the narrative with a sense of linear progression. When he dates an event, he simply identifies it in time, but he does not give it a causal relationship with the next event he describes. Thus, **future and past do not refer to chronological time**, but simply to the order of events in the narration.

## COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

## 1 READ the text and answer the following questions.

- 1 What kind of novel did Sterne create?
- 2 What narrative technique did he employ?
- 3 What are his characters like?
- 4 What are the main events of *Tristram Shandy*?
- 5 What is the new concept of time developed in this novel?



## When they begot me

*This passage, which is the famous opening of the novel, deals with the conception of Tristram. He relates events and conversations which he could not have witnessed.*

Laurence Sterne  
*The Life and Opinions  
of Tristram Shandy,  
Gentleman*  
(1759-1767)

Book 1, Chapter 1

I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally **bound**<sup>1</sup> to it<sup>2</sup>, **had minded** what they were about<sup>3</sup> when they **begot** me; had they duly consider'd<sup>4</sup> how much depended upon what they were then doing; – that not only the production of a rational Being **was concerned** in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very **cast** of his mind; – and, for aught they knew<sup>5</sup> to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from<sup>6</sup> the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost<sup>7</sup>; – Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly, – I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world from that in which the reader is likely to see me. – Believe me, good **folks**, this is not so inconsiderable a thing as many of you may think it; – you have all, I **dare say**, heard of the animal spirits, as how they are transfused from father to son, &c., &c. – and a great deal to that purpose: – Well, you may take my word, that nine parts in ten of a man's sense or his nonsense, his successes and **miscarriages** in this world depend upon their<sup>8</sup> motions and activity, and the different tracts and trains you put them into, so that when they are once set **a-going**, whether right or wrong, 'tis not a half-penny matter, – away they go clattering like hey-go mad<sup>9</sup>; and by treading the same steps over and over again, they presently make a road of it, as plain and as smooth as a garden-walk, which, when they are once used to, the Devil himself sometimes shall not be able to drive them off it.

*Pray, my Dear*, quoth<sup>10</sup> my mother, *have you not forgot to wind up*<sup>11</sup> *the clock?* – *Good G* –<sup>12</sup> cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time, – *Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?* Pray, what was your father saying? – Nothing.

- 1 they were in duty ... bound. Erano entrambi ugualmente tenuti per dovere.
- 2 it. Ciò (riferito a 'when they begot me', riga 2).
- 3 were about. Si accingevano a fare.
- 4 had ... consider'd. Se avessero doverosamente pensato.
- 5 for ... knew. Per quanto ne sapessero.
- 6 take their turn from. Dipendere da.
- 7 uppermost. Dominanti.
- 8 their. Le loro (riferito a 'animal spirits', riga 12).
- 9 clattering ... mad. In gran trambusto come pazzi scatenati.
- 10 quoth. Said (forma arc.).
- 11 wind up. Caricare.
- 12 Good G – ! Buon Dio.

### READING COMPETENCE

#### 1 READ the text and match the highlighted words and phrases with their meaning.

- |                            |                      |
|----------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 suppose .....            | 6 people .....       |
| 2 required .....           | 7 procreated .....   |
| 3 in motion .....          | 8 quality .....      |
| 4 had paid attention ..... | 9 was involved ..... |
| 5 failures .....           |                      |

#### 2 READ the text again and do the following activities.

##### 1 'animal spirits' in line 12 means

- A soul and body.
- B mind.
- C mental and physical energies.

##### 2 Does the plot proceed in chronological order?

##### 3 Two different time sequences appear: 'clock time' and 'subjective time'. Complete the following sentences, then answer the question below.

- 1 'Clock time' refers to .....
- 2 'Subjective time' refers to .....

What is the function of the difference between 'clock time' and 'subjective time'? Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ The narrator wants to draw the reader's attention only to 'subjective time'.
- ☐ The narrative follows the protagonist's free association of ideas.



4 What is the dominant mode? Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ Description.
- ☐ Narration.
- ☐ Dialogue.

5 Focus on the narrator. How would you define him?

- A Internal to the story.
- B Detached.
- C External to the story.
- D Involved.

From whose point of view are the events narrated?

6 How many times does the narrator directly appeal to the reader? How is he invited to participate? Answer these questions quoting from the text.

7 From the information you have gathered about Tristram's mother and father, can you make hypotheses regarding their personalities? Tick as appropriate.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 The father is                         | 2 The mother is                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> authoritarian. | <input type="checkbox"/> submissive.    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> clever.        | <input type="checkbox"/> stupid.        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> honest.        | <input type="checkbox"/> vain.          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> brave.         | <input type="checkbox"/> absent-minded. |

8 Sterne believes that our thoughts are conditioned by chains of accidents or random associations of ideas and that the father's state of mind at the moment of conception determines the character of the child.

- 1 Quote the phrases in the passage which reflect these beliefs.
- 2 What would you expect Tristram's character to be?

9 Why is this passage paradoxical?

- A The narrator relates conversation and events that he could not have witnessed.
- B The narrator quotes antithetical beliefs.
- C The narrator describes the paradoxical behaviour of his parents.

10 How would you define the language of this episode? Tick as appropriate.

- |                                      |                                      |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Realistic.  | <input type="checkbox"/> Funny.      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ironical.   | <input type="checkbox"/> Complex.    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Abstract.   | <input type="checkbox"/> Ridiculous. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Digressive. | <input type="checkbox"/> Simple.     |

11 A concept is repeated several times in lines 1-20.

- 1 Write it down: .....
- 2 State the function of this repetition: .....

12 A long digression about the 'animal spirits' is followed by the stupid question of Tristram's mother to her husband. What is its purpose? Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ To amuse the readers.
- ☐ To create expectation.
- ☐ To involve the reader.
- ☐ To sum up a concept.

13 What is Sterne's aim in writing this passage? Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ He wants to concentrate the reader's attention on Tristram's parents and not on Tristram himself, thus breaking the rules of any conventional biographical novel.
- ☐ He wants to describe Tristram's parents in detail.
- ☐ He wants to give expression to Tristram's opinion on life.

**3 COMPLETE** the summary of the text with the words from the box.

life	hypothesis	negative	growth	parents
irritation	silly	physical	interested	



The characters of the text are Tristram and his **(1)** ..... Tristram is making **(2)** ..... about his parents' mental and **(3)** ..... state while they were giving him **(4)** ..... The narrator points out that Tristram's parents are not **(5)** ..... in what they are doing. The **(6)** ..... of Tristram's father is caused by the **(7)** ..... question of Tristram's mother (line 21). This may have had a **(8)** ..... influence on Tristram's mental and physical **(9)** .....

**4 STATE** how *Tristram Shandy* differs from the previous novels you have studied. Focus on the following items.

- |   |                            |   |               |
|---|----------------------------|---|---------------|
| 1 | Setting in time and place; | 4 | theme/s;      |
| 2 | plot;                      | 5 | narrator;     |
| 3 | characters;                | 6 | writer's aim. |