

# Tristram Shandy

Laurence Sterne

## Context

Laurence Sterne was born in 1713 in Ireland, the son of an army officer. After graduating from Cambridge University, Sterne settled in Yorkshire and remained in England for the remainder of his life. He became a clergyman there, and then married a woman with whom he did not get along. His two major novels, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* and *A Sentimental Journey*, were written near the end of his life. He died in March, 1768, at the age of 55.

Sterne wrote *Tristram Shandy* between 1759 and 1767. The book was published in five separate installments, each containing two volumes except the last, which included only the final Volume 9. The numerous cliffhangers and anticipations Sterne put in the closing chapters of each installment are conventional features of serially published works, meant to arouse curiosity and maintain interest in the volumes to come. *Tristram Shandy* was enthusiastically received from the beginning, though it was also criticized for being bawdy and indecent in its frank treatment of sexual themes.

For its time, the novel is highly unconventional in its narrative technique—even though it also incorporates a vast number of references and allusions to more traditional works. The title itself is a play on a novelistic formula that would have been familiar to Sterne's contemporary readers; instead of giving us the "life and adventures" of his hero, Sterne promises us his "life and opinions." What sounds like a minor difference actually unfolds into a radically new kind of narrative. *Tristram Shandy* bears little resemblance to the orderly and structurally

unified novels (of which Fielding's *Tom Jones* was considered to be the model) that were popular in Sterne's day. The questions Sterne's novel raises about the nature of fiction and of reading have given *Tristram Shandy* a particular relevance for twentieth century writers like Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, and James Joyce.

## Summary

The action covered in *Tristram Shandy* spans the years 1680-1766. Sterne obscures the story's underlying chronology, however, by rearranging the order of the various pieces of his tale. He also subordinates the basic plot framework by weaving together a number of different stories, as well as such disparate materials as essays, sermons, and legal documents. There are, nevertheless, two clearly discernible narrative lines in the book.

The first is the plot sequence that includes Tristram's conception, birth, christening, and accidental circumcision. (This sequence extends somewhat further in Tristram's treatment of his "breeching," the problem of his education, and his first and second tours of France, but these events are handled less extensively and are not as central to the text.) It takes six volumes to cover this chain of events, although comparatively few pages are spent in actually advancing such a simple plot. The story occurs as a series of accidents, all of which seem calculated to confound Walter Shandy's hopes and expectations for his son. The manner of his conception is the first disaster, followed by the flattening of his nose at birth, a misunderstanding in which he is given the wrong name, and an accidental run-in with a falling window-sash. The catastrophes that befall Tristram are actually relatively trivial; only in the context of Walter Shandy's eccentric, pseudo-scientific theories do they become calamities.

The second major plot consists of the fortunes of Tristram's Uncle Toby. Most of the details of this story are concentrated in the final third of the

novel, although they are alluded to and developed in piecemeal fashion from the very beginning. Toby receives a wound to the groin while in the army, and it takes him four years to recover. When he is able to move around again, he retires to the country with the idea of constructing a scaled replica of the scene of the battle in which he was injured. He becomes obsessed with re-enacting those battles, as well as with the whole history and theory of fortification and defense. The Peace of Utrecht slows him down in these "hobby-horsical" activities, however, and it is during this lull that he falls under the spell of Widow Wadman. The novel ends with the long-promised account of their unfortunate affair.

### Characters

**Tristram Shandy** - Tristram is both the fictionalized author of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* and the child whose conception, birth, christening, and circumcision form one major sequence of the narrative. The adult Tristram Shandy relates certain aspects of his family history, including many that took place before his own birth, drawing from stories and hearsay as much as from his own memories. His *opinions* we get in abundance; of the actual details of his life the author furnishes only traces, and the child Tristram turns out to be a minor character.

**Walter Shandy** - Tristram's philosophically-minded father. Walter Shandy's love for abstruse and convoluted intellectual argumentation and his readiness to embrace any tantalizing hypothesis lead him to propound a great number of absurd pseudo-scientific theories.

**Elizabeth Shandy (Mrs. Shandy)** - Tristram's mother. Mrs. Shandy insists on having the midwife attend her labor rather than Dr. Slop, out of resentment at not being allowed to bear the child in London. On all other points, Mrs. Shandy

is singularly passive and uncontentious, which makes her a dull conversational partner for her argumentative husband.

**Captain Toby Shandy (Uncle Toby)** - Tristram's uncle, and brother to Walter Shandy. After sustaining a groin-wound in battle, he retires to a life of obsessive attention to the history and science of military fortifications. His temperament is gentle and sentimental: Tristram tells us he wouldn't harm a fly.

**Corporal Trim** - Manservant and sidekick to Uncle Toby. His real name is James Butler; he received the nickname "Trim" while in the military. Trim colludes with Captain Toby in his military shenanigans, but his own favorite hobby is advising people, especially if it allows him to make eloquent speeches.

**Dr. Slop** - The local male midwife, who, at Walter's insistence, acts as a back-up at Tristram's birth. A "scientific operator," Dr. Slop has written a book expressing his disdain for the practice of midwifery. He is interested in surgical instrument and medical advances, and prides himself on having invented a new pair of delivery forceps.

**Parson Yorick** - The village parson, and a close friend of the Shandy family. Yorick is lighthearted and straight-talking; he detests gravity and pretension. As a witty and misunderstood clergyman, he has often been taken as a representation of the writer, Sterne, himself.

**Susannah** - Chambermaid to Mrs. Shandy. She is present at Tristram's birth, complicit in his mis-christening, and partly to blame for his accidental circumcision by the fallen window shade.

**Obadiah** - Servant to Walter Shandy.

**Bobby Shandy** - Tristram's older brother, who dies in London while away at school.

**Widow Wadman** - A neighbor who has marital designs on Captain Toby Shandy, and with whom he has a brief and abortive courtship.

**Bridget** - Maidservant to Widow Wadman. Corporal Trim courts Bridget at the same time that Toby courts Widow Wadman, and Trim and Bridget's relationship continues for five years thereafter.

**The midwife** - The local delivery-nurse who is commissioned to assist at Mrs. Shandy's labor.

**Eugenius** - Friend and advisor to Parson Yorick. His name means "well-born," and he is often the voice of discretion.

**Didius** - A pedantic church lawyer, and the author of the midwife's license.

**Kysarcus, Phutatorius, Triptolemus, and Gastripheres** - Along with Didius, they form the colloquy of learned men whom Walter, Toby, and Parson Yorick consult about the possibility of changing Tristram's name.

**The curate** - The local church official, also named Tristram, who misnames the baby when Susannah fails to pronounce the chosen name "Trismegistus."

**Aunt Dinah** - Tristram's great aunt and, in Tristram's estimation, the only woman in the Shandy family with any character at all. She created a family scandal by marrying the coachman and having a child late in her life.

**Lieutenant Le Fever** - A favorite sentimental charity case of Uncle Toby's and Corporal Trim's. Le Fever died under their care, leaving an orphan son.

**Billy Le Fever** - The son of Lieutenant Le Fever. Uncle Toby becomes Billy's guardian, supervises his education, and eventually recommends him to be Tristram's governor.

### Volume 1 Summary

Tristram Shandy begins his autobiographical tale with the story of his conception, in which his mother interrupts the sexual moment by asking an irrelevant question about the winding of the clock. The author speculates that the circumstances in which a child is conceived profoundly influence its eventual mind, body, and character. He laments his parents' careless demeanor at this decisive juncture: "had they duly consider'd how much depended on what they were then doing...I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world." As it stands, he blames his own "thousand weaknesses both of body and mind" on their negligence. Tristram reveals that the whole circumstance of his coming into the world occurred as a series of such accidents and misfortunes. Stating succinctly that he was born on November 5, 1718, he promises to give the full details of his birth eventually, but only after a detour through his "opinions." He admits from the beginning that his narration will be unconventional, and he begs the reader to be patient and to "let me go on, and tell the story in my own way."

Meandering through the history of the town midwife, Tristram takes the opportunity to satirize the obscure legal language of her license document. He also introduces the character of Parson Yorick, whom he relates to the jester Yorick in *Hamlet* and to Cervantes's Don Quixote. At the suggestion of his wife, Parson Yorick sponsors the training of the midwife as a service to the town. The parson actually stands to benefit personally from this benevolent gesture, since the townspeople were frequently borrowing his fine horses to ride the seven miles to the nearest

doctor. In order to secure himself against charges of ulterior motives, he has vowed always to ride the decrepit old horse on which we now see him. Yorick's constant joking and acid wit make him many enemies; his unpopularity eventually drives him to a miserable early death.

The transition from the satire of legal language to the story of Yorick and his horses takes place by means of a brief, essayistic account of "hobby-horses": the narrow and often esoteric pursuits (hobbies, essentially) that interest people--often, to the point of obsession. The stories of Yorick and the midwife are also interrupted by the Dedication in Chapter 8, and by a passage in which Tristram forecasts his own literary fame. Tristram again defends his digressive style, promising "to go on leisurely, writing and publishing two volumes of my life every year" until he dies.

The marriage settlement between Tristram's parents stipulates that Mrs. Shandy could choose to bear her children in London, where she would find superior medical care. It also states, however, that if she made the trip to London on any false alarms, the husband could require her to stay in the country on the next occasion. This is the clause Walter Shandy invokes at the time of Tristram's birth. While Tristram thinks the legal arrangement, on the whole, a fair one, he thinks it "hard that the whole weight of the article should have fallen entirely, as it did, upon myself." He chalks this up as another one of his misfortunes, since it led him to be born with a flattened nose (the explanation about how this came to pass is deferred). Mrs. Shandy, since she cannot have "the famous Dr. Maningham" of London, insists on employing the midwife to deliver the baby--out of peevishness, Tristram suggests. Walter feels strongly that she should have Dr. Slop instead, and they finally agree to pay him to wait downstairs, in case of emergency.

Tristram introduces his father's theory that "there was a strange kind of magick bias, which good or bad names, as he called them, irresistibly

impress'd upon our characters and conduct." The most disadvantageous name of all, and the one Walter most detests, is Tristram. The narrator declares that he cannot yet tell the story of how he came to be called Tristram, appealing to the necessity that "I should be born before I [am] christened." He follows this statement with a more academic version of the same argument (about the proper order of the rituals surrounding birth), quoting a long and abstruse document dealing with the question of whether fetuses can be baptized in the womb.

Walter and Uncle Toby sit downstairs while Mrs. Shandy is going into labor. Before any dialogue gets properly underway, Tristram interrupts to give an account of Toby's character, promising to return to their conversation subsequently. Toby, we learn (after a few asides about the English climate and the scandalous marriage of Aunt Dinah) is notable for his overweening modesty, the fuller explanation of which Tristram, as usual, reserves for later, telling us only that it stems from a wound to the groin that Toby received during the siege of Namur.

Tristram then enters into a digression on digressions, explaining that his work is both digressive and progressive. Though the story may sometimes seem to be sidetracked or standing still, he claims that it is actually moving forward all the while. He then returns to Toby's character, which he says will be best illustrated by means of his uncle's strange hobby-horse. He relates how Toby, after being wounded, spent four years confined to his bed, where he was frequently called upon by sympathetic visitors. They usually wanted to hear the story of his injury, a fact that caused Toby some consternation--for reasons that Tristram declines to supply until the next volume.

### Commentary

Tristram's story begins *ab Ovo* ("from the egg"), in defiance of the Homeric epic tradition that begins stories in the middle of things and then allows the background to unfold along with the action. The alternative, seemingly, would be to begin with the beginning; Tristram takes this possibility to an almost ludicrous extreme by beginning *before* the beginning, from his conception rather than his birth. This strategy leads him into the problem of relating events of which he could have no knowledge, which would call into question his status as an autobiographical narrator. He anticipates and answers this concern by explaining that he has learned the story of his conception from his Uncle Toby, who in turn heard it from Walter Shandy. The effect is to emphasize that Tristram's accounts are not fictional--but neither should we take them as perfectly objective. Tristram represents a type of authorial presence different from that of Sterne himself: he is not free to invent characters or imagine events, but rather filters a "real" world (and a drastically limited and personal one, with a radius of but five miles) through his own experience, memory, personality, and opinions.

It quickly becomes apparent that the chronology of the story will be more complex and unorthodox than just its *ab Ovo* beginning. The narrative oversteps its own declared limits, including events that took place long before even the night of conception, and also drawing Jenny, the author's companion as the story is being written, into the book. And not only does Tristram stretch his chronological coverage to its extreme possibilities, he also disrupts it internally by presenting events in the wrong order, interrupting one anecdote with others or with essayistic digressions, and scrambling the beginnings, middles, and ends of his sequences. Yet, he maintains, the story is going on all the while. This is largely true because the narrator's own voice and interpretations provide a source of continuity. By listening to Tristram, we are getting to know him, which

was the whole point, and which takes precedence over the details of his birth, or any other single episode. "As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance that is now beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity; and...will terminate in friendship."

The idea of the hobby-horse, which is introduced casually here, will become a major thematic concern. There is nothing inherently sinister about these hobby-horses; most people have them, and Tristram confesses readily to having a few of his own (we are clearly to assume that his writing is one). But the novel will dramatize the way they can lead into a state of total self-absorption, when they become such a constant preoccupation that everything in the world gets subordinated to a single, all-consuming idea. In exploring this possibility, Sterne seems to see it as simply an extreme instance of what is already our innate psychological nature: drawing on Locke's chapter on association in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he dramatizes the way ideas that seem to be unrelated become connected in our minds. The novel will explore the implications of these associations for scientific knowledge, for our everyday understanding of cause and effect, and for social interactions.

The digressiveness of the narrative, in the way it follows chains of association rather than sticking to a rigid, formal structure, is also a manifestation of this principle. Obsessively formal thinking can be a kind of hobby-horse. Walter is the prime example of this deluding approach to the world: "like all systematic reasoners, he would move both heaven and earth, and twist and torture everything in nature to support his hypothesis." The open form of Tristram's writing, then, is an effort to take in the world in all its variety and flux. It is a resistance, in part, to the distortions and manipulations that Tristram sees his father performing to force evidence for his preconceived ideas. It remains for the reader to decide whether Tristram's approach offers any more objective window on

reality, or whether Tristram's own set of hobby-horses gives rise to just as much distortion.

Another open question is whether Sterne's attitude toward Tristram and his project is one of endorsement or irony. Tristram's frequent addresses to the reader (imagined variously and flexibly as Sir, Madam, Dear Reader, your worships, etc.) draw us into the novel. From Tristram's perspective, we are asked to be open-minded, and to follow his lead in an experimental kind of literary adventure. The gap between Tristram-the-author and Sterne-the-author, however, invites us not only to participate with Tristram, but also to assess his character and his narrative.

### Volume 2 Summary

Tristram picks up where the last chapter left off, undertaking now "to explain the nature of the perplexities in which my uncle Toby was involved" in his attempts to tell the story of his war wound. Toby's trouble was that the military maneuvers in question were so intricate and technical that nobody could understand him; indeed he sometimes even confused himself as well. It occurs to him now to get a large map of the environs of Namur, which relieves him of his difficulty and also sets him off on his hobby-horse.

Tristram informs the reader that his book is to be a "history-book" in the same way that Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is a history-book--that is, as a history "of what passes in a man's own mind." He goes on to attribute the obscurity in Toby's battle descriptions not to any kind of mental confusion, but to a confusion in language itself: the "unsteady uses of words" that predominates especially in the technical jargons of specialized fields.

Captain Toby's obsession with his map grows, and he launches into a detailed study of fortification and military science that becomes his ruling passion. He soon grows restless for his recovery. Tristram, after reminding us that he still means to resume the interrupted conversation from Volume 1, Chapter 21 (when he cut Toby off at "I think --"), proceeds with the story of his uncle's sudden desire to leave the sickbed: Corporal Trim, Toby's servant, had planted the suggestion in his master's mind that they should move to the country in order to construct a replica, built to scale, of the battle site and fortifications. This idea pleases Toby so intensely that he can hardly wait to begin.

Tristram resumes the scene by the fireside on the day of his own birth, and Toby finishes his long-delayed sentence by suggesting that they ring the bell to inquire about all the noise upstairs. The labor has begun in earnest; Susannah runs for the midwife, and Walter sends Obadiah to fetch Dr. Slop. Speculating about Mrs. Shandy's preference for the midwife, Toby suggests that it might be a question of modesty. Walter challenges him on this point, and Toby defers, admitting that he knows nothing about women. He alludes to the unfortunate outcome of his affair with Widow Wadman as evidence of the fact. Walter begins to hold forth about the right and the wrong end of a woman, but is interrupted by a knock at the door.

Obadiah and Dr. Slop have arrived. Tristram reflects on the complications of calculating time in a narrative where events are happening simultaneously, or in comparing narrative time with lived time. He first claims that it has been an hour and a half since Obadiah left on his errand--plenty of time to return with the doctor. He then argues, from the other side, that no more than two minutes, thirteen and three-fifths seconds could possibly have passed. Finally, he offers the conjecture that years have passed, since all the stories of Uncle Toby's military career and invalidism have intervened since the birthday was

first mentioned. His imaginary critic remains unpersuaded, so Tristram closes the matter by revealing that Obadiah actually ran into Dr. Slop just outside the house, in a collision that sent them both into the mud.

Obadiah is sent back out to fetch the doctor's tools, which the doctor has left at home. Toby has been put in mind of Stevinus, an engineer and writer on fortifications; he explains the connection, which seems illogical to everyone else. Walter insults him for his doggedness and stupidity. Tristram relates that Toby's feelings were hurt, but that he "was a man patient of injuries." He goes on to tell a sentimental anecdote about how Toby "scarce had heart to retaliate upon a fly," and attributes whatever goodwill he himself has learned to the early impression of his uncle's gentleness and humanity. Walter, seeing Toby's serene countenance, quickly apologizes, and the brothers are reconciled. Corporal Trim delivers a sermon on conscience (actually one of Sterne's own) that has fallen out of the volume of Stevinus. Tristram gives a minutely detailed visual description of the stance Trim assumes for this oration. The sermon proves to have been left in the book by Parson Yorick, who subsequently retrieves it.

Obadiah returns with the bag of surgical instruments, and attention turns once again to Mrs. Shandy's labor. Dr. Slop is told that he is not to interfere unless called for, so he contents himself with educating the company about recent advances in the science of obstetrics. We learn about another one of Walter's pet theories: that the medulla oblongata is the most important part of the brain, and that it stands in great danger during the process of childbirth. With strength in numbers, the medical hobby-horses of Walter and Dr. Slop outpace Uncle Toby's militaristic reflections, and the latter is unable to regain the floor. The volume closes with a reminder of certain narrative loose ends still to be picked up, most importantly: how Toby got his modesty from his groin-wound, how

Tristram's nose was lost in the marriage contract, and how he came to be named Tristram.

### *Commentary*

In calling his work a history of "what passes in a man's mind," Tristram draws attention to the fact that, in writing his own "life and opinions," he will be portraying mostly a *mental life*. This reassurance is important in light of the fact that we have moved through two volumes without yet arriving at the point of the protagonist's birth. He addresses our expectations on this point not only to help us make sense of the work, but also because those expectations are part of what the work is about--as is the question of how exactly the mental life figures in the life of a man. Still, the comparison to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is a provocative one: does Tristram mean that Locke's highly theoretical book is actually more autobiographical and introspective than philosophical? Or is he suggesting that his own book, however personal it may be, will draw out general truths about human nature? The author problematizes, through considerations like these, the relationship between a history of an individual mind and a philosophical account of human thinking in general.

The comparison to Locke also raises the question of the genre of this text. Sterne's book could be considered a novel; Tristram's narrative is certainly not one. *Tristram Shandy* actually draws on the conventions of a number of genres, if often only to poke fun at them or turn them on their heads. Ultimately, the novel recasts these conventions into a unique structure of its own. Comedy, essay, and satire are all modes the author regularly takes up. He refers to other literary works, and also pronounces his own work's independence from them. The presence of whole documents from various non-literary disciplines (like the sermon in this volume, and the memorandum in the first) contributes likewise to the

generic heterogeneity of the book. The inclusion of these texts also develops a thematic concern about the clash between everyday human life and the world of esoteric scholarship.

We begin to see more clearly, in this volume, that the novel is weaving together two major narrative lines: one is the sequence that involves the pivotal events of Tristram's early existence. The other traces the story of Uncle Toby, from his soldiering days to his hobby-horse and eventually to his lovelife. In this volume, the spotlight focuses on Toby while Tristram hangs suspended in the background, just on the verge of being born. As Tristram reveals more about his uncle's hobby-horse, the reader sees the ridiculous behaviors into which his obsession with fortifications carries him. We also, however, see him as genuinely kind and sympathetic: the famous anecdote of Toby and the fly invites us to empathize with him as strongly as Tristram does. Yet the overly sentimental tones in which the story is presented suggest that Sterne might be poking fun at the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility, into which Tristram's tale squarely falls. With the allusion to Toby's modesty in the first volume, and to his affair with the Widow Wadman in this volume, Tristram is outlining the trajectory Toby's part of the story will take.

Conversation, in these chapters, is governed by dueling hobby-horses. As the male characters compete for the chance to vocalize their various intellectual obsessions, the dialogue degenerates, becoming at certain moments either unintelligible or utterly irrelevant. The real, consequential event that is taking place upstairs is all but forgotten in the stupidity and self-absorption of their discourse. Yet pregnancy becomes a metaphor for these (often abortive) intellectual labors: Tristram speaks of his father's failure "to be safely delivered of" his explanation about women, and he discusses Walter's speculative tendencies in similar terms: "It is the nature of an hypothesis, when once a man has conceived it, that it

assimilates everything to itself as proper nourishment; and, from the first moment of your begetting it, it generally grows the stronger by everything you see, hear, read, or understand." When Tristram compares Walter's philosophizing with the labor going on upstairs, we are encouraged to think of Tristram's own writing project in the same way. The birth at the center of the novel is a figure for the idea of the "brainchild"--the process of mental construction that is the major subject of the book, and of which the book itself stands as an example.

### Volume 3 Summary

Still in the parlor, Uncle Toby continues his attempt to redirect the conversation toward the armies at Flanders. Walter takes the bait, but then lapses into a state of physical confusion when he removes his hat with his right hand and then has to reach across with his left to remove the handkerchief from his right coat pocket. Tristram criticizes his father for not pausing to switch hands, but Walter has never been one to retract a decision once he has advanced it. Uncle Toby, in contrast to Tristram, waits through Walter's contortions with patience and goodwill. He "whistles Lillabullero," however, at his brother's argument that babies were more frequently damaged during birth before the advent of modern medical technology.

The next physical struggle comes with Dr. Slop's attempt to untie the knot in his medical bag. Obadiah knotted it up to prevent it from clattering during transport so that he could hear himself whistle. Tristram suggests that this knot, too, contributed to the flattening of his nose. Dr. Slop cuts his thumb with a penknife. He falls to cursing Obadiah, and Walter offers him the use of one of his ready-made curses. The curse he produces is actually a Catholic excommunication document, written by Ernulphus the Bishop. Dr. Slop hesitates at its vehemence, but then is persuaded to continue with the excommunication, inserting Obadiah's



name wherever relevant. Tristram offers the opinion that we are all original when we swear, an argument contradictory to his father's hypothesis that every curse is originally derived from this one by Ernulphus.

Susannah appears, announcing that she has cut her arm, the midwife has fallen and bruised her hip, and the baby is still not delivered. She relays the midwife's request that Dr. Slop be called upstairs to assist. Dr. Slop, however, is sensitive about the fact that he has been subordinated to the midwife, and bristles at being summoned like a servant. He begins to speak disparagingly of the traditional methods of midwifery and its rude instruments of "fingers and thumbs." He concludes his statement, in what Tristram calls "a singular stroke of eloquence," with a flourish of the newly invented forceps, which he has finally liberated from the knotted bag. Unfortunately, he also accidentally produces the squirt, which is tangled with the forceps. This prompts Toby to ask, innocent of his own sexual innuendo, "are children brought into the world by a squirt?" Dr. Slop demonstrates the forceps on Toby, skinning his hands and knuckles in the process. In the delivery room, Dr. Slop and the midwife debate about whether it is the child's hip or head that is foremost. Slop remarks that the question is of no small consequence, suggesting that if the child is male, his genitalia may be in danger from the forceps.

"It is two hours and ten minutes...since Dr. Slop and Obadiah arrived," declares Walter, "but to my imagination it seems almost an age." He prepares to deliver a philosophical lecture on "Duration," only to be interrupted by Toby, who steals the gist of the argument out from under him: "'Tis owning, entirely, quoth my uncle Toby, to the succession of our ideas." After a moment of consternation, Walter launches into the lecture anyway. He and Toby bicker, and the speech is again cut short. Tristram, sarcastically, regrets what the world has lost in the unfinished lecture.

Walter and Toby fall asleep, the others are busy upstairs, and the author takes advantage of this quiet moment to write the Preface, which deals with Locke's remarks on wit and judgment. Tristram opposes Locke's ranking of judgment above wit, arguing instead that they go hand in hand, like the two knobs on the back of the chair. The brothers are then awakened by the squeaking of the hinge as Corporal Trim peeks into the room.

Trim informs the group that Dr. Slop is in the kitchen making a bridge, for which Toby expresses his heartfelt gratitude. Toby believes Slop is repairing the drawbridge, and Tristram digresses to tell the story of how Trim and Bridget broke the bridge during a romantic rendezvous at the fortifications. The confusion is cleared up when Trim announces that the bridge under construction is for the baby's nose, which has been crushed by the forceps.

Tristram describes at great length his father's elaborate and melodramatic posture of grief as he sprawls across the bed. Walter's distress is compounded, we learn, by a history of small noses in the family, a phenomenon that has had significant financial consequences. As a consequence, Walter has read deeply in the literature of noses, adopting it as another one of his obsessions. Tristram ends by promising a tale from Slawkenbergius, one of the most eminent authorities on noses.

### *Commentary*

With the amusing portrait of Walter Shandy attempting to reach his right pocket with his left hand, Tristram caricatures the doggedness of his father's philosophical disposition. The visual image of Walter's physical straining and contortions stands as a figure for the absurd intellectual gymnastics he constantly performs in defense of his favorite theories. The episode of the squeaky hinge, similarly, highlights the fact that Walter

Shandy's passion for the esoteric causes him to neglect more practical matters. The fact that Tristram still has not fixed the hinge even well after his father's death reminds us that there are strong resemblances between the father and the son, even though Tristram may try to downplay them.

Things do not look good for the child about to be delivered. Tristram has given us sufficient notice that the baby's nose is in jeopardy. The fact that Dr. Slop mangles Toby's hand with the forceps, in combination with Walter's theorizing about brain damage, leaves us cringing in anticipation of the disaster that is about to take place. The confusion about heads and hips firmly links the flattened nose with the possibility of castration. Tristram will deny any such symbolic circuitousness, asserting the literalness of his story. His characters, however, continue to reflect from time to time on the event as a near-miss, keeping the association active in the reader's mind.

In the discussion of time, Toby stumbles onto the Lockean definition of duration upon which Walter meant to expound. Sterne is attending here to the difference between clock-time and mental time. The explanation, though fairly abstruse, comments on the episode from the previous volume in which the elapsed time between Obadiah's departure and return became so utterly indeterminate. Each consciousness has its own pacing and tempo, set by whatever mental activity is going on at the moment. The effort to synchronize this tempo with an objective, external time can create strange effects, as when a short span of clock time "seems an age." One result of this discontinuity is to underscore the irreducible separation between individuals--the fact that people live in such separate worlds that each person is, in fact, a world unto himself. Locke's theory also lends an authoritative backing to Tristram's unconventional methodology in the temporal ordering of his narrative.

Tristram's elaborate wordplay on the word "bridge" points out that language, which we typically think of as a vehicle for communication, can actually be another medium for human isolation. The fact that the word suggests so many different contexts testifies both to the slipperiness of language and to the way an individual's private outlook colors his interpretations. Tristram also reminds us in the digression about the bridge that the story of Toby's amours is still forthcoming.

### Volume 4 Summary

Tristram begins, as promised, with the Slawkenbergius tale, a story about a traveler with an exceptionally long nose. He then returns to his father, who is still lying across the bed, but begins to rouse himself and expostulate about his afflictions. Walter decides that the misfortune of the crushed nose must be counteracted with all the force of an exceedingly propitious name: he settles on "Trismegistus."

Walter calls the day's events "a chapter of chances," and so prompts Tristram to review the list of chapters he has promised the reader: on knots, whiskers, the right and wrong end of a woman, wishes, noses, and modesty. He adds to the list a chapter on chapters, which he delivers immediately as his father and Uncle Toby walk downstairs. It takes several more chapters to get them all the way down the stairs, during which time they contemplate the greatness of the name "Trismegistus" and speculate on the difficulties of marriage and childbirth.

Tristram discusses with the reader the fact that he is in the fourth volume of his life story and has only gotten to the first day of his life. Some quick calculations reveal that at the current rate of one volume a year, the length of his life is growing faster than he is telling it. Rather than progressing, he is actually losing ground: "the more I write, the more I

shall have to write," he marvels, pointing out that the same holds true for the reader.

Susannah rushes in with the news that the child has gone black in the face. She needs to know the name he is to be given so that he will not die without being baptized. Walter hesitates for a moment, debating whether to risk such a great name on a child who might not live to reap its benefits. But since there is no time to be wasted, he sends Susannah with the name while he dresses himself. But she proves, as Walter had feared, to be a "leaky vessel"; she can only remember the first syllable to tell the curate. He christens the baby "Tristram," impatient of Susannah's objections. When Walter learns of the mistake, he walks calmly out to the fish-pond, surprising everyone with his composure. Remaining behind, Toby and Trim find a hole in Walter's theory about the importance of Christian names, reflecting on the fact that names actually make very little difference in battle. When Walter returns to the house, he delivers a speech on the systematic manner in which he has been persecuted in the matter of this child.

They send for Parson Yorick, in order to inquire whether a re-christening is possible. He declares himself no "canonist" and suggests that they consult Didius, the church lawyer. Tristram then omits a chapter (skipping from 23 to 25) and staunchly defends his privilege of doing so. He tells at great length what would have been in the chapter before returning us to the dinner of scholars. The issue of the un-naming is put off by a comic incident in which a roasted chestnut has fallen into Phutatorius's pants and burned him. He blames Yorick for the incident, demonstrating the parson's tendency to make enemies unwittingly. After treating the burn by wrapping it in a page just off the printing press, the learned men resume the question of the naming accident. After lengthy debates they conclude, irrelevantly, that parents are unrelated to their children.

Walter Shandy actually enjoys these circular academic discussions greatly, and only when he returns home does he recall his miserable afflictions. He is immediately distracted from them again by the arrival of a letter naming him as the recipient of a legacy of a thousand pounds, left to him by Aunt Dinah. He muses for some time about how to spend the money, feeling torn between sending Tristram's brother Bobby on a Grand Tour of Europe, or making some capital improvements to the Shandy estate. His indecision is relieved, however, when the news arrives that Bobby had died. Tristram seems to exult in that fact as the volume closes, stating that he dates the proper beginning of his "life and opinions" from the moment he became the family heir. He teases the reader, once again, with the promise of Uncle Toby's love affair, calling it "the choicest morsel of the whole story."

### *Commentary*

The sexually suggestive story from Slawkenbergius reopens the question of whether a sexual innuendo is implied in Tristram's damaged nose. Tristram plays with his audience here: he wants the reader to feel the ridiculousness of the conventional assumption that everything in a story must have a hidden meaning. To create this effect, Tristram must simultaneously encourage and disappoint that expectation. Tristram cultivates this ambiguity in a variety of ways, including the sexual overtones in the description of Uncle Toby's wound to the groin and the incident in which the hot chestnut lands in Phutatorius's fly.

Time continues to be an important theme. In analyzing the way his life outpaces his narration of it, Tristram is stating in concrete terms an idea that has been a premise of the book all along: the extreme difficulty for even the most flexible and resourceful kind of writing to contain an immeasurably rich, complex, and diverse reality. These reflections do not fling Tristram into despair about his project, however. Rather, he seems

to approach it with a new vigor, taking the abundance of material as a highly optimistic circumstance.

The accidental mischristening of the baby forces Walter to revise the explanation he gave earlier when he called this day "a chapter of chances." The particular misfortunes that have befallen him touch with perfect precision on each of Walter's most treasured obsessions, the points of his greatest vulnerability. They began to look too coincidental to be accidental, and he decides that he must be the victim of some heavenly conspiracy. Tristram, like his father, is susceptible to far-fetched ideas about the causation of events. They take the remotest precursor to everything that happens as its fundamental cause, overlooking more immediate factors. Such a view contributes to a fatalistic outlook: when a servant's knot is the "real" explanation for medical malpractice, human beings are seen as having very little control over the outcomes of their actions.

### Volume 5 Summary

Tristram opens this volume with epigraphs from Horace and Erasmus and then immediately inveighs against plagiarism and literary borrowing. He complains, "Shall we for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring out of one vessel into another? Are we forever to be twisting and untwisting the same rope?"

He then returns to the scene in which his father is digesting the news of Bobby's death. Walter's grief takes the oblique and impersonal form of a catalogue of literary and historical cases of parents who have lost children. Mrs. Shandy, overhearing the word "wife," listens at the door. Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Corporal Trim makes a speech on the subject of death that parallels Walter's oration in the parlor. Tristram compares the rhetorical styles of these two men of such different education and

upbringing. Obadiah and Susannah respond still differently: he thinks of all the work that will have to be done on the ox-moor, and she thinks of a green satin gown and the preparing of the mourning clothes. Tristram then digresses in order to recall that he still owes chapters on chambermaids and buttonholes, hoping that the previous chapter might adequately discharge his debt. Trim's speech-making continues while Tristram returns to Mrs. Shandy, whom he has left listening at the parlor door, in time to hear Walter's closing speculations on Socrates and his children.

Walter determines to devote himself, now that his oldest son is dead, to preserving what is left of his unfortunate remaining child. He sets out to write a "Tristra-paedia," a book outlining the system under which Tristram is to be educated. After three years of work, Walter is almost halfway through with the project; unfortunately, the child's education is being neglected all the while.

At the age of five Tristram suffers his next major catastrophe, in which he is accidentally circumcised by a falling window sash in the nursery. "'Twas nothing," he says, "I did not lose two drops of blood by it." But the house is thrown into an uproar. Susannah, who was supervising the child, flees the scene for fear of reprisal. Trim, hearing of the incident, takes the blame onto himself; he dismantled all the sashes to collect lead for Toby's fortifications. Trim's valiant defense of Susannah reminds Toby of the Battle of Steenkirk. Toby, Yorick, Trim, and Susannah march in formation to Shandy Hall to tell Walter about the accident. Walter's eccentricity makes him unpredictable, and nobody is sure how he will react.

Tristram, arguing for his right to backtrack, returns to the moment of the accident. The child screams most impressively, and his mother comes running to see what is the matter just as Susannah slips out the back.

Walter also proceeds to the nursery, learning what has transpired from the servants, who have already heard the story from Susannah. He surveys the scene without a word and walks back downstairs. He soon returns again, equipped to facilitate matters with a Latin volume on Hebrew circumcision practices. Walter and Yorick confer and pronounce that no harm has been done to the child.

Walter then begins to read from the *Tristra-paedia*. Toby and Trim take up among themselves the question of "radical heat and radical moisture." They generate and then present an alternative theory to Walter's. This free-for-all is interrupted by the entrance of Dr. Slop, who has been tending to little Tristram. Slop offers his diagnosis, and then the others return to their debate. Walter promises to refrain from reading the *Tristra-paedia* for twelve months--as soon as he finishes airing his theory about the importance of auxiliary verbs. He demonstrates their utility by means of the extended example of a white bear.

### *Commentary*

Tristram's diatribe against borrowing from other authors sounds strikingly modern. He wrote in a time when good writing was supposed to be conventional and allusive, almost by definition; it was not until the Romantic period that originality became the cardinal literary virtue. Yet despite the progressiveness of the sentiment, we are forced to recognize that its author draws unabashedly from every source he can lay his hands on, albeit often putting his borrowed materials to strikingly new and original uses.

In chronicling the family's reactions to the news of Bobby's death, Tristram paints a balanced and thorough portrait of the various members of the household, their mannerisms, and their preoccupations. The tragic event of a family member's death, rather than bringing the household

together, sends them each spinning off into their own private orbits. However, Tristram does not sentimentalize this fact any more than he does the fact of his brother's death. The story marches on, and the segment closes with Trim's reference to the story of Lieutenant Le Fever, a thread Tristram will pick up again later.

Walter hopes to compensate for the disasters of Tristram's conception, nose, and name by ensuring that his education is conducted flawlessly. The paradox of the *Tristra-paedia* is that even though it is meant to regularize Tristram's education, it actually becomes a source of its neglect. "He advanced so very slow with his work," Tristram tells us, "and I began to get forwards at such a rate," that the *Tristra-paedia* project becomes an exercise in futility. Tristram compares it with "drawing a sundial, for no better purpose than to be buried underground." Thus the project offers another example of the built-in obsolescence of writing. Like Tristram's own book, the *Tristra-paedia* fails to keep pace with the passage of time in the real world.

Tristram's accidental circumcision is not as grave, from either his father's point of view or his own, as his other mishaps. The scene unfolds as a comedy, and Tristram declines to draw out "the great moral" that is imbedded in this story, claiming to be too busy. In reality, the moral is double: the foolish fortification project has gotten so out of hand, and has so consumed the attention and distorted the judgment of its players, that it has begun to impinge on the everyday lives of the family in ways that are truly dangerous. On the other hand, Tristram credits Trim for his integrity in confessing his own fault when he could have allowed Susannah to take the blame; "How would your honors have behaved?" he asks his audience.

## Volume 6 Summary

The author pauses to look back over his work, remarking on the number of jackasses the world contains. Walter too surveys his work, congratulating himself on the usefulness of his *Tristra-paedia*. Dr. Slop and Susannah bicker as they dress young Tristram's wound. Walter begins to think of hiring a governor (a private tutor) for his son, in order to improve Tristram's supervision and begin his education. He reflects on the qualities of the ideal governor, which inspires Toby to recommend Le Fever's son, Billy. Tristram embarks on the sentimental story about Le Fever and his boy, regretting that he missed the opportunity, with all the scene-shifting in the last volume, to give the story in Corporal Trim's own words.

Toby and Trim had taken a particular interest in Lieutenant Le Fever when he fell ill while passing through their village. Despite their kind and generous attentions, Le Fever died, leaving Uncle Toby to be the executor of his estate and the guardian of his orphaned son. Young Billy Le Fever had been in the army until poor health and financial trouble recently recalled him home. His arrival is expected at any moment when Toby proposes him for Tristram's governor.

Dr. Slop exaggerates the extent of Tristram's injury, creating a public embarrassment for the Shandy family. Walter considers putting the boy in breeches as a corrective to public opinion and decides to submit the matter to one of his "beds of justice." Tristram explains that his father's preferred method for making big decisions is a modified version of a Gothic tradition, in which important matters are debated twice: once in a state of sobriety and once while drunk. The discussions Walter conducts while in bed with Mrs. Shandy are more sober than he might wish, however, since she is a markedly unspirited conversationalist. She acquiesces to putting the boy in breeches, and submits to each of Walter's

changing opinions about what sort of breeches they should be. Walter then consults his library for ancient wisdom on breeches.

Tristram declares a turning point in the book, leaving all these considerations behind "to enter upon a new scene of events," which will concern his Uncle Toby. He describes the details of Toby's fortifications, the history of their construction, and the pleasure Toby and Trim took in re-enacting the events of the war. He eventually leaves off the account of their fortification project to discuss the other side of his Uncle Toby's personality, referring again to Toby's unusual modesty and preparing the stage for the story of Toby's love affair. Toby grieves when the war ends, but Tristram insists that it is not out of any love of violence or disregard for human life. Toby delivers an Apologetical Oration in which he argues that war is a necessary evil. Nevertheless, the Treaty of Utrecht forces a hiatus in Toby's obsessive activities. It is during this "fateful interval," Tristram hints, that his uncle falls victim to Widow Wadman's amorous designs. After a series of ruminations about the nature of love, Tristram finally comes around to stating bluntly, "My uncle Toby fell in love." But Toby, oddly, is among the last to learn of his own plans to marry Mrs. Wadman.

## Commentary

The decisive event in this volume comes when Tristram announces a shift in the emphasis of the book. Up to this point, the major sequence of events has involved the conception, birth, baptism, and circumcision of the infant Tristram. Here the author transfers his focus to the adventures of his Uncle Toby. The transition is not as drastic as Tristram makes it out to be; we have been gathering pieces of Toby's story all along, as well as promises of more to come (though they have mainly occurred as digressions to the main narrative line). One of the most striking aspects of the book, however, is the degree to which the main plot trajectory often

recedes into the background, often seeming like no more than a skeleton on which the author hangs a diversity of opinions and analyses.

Now, however, Tristram declares outright that he would like to leave his own story behind. But he feels he cannot do so: "I must go along with you to the end of the work." This statement reveals the fact that the story of the infant Tristram does not exhaust the "life and opinions" of Tristram Shandy. Toby's story is just as important in disclosing the mental life of the author. As if to prove this fact, Tristram drops the issues of the window sash accident, the tutor, and the breeches and whisks the story back to the early days of Toby's obsessive hobbies. One of the most notable things about this particular hobby-horse is that it keeps Toby firmly rooted in the past, emphasizing re-creations and re-enactments. When the end of the war suspends his pleasures, Toby does look to the future; he hopes for a new war to break out--but only so that he can relegate it just as firmly to the past by retracing its every movement. The intensity of Toby's immersion in this imaginary world is such that it incorporates and transforms everything that comes within his purview.

### Volume 7 Summary

Tristram reminds the reader of his vow to write two volumes a year as long as he should have health and spirits. His spirits have not yet failed him, but he begins to worry that his deteriorating health may prevent him from continuing his project. Tristram resolves, therefore, to run from death, "for I have forty volumes to write, and forty thousand things to say and do, which no body in the world will say and do for me, except myself." This is the motivation with which he turns his footsteps to Dover to begin his European tour.

After a fairly rough passage, Tristram arrives in Calais. He debates with himself about whether he should give a written account of the town, as

many a travel-writer has done before him. He thinks it a shame "that a man cannot go quietly through a town, and let it alone." Yet he tries his hand at describing the place anyway, recording impressions of its church, square, town-hall, and seaside quarter, and adding a few remarks about its strategic location and history. He refrains at the last minute from reproducing Rapin's fifty-page account of the siege of 1346.

After passing quickly through Boulogne, Tristram complains about the state of French transportation: something is always breaking down. Once in Montreuil, he devotes most of his attention to Janatone, the inn-keeper's daughter. She is more worth describing than any architectural wonder, he says, because "thou carriest the principles of change within thy frame." Feeling Death still pursuing him, Tristram travels on to Abbeville. He expresses his disdain for the accommodations there, observing that he would rather die in an inn than at home, provided it was not this one.

Still eager to get to Paris, Tristram expresses frustration at the near-impossibility of sleeping in a stagecoach. The horses change so often that he must rouse himself every six miles to pay. Once in Paris, Tristram makes a quick and mathematical survey of the city's streets and bemoans the difficulty of finding hotel rooms there. Apologizing that he cannot stay to provide a proper travelogue view of the Parisian scene, Tristram is quickly back on the road. This time he complains about the slow pace of French travel and informs us that there are two sure-fire words for getting a French horse to move. To elaborate, Tristram offers an anecdote about an abbess, which reveals that the French words sound like English obscenities.

Tristram makes short work of summarizing Fontainebleau, Sens, Joigny, and Auxerre. Then he is reminded of a previous trip to Europe during his youth, when he visited many of these same places with the rest of the

Shandy family (except for his mother). His father's eccentricities gave that trip its defining character, and it retains a peculiar cast in Tristram's memory. After describing some of those earlier adventures, Tristram lingers with some awe over the way his narrative has overlapped itself; he observes, "I have got entirely out of Auxerre in this journey which I am writing now, and I am got half way out of Auxerre in that which I shall write hereafter."

Tristram is forced to sell his coach as he enters Lyons, it having become too dilapidated to be of any further use. Once in town, he meets with "Vexation upon Vexation." He makes friends with an ass, dubbing it "Honesty" and feeding it a macaroon. Someone else enters and drives the ass away, and Tristram's pants are slashed in the process. He then learns that he is expected to pay "some six livres odd sous" at the post office for his carriage to Avignon. Protesting that he has decided to book passage on a boat instead, Tristram finds that he is still considered liable for the money. When he realizes the case is hopeless, he tries to get a few good jokes out of the situation to make it worth the expense, and winds up feeling satisfied. Then Tristram finds that he has left his notes in the chaise and rushes back for them, only to discover that they have been converted into curling papers. He recovers them with fairly good humor, remarking that "when they are published...they will be worse twisted still."

In the south of France, Tristram feels he has left Death behind. Traveling across the plains of Languedoc on a mule, he comments, "There is nothing more pleasing for a traveler--or more terrible to travel-writers, than a large rich plain; especially if it is without great rivers or bridges; and presents nothing to the eye, but one unvaried picture of plenty." He gives a sample of his own "Plain Stories" and promises more of them some day, but now alleges that he must return to the story of Uncle Toby's romance. He ends by wishing wistfully that he could live out the

remainder of his life in such contentment as he enjoys while dancing with Nanette, a "nut brown" village maid.

### *Commentary*

With this volume, Tristram disrupts the patterns his narrative has followed so far. Rather than continuing to build (however haltingly) toward the story of Uncle Toby's romance, he shifts the scene far from the Shandy household in order to relate his own travels to the Continent. From the moment he arrives in Calais, Tristram begins to parody the conventions of travel-writing. He questions whether the sights he sees are worth describing at all, and then describes Calais in such a way as to make it sound identical to any other place. He is more interested in people (even fictional ones) than places, and brags that "by seizing every handle, of what size or shape soever, which chance held out to me in this journey--I turned my *plain* into a *city*--I was always in company." He claims to have learned a great deal about human nature as a result.

His ultimate interest, nevertheless, is in himself: not only his own opinions and wanderings, but the strange interaction between the text's own present and past. The number of Tristrams (Tristram depicted simultaneously at different points of his life) we have access to is multiplied in this section. The narrative contains two: the young man on the Grand Tour with his family, and the older man who feels the presence of Death and worries about being able to finish his writing. The voice of the author is still separate from both of these: he is no longer in France, but has returned to his study to record these fairly recent adventures. The author is enchanted with this strange phenomenon of memory by which lived repetitions can create a doubleness in memory.

For all the discussion about fleeing Death, Tristram still does not betray any real anxiety about his health or his mortality. He declares from the



beginning of the volume that his spirits never fail him, and the narrative testifies to the truth of that claim. He is as exuberant and farcical as ever. Nor has he lost any of his ribaldry. He continues to make fun of the prudish morality he expects from his reader, as in the story of the Abbess. The Abbess is both more and less modest than Tristram, for it is she who reveals the dirty words that he so scrupulously withholds, yet he mocks her elaborate measures not to actually say the words. This episode is meant to expose the legalistic absurdity of prudish standards of decency. Tristram is aware that even the most censorious readers have two ears--one that cranes toward the bawdy, and another that is repelled.

### Volume 8 Summary

Tristram elaborates again upon the necessity of moving backward and forward in time to tell his story. While he still intends to press on toward the story of Toby's love affair, he prepares us for the possibility that he may yet make some digressions along the way. He returns to his earlier suggestion that Toby was the last to know that he was in love, observing that if Susannah had not informed him of the matter, he might never have pursued the affair at all. Tristram launches into the story once, gets bogged down in rambling speculations, and decides to abandon the chapter and begin again.

When Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim first come down to the country to begin work on the fortifications, they find that the house is unfurnished. They are obliged to stay with Widow Wadman for three days, and by the third day she has fallen in love with Toby. Toby is so occupied with his battlements that it takes until the end of the war--eleven years, in fact--before he has leisure to attend to the situation with his smitten neighbor.

Tristram describes the Widow's advances toward Toby as a military maneuver. Separated from the site of Toby's battle replica only by a

hedgerow, Mrs. Wadman is in a most strategic position to launch her attack. By feigning interest in his maps and plans she works her way into his sentry-box, engineering seductive bumps and caresses whenever possible.

When the end of the war forces a lull in their activities, Trim offers to provide some amusement for Toby by telling the story of the King of Bohemia and his seven castles. This tale never really gets off the ground, and Trim digresses instead into the story of how he fell in love during the war. After receiving a wound to the knee, Trim finds himself under the care of a Beguine nun. After a great deal of knee massaging, he suddenly realizes he is in love with her. Toby hijacks the end of the story, which is clearly approaching a sexual climax, by saying, "and then thou...madest a speech."

Widow Wadman, who has been eavesdropping, seizes the passionate pitch of the moment to make a move. She enters the sentry-box and announces that she has a speck of something in her eye, asking Uncle Toby to take a look. Toby at first finds nothing, but as he continues to inspect her beautiful eye, his heart begins to warm to the Widow Wadman. This is the decisive turning point in her campaign.

When Toby informs Trim that he has fallen in love, the two set to work mapping out a strategy. They ready their uniforms and weapons, and Trim decides to attempt a peripheral conquest of Bridget, Mrs. Wadman's servant. The night before the campaign is to take place, Walter writes a letter to Toby full of his brotherly advice about women. The "action" is to begin at eleven o'clock the next morning, and Walter and Mrs. Shandy walk out to watch the drama unfold.

### Commentary

This volume is comprised of a series of delays and restarts, as if Tristram is reluctant to get to the events that will terminate the story because, in doing so, he will force himself off the stage. He is running to keep ahead of the end of his own novel in much the same way that he flew from Death in the last volume: not desperately or fearfully, but enjoying the sights along the way. "One would think I took a pleasure in running into difficulties of this kind," Tristram remarks when he gets hung up in the sixth chapter. He then goes on to demonstrate that he *does* take pleasure in them, turning the pressing concerns that push him to finish the novel (poverty and illness) into jokes. He got sick while frolicking in Flanders, and prefers to think of the happy cause rather than its unfortunate consequence. He then turns the serious condition of his lungs into a satire of medical professionals, whose diagnoses amount to nothing more than elementary math.

In one of these digressions, Tristram makes the provocative statement, "I am resolved never to read any book but my own, as long as I live." How could he read any other? By this point in the novel we are to understand that Tristram's book, in its broadest sense, amounts to the very workings of his own mind. Everything he encounters (or reads) passes through that same filter, which is itself the substance of the book. Everything Tristram has read is a part of his narrative, almost by definition; indeed much of it is there in a quite literal sense, and he defines the scope of his book so that more can always be included. Tristram's book, in this regard, is his very being--his life and opinions are precisely what he cannot avoid or escape.

When the war ends, Toby really does not know what to do with himself. The affair with Widow Wadman helps him to transition out of a mindset obsessed with the past (which has become translated by means of his

hobby into an imaginary and even delusory present). The experience of love and the prospect of marriage require him to think about the present reality and to look forward to the future in ways to which he has become unaccustomed. "It is not easy," he tells Trim, "for one, bred up as thou and I have been to arm, who seldom looks further forward than to the end of his musket, or backwards beyond his knapsack, to know much about this matter [of chronology]." Toby is trying to encourage Trim in his storytelling, but he could just as easily be speaking about himself.

### Volume 9 Summary

Tristram's mother reveals a voyeuristic curiosity in her desire to watch through the keyhole as Uncle Toby makes his march for Widow Wadman's heart. Corporal Trim has had some difficulty in getting Toby's ragged clothing and old wig tidied up; fortunately, Tristram tells us, Toby's goodness of heart shines forth in his countenance to such a degree that he looks good in anything. The advance begins, but then Toby and Trim detain themselves outside Mrs. Wadman's door while Trim tells of his brother Tom, who married a widowed Jewish sausage-maker in Lisbon and was taken into custody by the Inquisition. Walter and Mrs. Shandy watch impatiently during this lengthy delay.

The author pauses to review what he has written, deciding that "upon this page and the five following, a good deal of heterogeneous matter [must] be inserted, to keep up that just balance betwixt wisdom and folly, without which a book would not hold together a single year." He then expostulates for several chapters on the nature of his writing, defending himself in particular against charges of indecency. As evidence for the cleanness of his writing he submits his extensive laundry bills. Tristram plans a digression, and then realizes that in talking about it he has actually committed it. Marveling at this fact, he returns to Uncle Toby.

Mrs. Wadman and Bridget wait inside, poised for the knock at the door. Toby has a moment of nervous hesitation, but before he can tell Trim to wait, "Trim let fall the rapper." They enter the house, and two blank pages appear in the place of the next two chapters. We rejoin the action in the midst of a suggestive conversation in which Toby offers to let Widow Wadman see and touch the place where his groin was wounded.

Tristram cites Slawkenbergius on how a woman chooses her husband and discusses Mrs. Wadman's reservations about Uncle Toby's "fitness for the marriage state"--which, he assures us, was perfectly fine in spite of the wounded groin. Bridget has engaged herself to find out the details of the injury on her mistress's behalf, resolving to be as friendly with Trim as necessary in order to secure that vital information.

Tristram balks just at the moment of arriving at "the choicest morsel of what I had to offer to the world," suddenly falling into doubt about his literary powers. He invokes the spirit of Cervantes to aid him, and is reminded then of his travels through France and Italy. Anguished to realize that nobody else will appreciate the necessity of leaving chapters 18 and 19 blank until chapter 25 is completed, he voices again his favorite plea to the world "to let people tell their stories their own way." He then explains the details of what transpires in those omitted pages. Toby declares his love, and Widow Wadman, after an awkward pause, turns the conversation to the subject of children. Toby, who does not understand the motive behind her questioning, covers his bafflement by proposing marriage. Back in chapter 26, Widow Wadman interrogates Toby about his wound, and he admires the "humanity" of her solicitude. When she asks where, exactly, he received the blow, he sends for the map of Namur and sets her finger on the very place.

Trim then retrieves the map and makes the same geographical explanation to Bridget. She cuts to the chase, telling him bluntly the

rumor she has heard about Toby's impotence; Trim denies the allegation. He successfully romances Bridget, and for a while the two separate phases of the campaign continue regularly every afternoon. Trim finally reveals to his master the true reason behind Widow Wadman's concern for his injured parts, and Toby is woefully disillusioned. The whole neighborhood, meanwhile, has learned of their misunderstanding, and Walter is highly indignant on his brother's behalf. The novel ends with the story of a cock and a bull.

### *Commentary*

At the end of the fourth volume Tristram writes, "The thing I lament is, that things have crowded so in upon me, that I have not been able to get into that part of my work, towards which I have all the way looked forwards, with so much earnest desire; and that is the campaigns, but especially the amours of my uncle Toby." Tristram finally leads us to the long-promised conclusion of his Uncle Toby's affair, and at last we learn the reason behind Toby's much-vaunted modesty.

Toby's nervousness and innocence is endearing, and the presentation of the love affair as a battle seems in many ways a more apt use of the military metaphor than all their fruitless and obsessive hobbies. The story of Trim's brother Tom and his successful courtship serves in one way as an inspiration to Toby's efforts. On the other hand, the mention of the Inquisition leaves a lingering suggestion of the marriage state as a kind of prison, contributing to Toby's hesitancy. The prison metaphor certainly also extends to the question of censorship and hovers over Tristram's digression into the question of indecency in his writing.

The unhappy end to the Wadman affair recalls Toby's confession, in Volume 2, that he understands "nothing at all" about women. His naivete here confirms that fact, but it also induces a somewhat bleak answer to

the implicit question of what the nature of women actually is. Walter's lecture on the lustfulness of women, just before the novel ends, is a conclusion to his unfinished oration on the same topic earlier in the book. Women seem to bear the brunt of blame and contempt here, especially in light of the attention devoted earlier in the volume to cataloguing Mrs. Shandy's faults. Trim actually makes a more sympathetic statement when he suggests that women are often "put upon...to please others more than themselves." Walter's final speech is so out of tune with the playful attitude the book as a whole takes toward sexuality that we cannot imagine the author endorsing such a view. Where women fit into Sterne's intricate treatment of sexuality and gender remains a complicated question.

The issues of fertility, sterility, and sexuality dominate the closing chapters, bringing the focus back to the same set of concerns with which the book began. The reference to Walter's ritualized first-Sunday-of-the-month activities creates another satisfying symmetry. The final chapter brings together all the major characters to listen to one last cock-and-bull story, effecting a self-ironical reprise that serves as the author's farewell.

### Overall Analysis and /Themes

The most striking formal and technical characteristics of *Tristram Shandy* are its unconventional time scheme and its self-declared digressive-progressive style. Sterne, through his fictional author-character Tristram, defiantly refuses to present events in their proper chronological order. Again and again in the course of the novel Tristram defends his authorial right to move backward and forward in time as he chooses. He also relies so heavily on digressions that plot elements recede into the background; the novel is full of long essayistic passages remarking on what has transpired or, often, on something else altogether. Tristram claims that his narrative is both digressive *and* progressive, calling our attention to the

way in which his authorial project is being advanced at the very moments when he seems to have wandered farthest afield.

By fracturing the sequence of the stories he tells and interjecting them with chains of associated ideas, memories, and anecdotes, Tristram allows thematic significance to emerge out of surprising juxtapositions between seemingly unrelated events. The association of ideas is a major theme of the work, however, and not just a structural principle. Part of the novel's self-critique stems from the way the author often mocks the perverseness by which individuals associate and interpret events based on their own private mental preoccupations. The author's own ideas and interpretations are presumably just as singular, and so the novel remains above all a catalogue of the "opinions" of Tristram Shandy.

Much of the subtlety of the novel comes from the layering of authorial voice that Sterne achieves by making his protagonist the author of his own life story, and then presenting that story as the novel itself. The fictional author's consciousness is the filter through which everything in the book passes. Yet Sterne sometimes invites the reader to question the opinions and assumptions that Tristram expresses, reminding us that Shandy is not a simple substitute for Sterne. One of the effects of this technique is to draw the reader into an unusually active and participatory role. Tristram counts on his audience to indulge his idiosyncrasies and verify his opinions; Sterne asks the reader to approach the unfolding narrative with a more discriminating and critical judgment.

### Study Questions

*Tristram Shandy* is governed by a tension between the seemingly haphazard way in which the story is put together and an overarching sense of authorial design. Which predominates? Is the author in control of

his digressions (and merely affecting their spontaneity), or does the story actually run away from him and have to be reined back in?

Answer for Study Question 1 >>

Tristram wants the reader to believe that he never revises, that his pen leads him where it will, and that his book is comprised of whatever he happens to think of at a given moment. However, he also takes great pains to reassure his audience that he knows what he is doing, and that there is a *reason* for writing the book the way he does--a reason more convincing, perhaps, than his own mere whim. The work is obviously not as chaotic as Tristram suggests. Yet neither does it seem entirely appropriate to judge it under conventional standards of order and unity. In fact, the book warns us against trying to do so; we are afraid of being made to look like a Walter Shandy for trying to force our preconceived systems on subtle and complex reality.

Tristram suffers a series of early accidents which would be fairly trivial by any standard except his father's. To what extent do Walter's theoretical obsessions actually contribute to his son's misfortunes?

Answer for Study Question 2 >>

In a general way, Walter's preoccupation with eccentric hypotheses causes him to neglect the business of everyday life. His legalism about the terms of the marriage contract keeps Mrs. Shandy in the country for her confinement, leading at least indirectly to the flattening of Tristram's nose. His sympathy with Dr. Slop--another relative quack whose zeal for new instruments and methodologies Walter shares--may have encouraged a reckless medical procedure. The window-sash accident was not Walter's fault, but it was caused by the same kind of negligence and self-absorption (Corporal Trim's, in this case) that is characteristic of

Tristram's father. And the Tristra-paedia, by means of which Walter means to regulate his son's education, becomes an end in itself, totally consuming Walter's attention. Walter's rigorous concern for his son's well-being at the theoretical level rarely translates into any practical results, and the series of coincidences into which Walter's theories play out may be meant to suggest that such obsessions can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

What is the effect of Tristram's frequent addresses to his audience?

Answer for Study Question 3 >>

Tristram refers to his reader variously as "Sir," "Madam," "your worships," "your reverences," and a number of other titles indicating gender and status. He thinks of his reader as a stranger with whom he would hope, during the course of the book, to become intimate. Eager to win approval, he is nevertheless fully aware that he, like Parson Yorick, might be taken to be offensive. But if Tristram realizes that the audience is in a position to question him, he also clearly thinks that one of his roles as a writer is to challenge the reader--to cause the reader to reflect on his or her own readerly practices and expectations and also to suggest the implications that may have for everyday life. At times, the narrator seems to know more about us, the audience, than we know about ourselves, managing to predict our responses even before we are fully aware of them. In a book that is self-confessedly engrossed with the mental life of a single character, this deep and serious engagement with the reader is part of what keeps the narrative from becoming merely a lengthy monologue.

Source: sparknotes