

Tristram Shandy: a Novel About Novel-Writing

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Abstract: *The Lives and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* remains largely a reflection on the nature of a book and this paper aims at unfolding the various intricacies of the text which result in this interpretation. The book subverts conventions of novel writing at every step and is most prominently characterized with a non-linear narrative. The preoccupation with digression in opposition to a standard linear structure is underscored time and again in the text, consciously through various instances, emphasizing that how the very unconventionality of the text is a deliberate discourse meant to draw attention towards itself. The novel may be termed as a parody of the act of novel writing as it consistently defies logic to give prominence to emotions and in the process unfolds the psychology of the characters, but not a story.

Index Terms: novel, structure, digression, narrative

Lawrence Sterne's comic meta-novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, published in nine volumes between 1759 to 1766, remains one of the most engaging reflections on 'the nature of The Book'. Although the title of the book gives an indication about expecting an autobiography, the birth of the central character, which the author sets about to discuss on the first page, does not finally occur until volume iv. Thus, the novel concerns itself with events and personages before the author's birth. The novel largely seems to lack a plot structure and deals with Tristram's opinions on varied subjects and various little tales in the lives of those around him. It discusses his father Walter's obsession with the influence of the proper name on a man's character, his Uncle Toby's hobby of re-enacting famous sieges, the death of Yorick, the parson, from the ill-effects of rumour, etc.

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, is a novel with a departure from the conventions of novel writing. The novel has an unconventional plot structure, with no storyline, and numerous interruptions and digressions. These interruptions and digressions throughout the course of the novel hinder the author from following a linear, progressive narrative. Tristram talks about these digressions in the novel and tells about the chapters he has been planning to write, and he wonders how he will ever get them all done. He tells the readers about his capriciousness, how he ends a scene when he has something else to do- just as he leaves his father and his uncle upon the stairs in order to write his chapter on Chapters. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, thus, is a novel which, at every step, challenges the conventions of novel-writing, discussing its regulations and subverting them at the same time.

In the novel, Sterne writes about a man, Tristram, who is writing a book and this man presents to the reader, through the unfolding of his consciousness, the people who are related to his life. All of their stories are told to us, directly or indirectly, by this man through his viewpoint. However, most people make the mistake of considering the author and the book to be an extension of each other and are unable to differentiate the narrator from the author. Throughout the course of the book it is important to keep in mind that Tristram's opinions and his mind is independent of the artist's Sterne's mind. Early in his London success, Sterne came to be known as Tristram Shandy. This identification was useful to him as it made him the exemplar of the Shandean wit and good heart that he wished sincerely to teach. H. K. Russel writes in his essay '*Tristram Shandy and the Technique of the Novel*': "Thus we have become accustomed to thinking of Mr. Tristram Shandy as the Reverend Laurence Sterne. He is like Sterne in many respects, as David Copperfield is like Dickens or, more accurately, as Gulliver is like Swift."

As it has already been mentioned above that the novel is characterized by manifold digressions which serve to interrupt the narrative at irregular intervals. The stories of different characters in the novel are picked up, dropped and picked up again and again. Tristram unhesitatingly tells the end of a story first, then the beginning, and then the middle; sometimes he tells the beginning and then drops it for a hundred pages. Talking about his digressions, Tristram says that the digressions are the sunshine, the life and the soul of reading. "Take them out of this book for an instance- you might as well take the book along with them" (Sterne, 72). He talks about the problems he faces as an author: if he digresses, the whole book stands still, "and if he goes on with his main work, - then there is an end of his digression. He calls on the "POWERS" to set up a guidepost to show a poor author which way to go. However, Lawrence Sterne has constructed the book so that, like one wheel within another, the "digressive and progressive movements" go on together. W.L. Cross writes in *The Life and Times of Lawrence Sterne*: "...a reader at leisure could not fail to see that there might be a method in Sterne's madness: that every part of the book, every episode, every digression, whim, aside, or innuendo, was perhaps carefully pre- meditated, and the whole organized on a plan which the author was keeping a half secret" (22). Sterne continues to follow the characteristic progressive-digressive technique of the book where there are two lines of action which require to be narrated simultaneously. For example, one line of action concerns a conversation between the Shandy brothers while Mrs. Shandy listens at the door; the other is Trim's oration upon death in the kitchen. H.K. Russel compliments this technique as having "the advantage of keeping the main action on the edge of consciousness while the minor action is developed" (117).

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman is, therefore, essentially a novel in which the story is of secondary importance to how it is told. It is, in fact, an extended act of and discussion on story-telling. Sterne makes use of a number of

techniques to focus attention to the materiality of the text. A cross appears when Dr. Slop crosses himself, a black page "mourns" the death of Yorick, squiggly graphs indicate the progress of the narrative line, blank pages appear to represent pages torn out and a very different kind of blank page is offered to the reader for the purpose of composing his or her own description of Widow Wadman's beauty. Apart from being funny, these techniques are insightful critiques of the illusion of linguistic transparency offered by the traditional texts.

Tristram Shandy is loosely based on John Locke's theory of the association of ideas. In his novel Sterne revolts against the rationalism of the earlier periods of the Enlightenment and his book is a parody of the novels of the eighteenth century which presented the logical evolution of the hero's life from his birth to his grave. Sterne presents the characters by means of their emotions and impressions rather than through external incidents. Oana-Roxana Ivan in her essay "*Tristram Shandy: An Original and Profound English Novel of the Eighteenth Century*" writes: "He thought that the most important thing in literature was to record and represent the inner life of men, the psychological states which are forever changing. At the basis of his novel lies the desire to represent the emotional state of man and thus the writer excludes logic" (217). Thus, we learn next to nothing about the actual life of the hero. Lawrence Sterne gives us a novel which is unlike anything else and which succeeds in communicating to us the ideas of the characters and their psychological mindset without actually telling us a story. Although *Tristram Shandy* holds a place among the English novels, it is hard to call it a novel. It can, in fact, be rightly called a book on novel-writing.

Lawrence Sterne has tried to keep the plot structure of his book so that people will be induced to think as they read. This thinking is largely the following up of implications, of suggested trains of ideas, that is, of digressions. Sterne shows an entire new route to the authors to follow, in course of their novel. He subverts the conventions for the plot structure in the 'standard' novel. The point Sterne makes in *Tristram Shandy* is close to the familiar doctrine of "sentiments." It might be said that Sterne revised Aristotle by placing 'Characters' and 'Thoughts' before 'Plot'. He adapts a part of Locke's psychology to the problem of plot structure in the novel. Sterne, thus, shifts emphasis from events, or plot, to sentiments and characters. He believed that time in a novel should correspond to time in the reader's mind; it should be gauged by the succession of ideas, as debated by Locke in his 'Essay concerning Human Understanding'.

Having discussed the subtle as well as apparent attributes of the book *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, we can say that Sterne was the author of the most original and profound English novel of the eighteenth century. However, the novel, because of its unconventionality was the subject of a lot of criticism. Although Sterne's novel remains a rich resource of ideas and techniques for writers, its complexity is also known to frustrate the readers. Perhaps the key to the enjoyment of *Tristram Shandy* is being in harmony with the author rather than being contrary and rebellious. The secret is not to bring usual attitudes or traditional judgments to the book, but rather to surrender to the writer. As the author himself says, "I would go fifty miles on foot, for I have not a horse worth riding on, to kiss the hand of that man whose generous heart will give up the reins of his imagination into his author's hands, — be pleased he knows not why, and cares not wherefore" (272).

REFERNCES:

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