

**CC3T: British Literature (fiction and non-fiction): 18th
Century**

This is an e-material content which discusses a few aspects of Laurence Sterne's novel, "Tristram Shandy" which features in the syllabus of English Honours of Vidyasagar University under CBCS system.



Introduction to Laurence Sterne's Novel, "Tristram Shandy"

Laurence Sterne's novel "Tristram Shandy" is, almost beyond dispute, the most remarkable, shockingly experimental and subversive novel that most people who have basic literacy skills could ever grasp. While James Joyce's "Finnegans Wake" definitely outclasses this novel in terms of experimentation, the inevitable fact of the matter is that even those with the most advanced of literary degrees probably do understand half of what they claim to understand in that book.

"Tristram Shandy", by contrast, uses basic language structure to tell a fairly uncomplicated story capable of being understood fully by a large chunk of the English-speaking population. That being said, the novel is recounted by Tristram himself and begins with the story of his birth, but the title character then carries forward and completely disappears from its narrative progression for an unreasonably long period of time. But then that's the entire point of "Tristram Shandy": to point out the sham of the obligation of reality upon the definitely unrealistic nature of the novel. Which was, at the time of its writing, a revolutionary new form of literary expression viewed with great suspicion and

mistrust partly due to the lengths that many of its earliest proponents felt compelled to append onto their work in an effort to lend it an aura of factual authenticity.

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

The most immediately obvious flouting of novelistic conventions is the means by which the familiarity with existing birth-to-death style novels are upended. A novel titled “Tristram Shandy” would instantly result in the perception among readers of the time that they were going to open the book to read of Tristram’s birth and close the book either upon his death or a major point in his later life at which all travails had been finally put behind him. “Tristram Shandy” fulfills the first part of this

covenant, but almost instantly fails to follow through. The fact is that Tristram spends most of the time telling history story going on off on ever more unrelated digressions focusing on the wild adventures experienced by various forbears. The reader eventually learns more about the Shandy family than readers of other book ever learn about their titular character, but the knowledge gained of Tristram himself is in shockingly short supply.

As readers make their way through the digressive nature of “Tristram Shandy”, they are confronted with a inventive literary smackdowns of convention that many young people might find surprisingly familiar. The experimental nature of the novel inspired the stream-of-consciousness fiction that marked the 1920s, but the digressions, blank pages, change in fonts, diagrams and robust use of symbols makes reading “Tristram Shandy” an experience more akin to reading a blog or following someone on Facebook or Twitter than it does to trying to work one’s way through “Finnegans Wake”.

Ultimately, such a legacy is exactly what should have happened to Laurence Stern’s anti-novel. A book that set out to challenge every existing preconception of what a novel is or should be has never more righteously belonged to an age than the present one in which every existing preconception of what it means to communicate through publishing is being challenged in some new and exciting way nearly every day.

A Brief Summary of “Tristram Shandy”

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