

LAURENCE STERNE • *Tristram Shandy*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LAURENCE STERNE

The most original of all novelists of the 18th century, Laurence Sterne (1713-1768) was born in Ireland of English parents. His father died in a duel in 1731, and Sterne was **rescued** from poverty by a rich relative, so he could get to Cambridge. After graduating, he took **holy orders** and became vicar of Sutton-on-the-Forest, north of York. In 1741-42 Sterne wrote political articles supporting the administration of Sir Robert Walpole for a newspaper founded by his uncle, but soon left politics in disgust and his uncle became his archenemy.

In addition to writing, Sterne was a painter and a musician. He is known mostly for two works: *Tristram Shandy* (1760-67) and *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy by Mr Yorick*, translated into Italian by Ugo Foscolo in 1813.

An initial, satiric version was rejected by Robert Dodsley, the London printer, just when Sterne's personal life was upset. His mother and uncle both died. His wife had a **nervous breakdown** and **threatened** suicide. Sterne continued his comic novel, but every sentence, he said, was "written under the greatest heaviness of heart." In this mood, he softened the satire and told readers about Tristram's opinions, his eccentric family, and unlucky childhood with sympathetic humour. At his own expense, Sterne published the first two volumes of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* at York late in 1759. Sterne is considered the first writer to use the stream of consciousness technique, that is, a narrative technique by which the characters' thoughts, impressions and emotions are presented as they **spring** to mind.

ABOUT THE NOVEL

TRISTRAM SHANDY

Tristram Shandy is about the mad Shandy family and their friends. The main protagonist is Tristram, who tells the story of his life from his birth through adolescence up to his early manhood. The other characters are all eccentric.

However, the book is not at all autobiographical, but a celebration of digressions on different subjects. No chronological sequence of events is followed, and typographical features are subverted: words are substituted by **dashes** or asterisks, which the readers have to interpret. In addition to this, chapters vary in length from single sentences to paragraphs which are interrupted with whole sections written in French and Latin. Tristram's narrative provides the most graphic illustration of Sterne's convictions regarding the disordered workings of the human mind, and at the same time is a **reminder** of the difficulties associated with understanding and seeking to represent the workings of **inner** consciousness. Tristram moves freely from present to past and back in a process which is never-ending, and readers are **drawn** inside a capricious mind full of memories and **asides**.

THE TEXT

I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly considered how much depended upon what they were then doing; that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind; and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost: Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly, I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that, in which the reader is likely to see me.

to rescue: *salvare*

holy orders: *prendere i voti*

nervous breakdown: *esaurimento nervoso*

to threaten: *minacciare*

spring to mind: *venire*

fuori, scaturire

aside: *a parte, digressione*

dash: *trattino*

inner: *interiore*

reminder: *promemoria*

scribbling: *scarabocchio*

COMPREHENSION

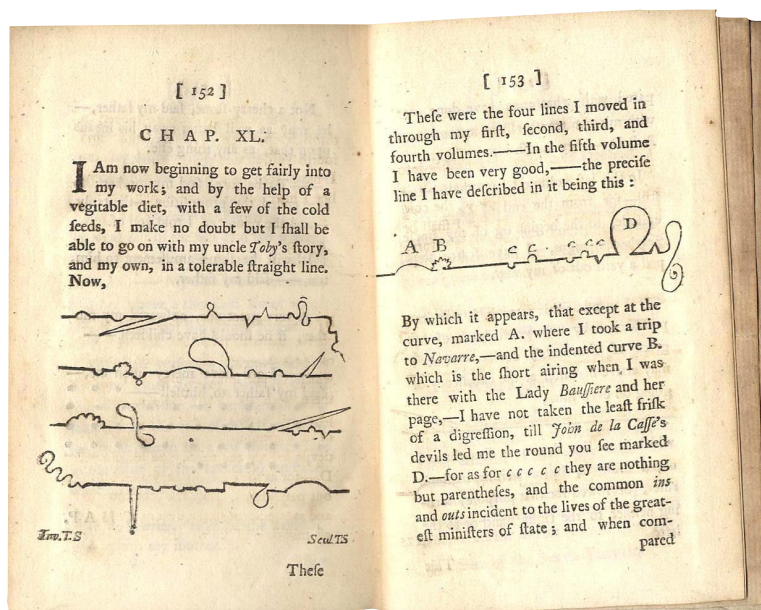
1 Answer the questions.

1. Who is the storyteller?
2. What is the passage about?
3. What does he wish?
4. What does he wonder about his parents?
5. How should their parents have behaved before having a baby?
6. What is the storyteller sure of?
7. What is so unconventional in the passage above?
8. What tells you that the passage is not taken from a contemporary writer?
9. What kind of relationship does the storyteller have with his readers?
10. Does the passage contain any irony?


ANALYSIS

2 Look at the image below. Then, answer the questions.

1. What is so peculiar about the book layout shown below?
2. Is it common to find lines in a book?
3. Are the lines straight or curved?
4. Would you define them as serpentine lines?
5. Why do you think Sterne preferred these lines to straight ones?
6. Could these lines represent his type of narration?
7. What do the letters in the fifth line stand for?
8. Do you think Sterne's layout demonstrates the inner workings of the human mind well?
9. Do you think he was brave to publish such a book back then?
10. If you were to write your autobiography, would you insert drawings, scribbles, photos and balloons or not? Justify your answer.



DISCUSSION

3  Sterne is an eccentric writer, yet he is one of the most important as far as the theory of literature is concerned. Jot down some notes on what is so peculiar and unexpected in the layout he chose and then discuss your ideas with the class, following the prompts below.

- What type of modern publications tend not to respect classical layout?
- What objectives does layout contribute to in a text?
- Do you know any authors who use unconventional layout in their publications?
- Do you think Sterne's technique can be considered a precursor of graphic novels?

