



# The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman

*Laurence Sterne*

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"I begin with writing the first sentence —and trusting to Almighty God for the second."

Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (or, more briefly, *Tristram Shandy*) is a humorous novel by Laurence Sterne. It was published in nine volumes, the first two appearing in 1759, and seven others following over the next seven years (vols. 3 and 4, 1761; vols. 5 and 6, 1762; vols. 7 and 8, 1765; vol. 9, 1767). Probably Sterne's most enduring work, it purports to be a biography of the titular character. Its style is marked by digression and amplification.

Sterne had read widely, which is reflected in *Tristram Shandy*. Many of his similes, for instance, are reminiscent of the works of the metaphysical poets of the 17th century, and the novel as a whole, with its focus on the problems of language, has constant reference to John Locke's theories in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

## Reception and influence

Some of Sterne's contemporaries did not hold it in high esteem, but its bawdy humour was popular with London society. Through time, it has come to be seen as one of the greatest comic novels in English. Schopenhauer in particular, considered it the acme and crowning of the novel form, one of the "four novels at the top of their class," along with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*, and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*.

Samuel Johnson famously commented, "Nothing odd will do long. *Tristram Shandy* did not last." Schopenhauer privately rebutted Samuel Johnson saying "The man Sterne is worth 1000 Pedants and commonplace-fellows like Dr.J." The young Karl Marx was a devotee of *Tristram Shandy*, and wrote a short humorous novel, *Scorpion and Felix*, which remained unpublished, that was obviously influenced by it. Goethe praised Sterne in *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*, which in turn influenced Nietzsche.

*Tristram Shandy* has also been seen by formalists and other literary critics as a forerunner of many narrative devices and styles used by modernist and postmodernist authors, such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Carlos Fuentes, Milan Kundera and Salman Rushdie.

The success of Sterne's novel got him an appointment as curate of St. Michael's Church by Lord Fauconberg in Coxwold, Yorkshire, which included the living at (what Sterne called) *Shandy Hall*. The medieval structure still stands today under the care of the Laurence Sterne Trust after its acquisition in the 1960s. The gardens, which Sterne tended to during his time there, are daily open to visitors.

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