

## Life and Opinion 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.**

## VOLUME I

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.

## VOLUME II

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.

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.

### VOLUME III

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.

VOLUME IV

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."

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.

## VOLUME V

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.

## VOLUME VI

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. Slope 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.

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.

## VOLUME VII

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.

## VOLUME VIII

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.

## VOLUME IX

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.

## 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.