

Evaluation of 'Tristram Shandy'

The Preface:

The very strange thing about the novel 'Tristram Shandy' is that the reader suddenly finds the Preface of the novel in the end of 20th chapter of the 3rd book instead of in the beginning of the 1st chapter of the 1st book. When we read it we feel that it is either ambiguous or faulty. Here, Sterne writes "No, I'll not say a word about it-, Here it is – in publishing it I have appealed to the world- To the world I have left it. It must say for itself." The Preface itself raises many questions like about what he would not say anything. He writes, "Here it is ", but about what he is talking is not told to the reader. In fact it is left for the reader to imagine.

Misnomer Title:

The title of the novel, 'The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman', is misnomer. At the first glance, on the basis of the title, generally the reader will guess that it is the novel about a person, protagonist, whose name is Tristram Shandy, about his or others' life and opinion. But when we read the novel we find that the life and opinion of the hero is the subject which we are actually bidden to expect. The opinion of the character, the caprices (a sudden change of mood) of Tristram's father, his uncle, his uncle's servant, above all, the opinion of the author himself are the things what we actually find. In other words, the novel has ceased to be a mirror of life and manners of the hero or even of the society. But it has become, 1. A channel for the outpouring (expression/outburst) of the author's own personality and idiosyncrasy (a person's particular way of behaving & thinking). 2. A stage from which, under the thinnest of disguises or no disguise or no disguise at all, he lays bare the working of his heart, his intellect, his most fleeing imaginations before any audience he can gather round him.

Tristram Shandy - the Protagonist:

Tristram Shandy is the narrator of the novel 'Tristram Shandy'. We expect him to be the protagonist of the novel on the basis of the title. But when we read the novel we find that Tristram is nonentity. He is merely a peg (hanger) of his father's philosophy. He is uncle Toby's devoted follower, the ardent sharer of his dreams, the zealous (passionate / ardent / fervent) agent of their fulfilment, hardly less warm-hearted, hardly less overflowing with kindness, less unworldly, by many points less simple and more studious of effect, but the story of the novel does not revolve round the hero Tristram just begins with a note about his birth but soon he diverts his topics and fills up pages & pages about them and readers are made to wait for the information regarding him. That is why Goethe says "Shandyism is the incapacity for fixing the mind on a serious object for two minutes together." Tristram says that his life & opinion are going to make some noise in the world, & it will be read with equal interest as the 'Pilgrim's Progress' is being read. The end of the book will be proved as the dread, as Montaigne's essays are proved. He considers it necessary for him to consult his reader a little in his turn. He begs the reader to pardon him for going on a little further in the same way. He is glad on thinking that he has begun the history of his life in the style of Horace, but again he begs for Mr. Horace's pardon as he is going to confine himself neither to his rules nor to any man's rules that ever lived. He says, "Tis wrote only for the curious and inquisitive." (Book-1, chapter-4) Tristram says that he was begot in night betwixt the first Sunday and the first Monday in

the month of March in the year of their Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighteen. But how he came to be so very particular in his account of thing which happened before he was born, and it is another a small anecdote (story/tale) which is known only in his own family, & now he is going to make it public for the better clearing up this point. Then he tells us about his father Walter Shandy, a Turkey merchant, and his habit. But it is only in next chapter that we come to know that he is born on this earth on 5th Nov. 1718. The reference of nine months, from March to November is given about that period when he was in the womb of his mother. Because of such style of writing of Sterne's biographer, Mr. Trail comments, "It may be a doubt whether it was an accident or his usual deliberate fantasticality which made Sterne a well-known writer."

However, Tristram is not born until near the end of the 4th volume & he is not put into breaches until the 6th volume. The book mostly concerns the life of the gent's uncle & the opinion of gent's father than the view of Tristram himself. But he himself is the subject of his book and his inner life and his opinions are the material. Tristram says that he has informed his reader about when he is born, but not how, as it is reserved to be told in another chapter because he and his reader is yet stranger to each other, so it would not better for him to let the reader into so many circumstances relating to himself all at once. Therefore the reader should have patience. In this way Tristram deliberately loses his track & tells us about the midwife, the parson, his horse. Etc. Thus it is again questionable that how far Tristram is the protagonist of the novel. It seems that he is more a narrator than the protagonist, narrates the story more about the life & opinion of others than himself. In composing his life-history, he hopes to make whole an existence which has been crippled and fragmented. He is both a character in his own story and a 'character' in the whimsical way he tells it, but his is never a unified self. He can never agree with himself.

For Tristram to write this autobiography involves not cheating on the reader by leaving anything out. The result is that he starts his life-story not from birth, but from the moment of conception, and gives us so much detailed information that he never gets beyond being a small child. The book begins before the beginning and ends before the end. It ends six years after it was begun as far as the author's time-stream goes, but four years before the birth of its hero. In the end, we get neither Tristram's life nor his opinions. And therefore we know little about him as a person in five hundred-odd pages. In a sense it is a work about nothing. In fact Sterne himself puts in a good word for nothingness elsewhere in his writing what worse things there were in the world. Tristram's absence shows how it is with all human subjects. It is an allegory of the coming into being of every human subject. There is no saying where a human being begins and ends. Just as words are always versions of other words, so human beings are recycled versions of other human beings. Tristram is, therefore, hysterically (uncontrollably), terribly confused up than most of us. He represents the condition of us all as we are not self-originating. We have to become human subjects on terms already laid down for us by others. Tristram struggles to be the source of his own narrative, but finds it constantly outrunning his control. For him writing is the way he will throw out his heavyhanded father and become independent. Thus he wants to be self-generated.

Tristram's autobiography is actually a satire at the very form called autobiography. According to Stern autobiography is an impossible form. Since every human life is unique, how could there be established procedures for writing and account of one? As we all belong to the same animal species, there are certain stages through which we all have to travel. Everyone has to have parents, be born, reared, educated, and launch out eventually on their own independent existence. Thus,

autobiography is an ironic form. In the seventeenth and eighteenth-century there was a war between the Ancients and the Moderns.

Walter is a kind of mad Ancient – a crazed rationalist full of elaborately useless learning. For him the real world must conform to categories of the mind. He believes in rigorous chains of cause and effect in which nothing can happen by chance, but which can be manipulated (control) by men like himself to ensure the best possible human outcomes. Tristram is a kind of mad Modern, determined to defeat his father's insanely well-ordered system by telling the story of his life which has no design or coherence at all. Walter simplifies complexities, while Tristram gets bogged down in them. Walter believes that the sign constructs reality; therefore he gives his son the right name and it will help to ensure a contented life for him. For him, mind and materiality are harmonious, while for Tristram the one constantly spoils the other. Therefore, he has been crushed by his father's madcap (crazy/silly) schemes, and the novel is his way of struggling to get out from under them or to expose them to public ridicule. Tristram is a materialist and empiricist who scorns abstract notions and trusts to what he can see and feel. Walter, by contrast, is an idealist for whom concepts are more real than things, and who lives at a distance from the actual world. Tristram has no control over his environment. Thus, there is a vast difference between Walter and Tristram. If Walter is all mind, Tristram is all body. Both characters are cut off from reality; Walter by his ideas, Tristram by his sense-impressions.

Sentimental Novel:

There is no doubt that the novel is a sentimental novel. Here Sterne exaggerates tenderness, sadness and nostalgia. He exaggerates the reference of his conception, by giving the details of those days and nine months from March to November when he was in the womb of his mother, birth, and while in the next chapter (chapter - v, book- 1 st), he writes, "On the fifth day of November 1718, which to the era fixed on, was a near nine calendar months, as any husband could in reason have expected, -was I Tristram Shandy brought forth into disastrous world of ours- I wish I had been born in the Moon, or in any of the planets, because I never could bear cold..." While in the previous chapter he writes about his father who is originally a Turkey merchant. He is one of the most regular men in everything he does, whether it is the matter of amusement or anything else. As a small specimen of his extreme exactness of his father is that he has made it a rule for many years of his life to wind up a large house clock by his own hands on the first Sunday night of every month throughout the whole year and what happens once his mother cannot hear the said clock wind up, & for this Tristram says, "It was ... a misfortune, which in a great measure, fell upon myself, and the effects of which I ear I shall carry with me to my grave." Thus, he merely exaggerates the matter.

Forerunner of Stream of Consciousness:

Sterne has introduced a new style of writing. He deserts his characters in the most ridiculous situations. A hundred topics are mixed and interwoven together. In the novel at many places he has put dashes (-), incomplete sentences, enigmatic paragraphs, asterisks, index-hands and so forth. He has not bothered about grammar. At many places he has left entire chapters blank, for the imagination of the reader to construct. Sterne writes a sentence and calls it a chapter breaks off suddenly and starts a new chapter. In the end of the 12th chapter of 1st Book, he has darkened the whole page with ink, while in the end of 36th chapter he has blotted the whole page as if he were playing with water colors and in the last chapter of 6th Book, he starts to write about Uncle Toby's

story but again he loses himself and starts drawing some diagrams. This is how Sterne has introduced a new way of writing a novel which is known as Stream of Consciousness.