‘LIFE AND OPINION OF TRISTRAM SHANDAY, GENTLEMAN’
- LAURENCE STERNE (1713-1768)

1. The Author & His Contemporary Age:

The Period to which ‘LIFE AND OPINION OF TRISTRAM SHANDAY, GENTLEMAN’ belonged is much more important than to which Laurence Sterne (1713-1768), its author belongs. First two volumes (out of total nine volumes) of ‘Tristram Shandy’ are published in 1760, and the history of the English novel from 1760-1780 is stages of its growth. The chief questions to be asked are:

1. What are the new elements which these years added to the novel?
2. How far has each of them proved of lasting value?
3. What is of the specific genius of two or three authors who stand out above the rest?

The answer to the first of these questions may be given in summery form at once. In the hands of Sterne and a group of writers, who, though it may be without sufficient reason, are commonly treated as disciples of Sterne, sentiment began to count more than it had been in the hands of the precursors. As a natural consequence, the individuality of these writers impressed itself more and more totally upon a theme. And it is said, “Sterne is undisputed master in this way of writing; and here, so far, at least, as his own century is concerned, he stands absolutely alone.”

Other writers such as Brooke and Mackenzie may use the novel as a pulpit for preaching their own creed (dogma/statement of belief) or advancing their own scheme of reform. But their relation to Sterne is of the slightest (least) and the effect produced is utterly different.

Sterne is the sole (one and only / single) novelist of first-rate importance in the Period under examination (review / analysis). Due to his originality, he stands aloof from the main stream of contemporary fiction. Apart from him the writers of the time fall into the three groups:

1. The novelists of ‘Sentiment & Reflection’; who, though far enough from Sterne, are yet nearer to him than any of the others.
2. The novelists of home life, who follow the chief lines, lay down by Richardson in the preceding generation.
3. The novelist of more distinctly Romantic bent, who have drawn their theme from the Medieval Past, and supported the sense of mystery and terror.
The main facts of Laurence Sterne’s life are sufficiently well-known. After a struggling boyhood, he went to Cambridge. In 1738 he became vicar of Sutton. In 1741 he married Eliza Lumley, which was later on proved as a mismatched marriage. By her he had one daughter Lydia. Two defects were found by the critics about his character. However, these defects have nothing to do with his genius as a writer. He is one of the four wheels of the caravan of the novel. His most significant novels are:

→ ‘Life and Opinion of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman’ (1759)
→ ‘Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy’ (1768)
→ A Political Romance (later called ‘The History of a Good Warm Watch-Coat’) (1759)
→ He has also written letters & tried his hand at satire
→ A Fragment in the Manner of Rabelais (a satire) (1759)
→ Journal to Eliza

It is through ‘LIFE AND OPINION OF TRISTRAM SHANDAY, GENTLEMAN’; Sterne has revolutionized the whole scope and purpose of the novel. He has opened new and fruitful fields of humor. He has created a style more subtle and flexible than any had found before him. He has widened the scope and loosened the structure of the novel. The critics say,

“Sterne is nothing if not an innovator.”

When ‘LIFE AND OPINION OF TRISTRAM SHANDAY, GENTLEMAN’ began to appear, there was real danger that the English novel would remain little more than a mirror of contemporary life, the social condition of the time which we find in the works of Defoe, Fielding, Smollett, and Richardson. But Sterne has thrown himself athwart (crossways) the tradition of the elders. He has delivered one blow after another at the fashion they had set. ‘Tristram Shandy’ has torn up every known landmark. It is said,

“If we compare ‘Tristram Shandy’ with ‘Tom Jones’, with ‘Roderick Random’, with ‘Moll Flanders’, if we compare it even with ‘Pamela’ or ‘Clarissa’- we shall see that the wheel has come full circle.”

‘Tristram Shandy’ is the only novel which was actually a stake (chance/risk) for the whole personality of the author. The purposes to write such novel are:

1. To give free utterance to his own way of looking at life.
2. His own moral.
3. Intellectual individuality.

How to study ‘Tristram Shandy’

In many ways and for various reasons, ‘Tristram Shandy’ is one of the great books of prose fiction. In its humor, universality, insight into humanity, in its concern with motives and with the psychology of the individual, in writer’s approach to the problems of novel writing, it makes great sense to the modern reader. Perhaps the key to the enjoyment of ‘Tristram Shandy’ is literalness. If we believe everything we are told in the book, understand it in the way we are told to understand it, we will not become angry and frustrated the way most past readers have. The secret is not to bring usual attitudes or traditional judgments to the book, but rather to surrender to the writer. As the author himself says,

“I would go fifty miles on foot, for I have not a horse worth riding on, to kiss the hand of that man whose generous heart will give up the reins of his imagination into his author’s hands- be pleased he knows not why, and cares not wherefore.”

Many modern readers have felt that there are certain problems in reading this novel, but they present a kind of complexity that can be pleasurable for the modern reader. The problems are:

1. The identity of the author
2. The point of the story
3. Many digressions

However, the fullest and deepest meaning is gotten from the book only by assuming that Sterne created a fictional character named Tristram Shandy and that he made him a writer. He gave him a mind that knows of all the happenings in the book, and this mind is independent of the artist Sterne’s mind.

→ 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, ‘Life and Opinion 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 fulfillment, 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 (unusual) 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 heavy-handed 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 (disdain) 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.

- **Character & Humour:-**
  Sterne’s handling of character is humorous to the very core. This humour the author has represented mainly by the trio, Walter Shandy, Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim. In Johnsonian sense,
“Sterne’s characters may be born humorists. But they have been born anew, & have taken on an entirely new nature, in the soul of a writer who was a humorist in another.”

Sterne has taken Cervantes & many other writers like Rabelais, Montaigne, and Burton as his models, which have provided hints & suggested methods. But so far as humor is concerned for the novel (in the humorous handling of the characters) Sterne’s master was Cervantes & none other.

Tristram tells us the story about the parson, & considers his horse as the brother of Rocinante - the horse of Don Quixote. Tristram says that he tells us all these things just because his purpose is to do exact justice to every creature brought upon the stage of this dramatic work. However after telling us everything about the parson, in the next chapter we are told about his name i.e. Yorick who is the friend and level-headed adviser of the Shandy family. Thus along wit, the characters, the style of the novel is also humorous.

- **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- 1st). 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.
• **Father 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 darken 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 like,

  ![Diagram](image)

  This is how Sterne has introduced a new way of writing a novel which is known as Stream of Consciousness.

• **Oddity of the Novel:-**
It is very difficult to say whether ‘Tristram Shandy’ is a novel or any other form of fiction. Some critics are in opinion that it is not a novel in the proper sense of the term. However this oddity of the book has caused a great sensation in London. According to Dr. Johnson,

“Nothing odd will do long; ‘Tristram Shandy’ did not last, irresponsible and hasty trifling.”

- **No Chain of Causation (the causing of an effect):**-

The story starts with the narration by Tristram of his own conception. In the first three chapters Tristram writes about his father, mother, uncle Toby and Uncle Toby's servants, while in 15th chapter of the Book 1st, he writes about the marriage of his parents – Walter Shandy with Elizabeth Mollineux in the presence of two witnesses and the tells about all those conditions and commitments put by them before each other.

In between, little by little he introduces himself to the reader. However, we find many thing but a little about his life and opinion. His own baptism takes place in 14th chapter of 4th Book.

However, in the 19th chapter of Book 1st, he writes about his father's strong disapproval for certain names like Jack, Dick & Tom. He is very careful to give a suitable name to his new born child and ultimately he chooses ‘Tristram’. Later on after 2 years of Tristram’s birth his father writes a “Dissertation” simply upon the word ‘Tristram’ showing to the world the ground of his strong disapproval for this name.

Stern talks about many things but in a ridiculous way on trivial and unnecessary subjects. For instance, in 18th chapter of the 7th Book he writes about a survey in Paris and gives a long list of 900 streets, which is, first of all, almost of no need, secondly it is neither relevant to any previous chapter nor any further chapter. Thus the novel has no chain of causation. It raises many questions like,

i. How can a writer write about his existence in his mother’s womb?
ii. Is this information necessary for a writer to give?
iii. Can there be any hidden meaning of the Preface?
iv. What does Sterne actually want to tell us?
v. Does he really want us not to understand him and his work?
vi. Are all these information only for adding numbers of volumes of the novel ‘Tristram Shandy’?

If we try to find out the answers of these questions then obviously, we would like to conclude with the note that ‘Tristram Shandy’ is nothing but a sentimental novel Though its incoherence is highly appreciated by the writers like Virginia Wolffe, James Joyce; it had made Sterne famous in England, London, and France; translated into many languages; then also it is not a novel in the proper sense of the word, as it must have characters and incidents in an organic way. But ‘Tristram Shandy’ lacks in this manners. It is the book written without plan, without beginning, without progress or without end. Some critics are in opinion that Tristram embodies Sterne. Even Mr. Traill (perhaps Sterne’s biographer) has said,

“It may be doubted whether it was an accident or his usual deliberate fantasticality that made Sterne a well-known writer.”

• **Style:**

  Addressing to the critic, the author, (Tristram) says that the language of his book is inurbane and only befitting the man who cannot give clear and satisfactory accounts of things. He writes,

  “… that I write as a man of erudition; that even my similes, my allusions, my illustrations, my metaphors are erudite-and that I must sustain my character properly, and contrast it properly too,-”

  (Book-2/chapter 2)

  Tristram cites the example of John Locke’s essay, ‘Concerning Human Understanding’ and says that he knows many who quote the book who have not read it and he even, knows many others who have read it but not understood it, while about his own book he says,

  “-It is a history – A history! Of who? What? Where? When? Don’t hurry yourself- It is a history-book, Sir, of what passes in a man's own mind; …”

  (Book-2/Chapter-2)

  Tristram says that if the reader will look down into the bottom of his history, they find that the cause of obscurity (hard to understand) and confusion in the mind of a man is three folded:

  i. **Dull organs**
ii. Slight and transient (temporary/ momentary) impressions made by the objects when the said organs are not dull.

iii. A memory like unto a sieve, not able to retain what it has received.

About “digressions” in the novel the author says that in his all digressions there is a master-stroke of digressive skill. They are all fair. Though he flies off from the main topic, yet he constantly takes care to order affairs so that his main business does not stand still in his absence. He writes,

“In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too-at the same time.”

(Book-1/Chapter-20)

For example, the author wants to give the great outline of his Uncle Toby’s most whimsical character and suddenly he starts talking about his Aunt Dinah and the coachman. That is why we find the move as a rhapsody. However, for him,

“Digressions are the sunshine; - they_ are the life, the soul of reading! _ take them out of the book, for instance_ you might as well take the book a.ong with them;”

(Book-1/Chapter-20)

These digressions are the advantages not only for the reader but also for the author as they provide him other new ideas to develop his novel and an opportunity to collect references about his main work. Therefore digressive and progressive movements are used as one wheel within another and in this way; in general, the whole machine has been kept-a-going for forty years. All the digressions finally have unity in the creative consciousness of Tristram. No matter how he may get but the important thing is that he harmonizes these digressions with the “main work” and no matter how vague (unclear) the connection is between “digression” and “story”, he always finally brings the two together.

At many places in the novel we find Tristram asking help from literary critics about how to proceed. He worries about the slow progress of the book. Then also he is sure about one thing and that is why he writes,

“I shall never overtake myself… Heaven prosper the manufacturers of paper…”

(Book-4/Chapter-13)
This is because he is going to write many volumes of his history. Somehow, he fills up pages and pages, chapters and chapters and that is why we find lack of unity. But through it he shows us what Tristram and his book are like. This is Tristram’s book and this is the form he has given to it. In fact the very structure of the book reflects his mind and his character as he is the author of the story/book. He writes in the novel,

“All I wish is, that it may be a lesson to the world, ‘to let people tell their stories in their own way.’”

Thus, the notable thing is that other writers just drop a curtain on the scene and the reader takes for granted that everything worked out as it was supposed to. But Tristram proves every time that nothing happens by chance. He fulfils his responsibility morally by taking care of every detail. He thinks that if he wants to do his job well he should not take the easy way out and therefore he gives even minute details and takes care about his each and every promise. He is a purposeful author and wants his readers to know that he is. He always asks himself a question,

“Is a man to follow rules-or rules to follow him?”

(Book-4/Chapter-10)

Sterne is an amateur (layperson/proletarian) artist. His visual description is a constant element in the book and that is why the minute details are give so that the reader can see what is going on. Sterne portrays a world in which reason, identity and communication are gradually collapsing, as men and women retreat to their own solipsistic enclaves. Each of them has his or her ‘hobby-horse’- Walter his dogmatic system, Uncle Toby his model-building, Tristram his never-ending autobiography – which is the index of their odd behavior.

- Uncle Toby:

  Uncle Toby is the most Whimsical character. He stands next to Tristram himself. He represents humanity, kindness, compassion, simplicity, transperance etc. Tristram gets most of information about his life and family from Uncle Toby. And even when we study the novel we find that Uncle Toby is more close to Tristram than his ever his own father, Walter Shandy, and that is why every now and than in the novel, we find Tristram addressing Toby as “My Uncle Toby”.
Uncle Toby lacks this satirical strain. He is the very image of the 18th century Man of Feeling, and we are supposed to weep with him; but we are meant to smile at him all the same.

Uncle Toby has great Crush for the fortification and the story related to it. He is an eye witness of the siege (cordon) of Namur and it is one of the most memorable attacks in that siege made by the English and the Dutch in which the English won. And Uncle Toby is generally more eloquent and particular in his account of it. In this siege he is wounded but Tristram writes that his wound fails to explain clearly the technical details of where and how he has received the wound. Toby says that all of his concern with fortifications is “for the good of the nation” (Book-3)

Uncle Toby’s keen interest for the fortification reminds us Cervante’s ‘Don Quixote’. He is highly under the influence of Don Quixote. He studies the map with (84) great interest. He learns more and more about fortified towns like Namur and begins to study all manner of military writings with such an intense, application and delight that he forgets himself, his wound, his confinement, his dinner etc. Therefore Tristram worries for his health and he urges him as if he were actually there at that moment. On seeing him lost in reading the books, Tristram writes,

“-stop! My dear uncle Toby - Stop! - Go not one foot farther into this thorny and bewildered track- intricate are the stapes! Intricate are the mazes of this labyrinth! ...O my uncle; fly-fly, fly from it as from a serpent - Is it fit – good - natured man!... - evaporate thy spirits - waste thy animal strength - dry up radical moisture - ... O my uncle Toby”

(Book-2/c-3)

However, Tristram pays homage to his Uncle Toby. He speaks with great love of his character and takes vow that Toby’s that Toby’s fortification “shall never be demolished”. There is a gook understanding between Uncle Toby and his Hobby-Horse. He mounts on it with great pleasure and it carries Toby with equally great pleasure. But Walter finds it the most ridiculous horse that ever gentleman mounted.

The relationship between Walter and Toby is friendly and having great love and respect for each other. Quoting Aristotle’s philosophy Walter tells Toby that the person who thinks of anything which is past looks down at the
ground but the person who thinks of something that is to come, looks up towards the heaven. Here Tristram says that his Uncle Toby thinks of neither, as he looks horizontally. Toby becomes the subject of mockery when he mistakes the bridge that is why in order to teas him, Walter requests him to tell him how it happened. Here Toby says,

“How can you teas me so much about it? I have told it you twenty times.”

Such friendly relation provides humor to the reader. However, we find a vast difference between Walter and Toby. Toby is very optimistic by nature. He believes that God will take care of everything. Commenting upon the burden that women have in bearing children,

Toby: “God bless them.”
Walter: “Devil takes them.” (Book-4)

Tristram truly says that Toby is a man of courage. He is of peaceful and easygoing nature, having no harsh element. He is kind also to the servants of the family. His compassionate nature can be seen in the episode of fly. One day at dinner a fly comes buzzing. He with infinite attempts catches it. However he does not hurt it but wants it to fly away. He says,

“Go - I’ll not hurt thee, I’ll not hurt a hair of thy head: - Go – go, poor devil, get thee gone, why should I hurt thee? – This world surely is wide enough to hold both thee and me.” (Book-2-c-12)

Tristram says that the lesion of universal goodwill is taught and imprinted to him by his uncle Toby and it has never since been worn out of his mind. Thus the expensive education which a person gets from the university is bestowed upon him at home. He writes,

“Yet I often think that I owe one half of my philanthropy to that one accidental impression. This is to serve for parents and governors instead of a whole volume upon the subject.” (Book-2-c-12)

Though we find exaggeration and sentimentality in Toby’s character, however, his goodness is touching and real, and that is why William Hazlitt truly says that he is,

“…One of the finest compliments ever paid to human nature.”

• Walter Shandy:
Walter Shandy, the father of Tristram, is a man who loves hypotheses, theories and erudition and hates interruption. He is an easily disappointed man. The two most important concepts of in ‘Tristram Shandy’ are:

1. The theory of “Association”, given by the great 18th century philosopher, John Locke who propounds in his essay ‘Concerning Human Understanding’ that ideas result from sensations, and that it is the association of ideas that provides the link between characters and sentiments. (This is what 20th century novelists have learnt from modern psychologists) Locke explains the genesis of ideas from sensation. Simple sensations produce simple ideas of those sensations; associated sensations produce associated ideas of sensations; and this process becomes immensely complicated with the accretion (growth or increase by a gradual build up) of other associations of this kind. The mind has the capacity to form ideas from sensations and reflection as well, and this reflection is able to juggle and forming ‘abstract ideas’. Thus the whole body of logical knowledge is built up through association from the simple primary base of sensation.

2. The theory of ‘Sensibility’ or ‘Sentimentality’ according to which value lies in feeling

Both these theories are mainly first represented by Walter Shandy and his wife than Uncle Toby and Tristram. Walter Shandy is very possessive by nature. The way Toby is serious about military architecture and fortification, in the same way Walter is serious about the name of the person. He even, writes a dissertation on this subject. He suggest Susannah that his child must be baptized with the name ‘Trismegistus’. But she forgets the name and tells the curate that the name begins with “’Tris- and therefore he says that it must be “Tristram”. She says that then it must be ‘Tristrangistus’, but he insists that there cannot be any such name and the child finally baptized, “…and so Tristram was I called, and Tristram shall I be to the day of my death.”

(Book-4/c-14)

Thus, though, Walter takes great care about his child’s name, his head, nose etc, then also he has to lament over the failure of all his efforts and all his doctrine. Finally he has to compromise.

On one hand Walter provides great humor with his strange theories and by lamenting over the failure of those theories, while on the other hand his strange
behavior when he receives the death of his eldest son, Bobby, surprised the reader. He represents human beings artificiality, hollowness, and indifference attitude. He is self centered, money minded greedy and having no respect for women at all, even not for wife, Elizabeth Shandy.

At one level, ‘Tristram Shandy’ is an allegory of the coming into being of every human subject. It is just that its hero is more hilariously, devastatingly messed up than most of us. It does not help that he has a mad father. Walter Shandy is a crazed system-builder for whom nothing is random or accidental, and everything connects significantly with everything else. It is the condition to which we might today give the name paranoia (fear/ suspicious /mistrust/ obsession /terror/mania). He predrafts his development in his ridiculous ‘Tristrapaedia’, he determined to leave nothing in his son’s upbringing to get out.

So there is no origin. Something or someone has always been there before us. If not, we could not be there ourselves. Tristram is preceded and preempted by his paranoid father, who symbolizes the Law which governs his being and if Walter is mad, it is because the Law is mad too. It is mad because it believes that it should be obeyed simply because it is the law, rather than on any rational grounds.

However, the novel represents Tristram’s hopeless revenge on his father. One text deconstructs another. Walter models his son’s life on writing, requiring it to conform to the strict letter of the ‘Tristrapaedia’; but Tristram’s own text will show how his life rebels against such orderly discourse. He writes,

“I should beg Mr. Horace’s pardon; - for in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man’s rules that ever lived.”

Walter and Elizabeth Shandy represent subtle subjects like absurdity of life, question of existence, rationalism and degeneration of human civilization. The first chapter deals with their marital act, which is going to be responsible for the determination of the date of Tristram’s geniture and his, would be consciousness and unconsciousness. Tristram’s struggle for his existence is found where he wishes his parents are aware about what they are doing when they beget him, after all they are equally bond to that moment, which the author
considers a “duty” of mankind towards Nature in order to keep on going the life cycle on the earth. He writes,

“...that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it...”

It seems that the author considers himself as the result of the week moment of his parents. He raises questions at the existence of human being on the earth and writes,

“Believe me, good folks, this is not so inconsiderable a thing as many of you may think it; you have all heard of the animal spirits, how they are transfused from father to son etc., etc.”

This is how man’s duty towards nature becomes a mode of physical pleasure and results into the animal spirit. Sterne satirizes at the man’s illusion of their planning for making family, society and nation in order to make a civilized society. But the fact is that the mankind is degenerated and gives to the next generation nothing but hollowness. The reference of Bobby’s death is also a fierce satire at human nature, as it discloses the selfish attitude of all people who are related to Bobby him in some or the other ways. For example- Bobby’s death provides a chance to Walter to make an oration about death and the fall of civilization, Mrs. Shandy is also found less affected as she is more eager to know the story behind the word “wife” which she has heard secretly from the talk between Walter and Toby, Obadiah laments as it is going to increase his work burden, Susannah dreams to have that costly green satin night gown of Mrs. Shandy, as now Mrs. Shandy will go into mourning. Through Corporal Trim’s oration the author suggests that death is finally trivial.

“Death affects only the person who dies.”
All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.