

# Travel writing and identity in tristram shandy



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In *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, Laurence Sterne employs unconventional structure and non-linearity to disorient his readers. Sterne projects himself through the lens of Tristram Shandy, and conveys his 'conversation' with readers through parody and satire. In keeping with his disorienting style, Sterne disrupts the patterns that defined the narrative in the first six volumes, and changes course significantly into a lengthy digression; volume seven, which is an ironic attempt at travel writing. Volume Seven details Tristram's 'Escape from Death' as he adventures through Europe, including his smaller digressions, like the story of the two lovers, Amandus and Amanda. Tristram makes allusions to fictitious stories while traveling to the sites of their occurrences, such as the tomb of the lovers, only to sadly realize that the place does not exist. His attempt at situating himself as a traveller in a literary context proves to be a humorous failure, much like his broader failure in situating his identity in the novel. The story of Amandus and Amanda's tragic, but joyous relationship translates to Sterne's recurring theme of dualities. Sterne seems to advocate sensuality for its own sake, projecting the idea that joy and sorrow are the two sides of every man. Tristram Shandy's inclusion of the sentimental tale of the lovers acts as a commentary on the dry and empty nature of the travel writing genre. Shandy's character lacks depth throughout the novel because his narrative offers little personal reflection and the act of mocking the travel genre aids in situating the character within his own narrative. Volume Seven begins with a halting change in narrative; Tristram, while in the midst of telling the story of Uncle Toby's romance, shifts the scene far from the Shandy household in order to detail his own travels throughout the continent. In true Tristram

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fashion, he consciously informs the reader that he will adopt the voice of a travel writer and provide a detailed account of his journey. He instead deviates from his preconceived goal and mocks the genre from every angle possible. Tristram introduces his adventure with the following; “—Now I think it very much amiss—that a man cannot go quietly through a town, and let it alone, when it does not meddle with him, but that he must be turning about and drawing his pen at every kennel he crosses over, merely o’ my conscience, for the sake of drawing it” (Sterne 387). From the moment he arrives in Calais, Tristram parodies all the conventions of travel writing. He questions whether the sights he sees are worth describing at all, and then illustrates Calais in such a way as to make it sound identical to any other place. He is more interested in people—even fictional ones—than places, and brags that “ by seizing every handle, of what size or shape soever, which chance held out to me in this journey—I turned my plain into a city—I was always in company” (Sterne 430). He writes a number of times about the innkeeper’s daughter, Janatone, as a figure who is more lasting and influential than any historical landmark; he values her more because of her transitory humanness. He writes, “...may all measure them at your leisure—but he who measures thee, Janatone, must do it now—thou carriest the principles of change within thy frame”(Sterne 394). Tristram begins to focus more on physical movement of age and time, perhaps because he feels that death is upon him, but also because it is a recurring element of his anxiety throughout the text. Tristram’s measure of time is reflective of his non-linear narrative, they coincide with each other; this proves problematic for plot development, but reinforces the notion that Tristram has difficulty asserting his ‘ humanness’ in the novel. The language and his means of conveying it

become noticeably more mechanical as Tristram becomes more aware of his lack of placement in the plot. He claims that “ speaking of my book as a machine” helps him to gain “ the greater credit? for it. Volume Seven navigates two separate travel narratives; one of Tristram as a young boy and the other as Tristram at a mature age, recording his recent travels. He provides a disorienting explanation after he realizes the plots were intertwined; “...I have been getting forwards in two different journies together, and with the same dash of the pen—for 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”(Sterne 413). The exposition appears purposely unhelpful, but it is only characteristic of Tristram’s digressive-progressive nature. The voice of the author is still separate from both of these threads: he is no longer in France, but has returned to his study to record these fairly recent adventures. Tristram is fascinated with this strange phenomenon by which lived repetitions can create a doubleness in memory. His allusion to travel writing is ironic in more ways than one; he imitates the genre to deliberately go against its conventions in regards to his actual travels, as well as his own physical situation within the novel. He attempts to write himself into the plot geographically to compensate for the lack of identity that readers perceive in his character. Aside from the major tragedies that occurred in his life, the young Tristram Shandy is but a minor character next to Uncle Toby or Walter Shandy. Just as the title suggests, the novel is essentially a factual document, ridden with mental constructs and thought processes catered by Tristram himself. Tristram’s intense concentration on fictional stories and characters connects his character to emotions that he has been seeking for the length of the novel. He offers

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countless references to short and seemingly insignificant sub-plots, usually introducing characters that are never mentioned afterward. The story of the two lovers proves different however, as in Chapter 31, Tristram promises to travel to the legendary tomb to 'drop tears on it'. The story essentially details the forbidden love between Amandus and Amanda, lovers who are separated by their families and upon reuniting drop dead from the overwhelming joy. Tristram, interestingly, regards this story as far more valuable than the 'antiquities' that travellers worship. Immediately following the story, Tristram asserts that, "There is a soft area in every gentle mortal's life where such a story affords more pabulum to the brain, than all the Frusts, and Crusts, and Rusts of antiquity, which travellers can cook up for it" (Sterne 418). Tristram commends the story as more nourishing than the 'frusts, crusts and rusts' that travel writers 'cook up'; he assumes an idealistic position on the story of the lovers, perhaps illuminating an emotional depth within him that was absent previously. To his displeasure, he arrives at the tomb, only to find out that it does not exist. There is an ambiguity surrounding Tristram's intentions in venturing to the tomb, similar to the context of his desire for Uncle Toby's presence. Tristram concludes the already brief Chapter 40 when he proclaims, "What I would have given for my Uncle Toby to have whistled, Lillo Bullero!" (Sterne 427). Uncle Toby's whistle occurs when a situation becomes too provocative or awkward for Toby's modest nature, however, Tristram seeks the nostalgic feeling he gets from hearing the sound. The inclusion of this story is open to readers' interpretation, as it contains many of Tristram's 'opinions'. Everything he decides to include or exclude in his narrative is deliberate, as convoluted and displacing as it may seem. Essentially, Shandy's mistrust of travel narratives

and high regard for fictional plots provides a depth in his character that was not apparent in earlier volumes. Volume Seven is an abrupt and severe deviation from Tristram's original narrative, and it offers a glimpse into the 'human' and 'physical body' that comprises his character. Tristram Shandy's inclusion of the sentimental tale of the lovers acts as a commentary on the dry and empty nature of the travel writing genre. This is a departure from the rest of the novel, where Shandy's character lacks depth. The rest of the text offers little personal reflection and the act of mocking the travel genre aids in situating Tristram Shandy in his own narrative.