

# The ideal reader in don juan and tristram shandy



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Byron called Don Juan 'the poetical Tristram Shandy', and both works appear consciously intertextual in their attempts to question held beliefs about storytelling. They both define an ideal reader by everything that they should not be, and attempt to create an atmosphere of uncertainty through the satirical contradictions of their own works. Their differences, however, appear to be in method: Byron attempts to fulfill his target of formal perfection and moral uncertainty, whereas Sterne experimentally portrays and then subverts different approaches to storytelling throughout, leaving readers constantly uncertain about his sincerity.

Laurence Sterne's style in Tristram Shandy pushes the 'shaggy dog' method of storytelling to its logical extreme, creating a narrative that interrupts itself constantly and explores tangents with little consideration to the linear plot. As Melvyn New observes, however, Sterne has created an irrational narrator through purposeful and intricately planned style: a 'carefully crafted impression of carelessness and abandon.' The illogical series of events and confused chronology is begun by his promise to start from the beginning, and 'to go on tracing every thing in it, as Horace says, ab Ovo', and this incorrect reference to classical literature (as Horace in fact praises Homer for beginning in the middle) demonstrates the relationship with an informed reader that Sterne wishes to have. The ideal reader should be able to see through commonly held beliefs about literature and any false claims to classical knowledge, as that hypocrisy is what he satirizes, but he also insults the reader who assumes that sharing an inside joke would lead to sharing all subtext or intent later in Chapter Four of Book I: 'I know there are readers in the world, as well as many other good people in it, who are no readers at all,

-who find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last, of every thing which concerns you.' The shift from the impersonal third person ' themselves' and ' they' to ' every thing which concerns you' shows how changeable the targets of Sterne's satire are.

Fawcett connects this shifting of target to all different types of reader to the visually experimental transformations of the page through punctuation and the changing contradictions throughout the story, and compares these short-lived changes to Johnston's Dictionary of the English Language (written four years before Shandy): his experimentations ' resist promises ... that the printed word was somehow more stable or more legible than the spoken word ... that printed books develop more stable selves than performance.' By including illegitimate versions of his work into the heart of his story and by using asterisks, ambiguities and euphemisms as forms of blanks that the reader must fill in, Sterne invites his fans and critics to help create his work only to shift again and chastise them later for the choices they have made.

Although Byron, like Sterne, is using a wandering narrative to directly discuss his personal thoughts on the state of literature and literary discussion in Britain, his outlook on literature seems far more fixed. In actually starting the 16 and a half cantos, he seems to have been fuelled by Coleridge's criticism of Bertram, and in his formalist approach to verse, the point of Don Juan, as Jerome J. McGann remarks, seems to be ' to clarify the nature of poetry in an age where obscurity on the subject, both in theory and practice, was becoming rampant.' In Don Juan he claims that ' Good workmen never quarrel with their tools' (1. 201), which supports this conservative, formalist view of rhyme and meter as necessary ' tools' with <https://assignbuster.com/the-ideal-reader-in-don-juan-and-tristram-shandy/>

undeniable material significance through his own adherence to their rules. Byron's use of ottava rima was influenced by Beppo, and an attempt to anglicize the same form as Pulci, Berni and Casti. Italian lends itself far easier to the form (which demands six lines of alternating rhymes and a closing couplet), due to an abundance of easily-rhymed words ending in vowel sounds unlike English, but Byron's incredibly long exercise within such challenging restrictions exists as proof that his specifications can be fulfilled, and that readers should demand that standard of inventiveness. It also serves the thematic point of juxtaposing a constrictive verse style against the free flow of poem's narrative and the transgressive nature of its actual content. He comments on other literature through the premise itself, by subverting the Don Juan mythology and making him the pursued neophyte who is easily seduced rather than the seducer, but also makes direct reference to other writers. He calls Wordsworth unintelligible (Dedication IV), Coleridge misguided (II), Bob Southey insolent and untalented (III), and concludes that they are 'shabby fellows' (VI). The reader is being advised as to what their standards for poetry should be, and while he has a fixed answer that he claims to be exhibiting unlike the self-conscious satire of Sterne's easily distracted storyteller, both writers are engaging with their contemporary literary circles through trying to construct the ideal reader by teaching them to question the received wisdom of authors.

Part of both writers' self-conscious commentary on story-telling and the state of literature throughout their respective pieces is their consideration of the female reader. Barbara M. Benedict comments on the gendered nature of Sterne's addresses to the reader: 'The readers of the novel are segregated

by gender: whereas the term “ Sir” solicits a sympathetic reader, “ Madam” evokes a bad one-and the division indicates the painful separation of interests that divides ‘ modern’ audiences. This characterization works rhetorically to associate debased modern culture, both literary and by implication political, with female values and audiences.’ This dichotomy reflects and perpetuates a societal view of women readers, as he mocks the dedications of other authors when he uses the obsequious ‘ My Dear Lord’ or ‘ Sir’, and the man addressed grows from ‘ a perfect stranger’ to ‘ my dear friend and companion’ in a manner perhaps satirizing the confessional format of novels like *Moll Flanders*, but appears to mock the reader themselves when using ‘ Madam’. When he addresses his female reader about the truth of his and Jenny’s relationship, for example, he provides her hypothetical responses as scandalized exclamations: ‘ Friend!—My friend.— Surely, Madam, a friendship between the two sexes may subsist, and be supported without—Fy! Mr. Shandy:—Without any thing, Madam, but that tender and delicious sentiment which ever mixes in friendship, where there is a difference of sex. Let me intreat you to study the pure and sentimental parts of the best French Romances;—it will really, Madam, astonish you to see with what a variety of chaste expressions this delicious sentiment, which I have the honour to speak of, is dress’d out.’ The irony of recommending a French Romance to find ‘ pure and sentimental’ chaste friendship between men and women casts doubt on the pure intentions of any reader familiar enough with the genre to understand the joke. The specifically female reader is recommended a genre that with the past popularity of novels like Richardson’s *Pamela* has gained a reputation for female readership, and mocked for the implication that she may already be familiar. Romances

<https://assignbuster.com/the-ideal-reader-in-don-juan-and-tristram-shandy/>

themselves are cast in a hypocritical light through Sterne's sarcastic praise of their 'pure and sentimental parts': since the implication here is that they are purely written for titillation, any attempt by the author to present a romance as otherwise must be a knowing falsehood that the reader also coyly engages with.

Byron acknowledges the importance of a female readership in the fourth canto by addressing women directly: 'Oh ye, who make the fortunes of all books, | Benign ceruleans of the second sex!' (IV, 108-9) The reference to 'benign ceruleans' does not indicate a fear or reverence of their opinion as potential critics, however, as he emphasizes the harmlessness of those hypothetical female readers by referring to them as inanimate representations of abstract color. He also boasted of *The Corsair* that it was 'shining in boudoirs', demonstrating an awareness of the upper-class women who accounted for a significant amount of his success. There was more concern from critics around *Don Juan* specifically entering boudoirs, however, as the subject matter (especially within the context of Byron's scandals and self-imposed exile) was inherently sexual and the narrator very sympathetic to his protagonist. As Haslett observes, his reputation increased the perceived danger: 'The choice of *Don Juan* dictated that the categories of character (*Don Juan*), text (*Don Juan*), *Don Juan*-like author ('Byron'), and libertine style (the voice of the poem's *Don Juan*-like narrator) were not only blurred but mutually contaminating.' Byron did not attempt to distance himself or his reputation from the poem, or to sincerely construct the 'hero' he calls for in the first stanza, but through reference to female writers suggests that they have created *Don Juan* through their desire-fueled

imagination: 'And as romantic heads are pretty painters, And above all an Englishwoman's roves Into the excursive, breaking the indentures Of sober reason, wheresoe'er it moves, He found himself extremely in the fashion, Which serves our thinking people for a passion.' (XI, 33) 'Sober reason' is rejected when it comes to Byron's portrait of morality, and the hypocrisy of society women who could disguise desire for military men as admiration for their accomplishments is exposed here through claiming that a very unaccomplished protagonist is the creation of women's imagination. For women to 'think' is then synonymous with their having sexual ideas - a suggestion which Byron had previously made in *The Waltz*.

Sterne's presence within the text in *Tristram Shandy* is also found in a specific character as well as through his writing voice as Tristram: a real sermon of his is presented as Yorick's, and that character is made notable through the reader being given almost his whole linear biography from birth to death. In chapters ten to twelve of the first book, his life's events are recounted, ending with the fact that he died as a direct consequence of a misunderstood prank; and that he "lies buried in a corner of his church-yard, in the parish of —, under a plain marble slab, [...] with no more than these three words of inscription serving both for his epitaph and elegy. Alas, Poor Yorick" (35). This recounting of his death is soon followed by the completely black page, cementing him in the readers' memories: this association of popular character with author proved financially adroit for Sterne, as he later published sermons under Yorick's name, but the literary associations of his name with Hamlet is another example of Sterne's intertextuality, satirizing his own storytelling by connecting to previous works which possess more

dignity. He casts himself as the jester, and through the contrast of the reference tells the informed reader not to take death as seriously in this text as in others.

Both Sterne and Byron convey their thoughts on the literary world's failings through demonstrating a reader's potential flaws. Although Sterne's targets appear to be always shifting, and Byron sets out with a fixed ideal of formal perfection, if not moral, they appear to share and be motivated by a primary hatred of hypocrisy: poets who speak about poetry but cannot master technical approaches, readers who hide their reason for reading, and the 'gravity' of British society itself. By exposing these falsehoods, they both try to fulfill their goal of changing their literary environment by creating sharper, more cynical readers.