Triatram Shandy: (a) Plot

The plot of Triatram Shandy seems to be lost in a maze of digressions; nevertheless, T.S., too, has a story, like any other novel.

Narrator Triatram begins with his very beginning, that is, with his procreation. He was begotten, he says,

"betwixt the first Sunday and the first Monday in the month of March, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighteen".1

This he learnt later from a note-book entry of his father, which recorded the dates of his 'family concernments'. He was born into this world on 5, November, 1718, in the village where Walter Shandy (his father) dwelt after his retirement from business. Triatram's birth introduces the local midwife - a poor widow, whom parson Yorick of the parish had helped to settle in her profession. Parson Yorick was a benevolent, guileless and gay character. His love of wit, and jests made many enemies, and he died by heart-break, caused by their malicious machinations against him.

The narrator then comes back to the midwife, and to his birth in the village. The latter event, he explains, was brought about by the terms of the marriage settlement between Mr. and Mrs. Shandy. The relevant article in the settlement is produced; by which we come to know that Mr. Shandy was to pay £ 120 as expenses for taking his wife to London, and for her lying-in in the city. But in case she made him undertake the journey and the expenses on a
false alarm, she would forfeit her right of carriage to London, and for the next turn would have her lying-in in their village. This was a misfortune for Tristram, for he got a broken nose by it—thanks to the new scientific instrument of Dr. Slop, the man-midwife. Dr. Slop had been called, in addition to the midwife (who was preferred by Mrs. Shandy), at the instance of Walter Shandy, who was enamoured of the new obstetrical science.

About the time of Tristram's birth, the Shandy brothers were conversing in the parlour. The introduction of his uncle Toby leads Tristram to digress on the character of Toby. Uncle Toby's character was distinguished by modesty. Tristram points to Toby's qualities of the heart, which are set in contrast with the dry intellectualism of Walter. Referring to Toby's character, Tristram says how it came to be ruled by his hobby-horse of the science of fortifications. In the siege of Namur, Captain Toby had received a wound at the groin, by a stone dislodged from a parapet by a cannon-ball. This rendered him unfit for active service, and confined him to bed for four years in London, where his brother Walter, then 'just beginning business in London', took good care of him. In his sick-bed, Toby would get into perplexities, while narrating to his visitors the details of the siege, of his own position, and so on. So he had to take the help of a map for locating the positions. Gradually, his study of the map became an obsession with him; and the science of fortifications became his hobby-horse; so much so that even before he was completely cured, Toby left his sick-bed for his country-house to stage his 'campaigns' on the bowling-green, with the help of his faithful corporal Trim—a retired soldier and a faithful servant and friend.
of Toby Shandy. It was Trim who first conceived the idea of the bowling-green, and Toby was excited by it.

"... as Trim uttered the words, 'A rood and a half of ground to do what they would with', - this identical bowling-green instantly presented itself, and became curiously painted all at once, upon the retina of my uncle Toby's fancy."

Leaving the digression on Toby, the narrator comes back to his immediate business - that of his birth. Walter Shandy in the parlour asks about the noise upstairs, and learns that Mrs. Shandy is taken ill. As maid Susannah runs for the midwife, Walter sends for his Dr. Slop, who lives eight miles away. Servant Obadiah comes with Dr. Slop in about two minutes; for he had not gone far when he met the doctor coming on a pony. Obadiah riding furious on his big coach-horse clashes with Slop at a sharp turn of the road. Dr. Slop, 'a little squat, uncourtly figure', falls, and is splashed in the mud. Obadiah leads him, 'with all his stains and blotches on him', into Shandy parlour. Dr. Slop "stood like Hamlet's ghost, motionless and speechless, for a full minute and a half at the parlour-door (Obadiah still holding his hand) with all the majesty of mud".

Slop's sudden and quick arrival reminds Toby who is absorbed in his science of fortifications - of Stevinus, the inventor of 'the celebrated sailing chariot' which shortened distance. Toby asks Trim to bring Stevinus's book on fortification. Obadiah has been sent to fetch the instruments of Dr. Slop and Uncle Toby now engages in a discourse on the science of fortifications. By the time Trim brings Stevinus, the discourse has come to an end, and Toby asks him to take the book back. Walter Shandy, however, asks Trim to "see if thou canst spy aught of a sailing chariot in it".
As Trim is looking into the book, a sermon pops out of it. Walter Shandy suggests that Trim read it till Obadiah returns. Trim sets himself to the appropriate posture, and reads Yorick's sermon on Conscience. (The sermon in manuscript had been inadvertently put into Stevinus by Yorick himself, who had borrowed the book of Toby). The sermon is a severe indictment of Roman Catholicism for its emphasis on the ceremonies and rituals of religion. Yorick sketches vivid pictures of the atrocities of the Inquisition. As Trim reads the sermon, the humorist author puts in little spicy comments by Walter and Toby Shandy, as well as by Trim, to ridicule Romanism and spotlight the humanistic significance of the sermon, and of the novel as a whole. The sermon ends with an inspired declaration of the primacy of Conscience as a faithful interpreter of the laws of God.

Obadiah has now returned with Dr. Slop's bag. As the doctor prepares to go into action, Walter Shandy stops him, saying that 'by express treaty, solemnly ratified' between him and his wife, the doctor can only assist the midwife, in case of an emergency. Dr. Slop begins praising the new obstetrical science, and Walter – a ceaseless experimenter with ideas – gets mightily interested in the discussion. And then, as Walter Shandy launches a 'scholarly' discourse on the subject of the extraction of the foetus, the modest Toby feels uneasy. Toby confounds Dr. Slop by a sudden reference to 'the prodigious armies we had in Flanders'. This sudden interruption irritates Walter, and then the good Toby withdraws to himself.

Obadiah has brought 'the green baize bag' of Dr. Slop in such a knotted condition, that the doctor, in a hurry to open
the bag, cuts his 'thumb quite across to the very bone'. The splenetic Slop flies into a rage, and opens his battery of curses at poor Obadiah. And of curses he had a long ready list in Bishop Ernulphus's book, which contained— we are told—

"fit forms of swearing suitable to all cases, from the lowest to the highest provocation". 16

The ever-curious Walter asks Slop to read from the book; Toby's soul recoils from this inspired recital of curses, this insult to humanity. So, as Dr. Slop reads out the curses, Toby continues whistling Lillabullero to himself. In Dr. Slop's recital of curses, Sterne indulges a dig at the Roman Catholic emphasis on the sinful nature of man. Thus, as Slop recites—

"Curse him! and may heaven, with all the powers which move therein, rise up against him, curse and damn him (Obadiah) unless he repent and make satisfaction!" 17

the good Toby, the mouthpiece of Sterne's humanism, says that he could not "curse the devil himself with so much bitterness".

The midwife sends an urgent call to Dr. Slop, for "the nurse has cut her arm", and the midwife herself has been slightly wounded in a fall. Dr. Slop rushes into Mrs. Shandy's room. The Shandy brothers dose in the parlour. Trim is away, busy making, for his master's 'campaigns' on the bowling-green, 'a couple of mortars' out of 'an old pair of jack-boots' in the Shandy family. As Trim enters the parlour for showing the two mortar-pieces to his master, Walter Shandy wakes up; for the parlour-door had a creaking hinge, which had not been repaired for ten years. Asked by Walter, Trim says that he has brought two 'mortars'. Walter takes the word to mean vessels for the pounding of drugs, and tells Trim that if Dr. Slop has any drugs to pound, he should do it
in the kitchen. Trim now tells him that, what he has brought is only 'two mortar-pieces for a siege next summer'. Walter learns from him that Dr. Slop is busy making a 'bridge' in the kitchen.

"... my uncle Toby mistook the bridge - as widely as my father mistook the mortars";

for the (draw-) bridge of Toby's bowling-green having given way a few days ago, he had asked Trim to make a new one. Trim then explains that Dr. Slop is making 'a bridge' for Tristram's nose (which he has crushed with his instrument, while bringing him into the world) 'with a piece of cotton and a thin piece of whale-bone'.

Walter Shandy is overwhelmed with grief. He quietly gets up and goes to his chamber upstairs; he throws himself on his bed and lies there in a still posture of distraction.

"A fixed, inflexible sorrow took possession of every line of his face. - He sighed once - heaved his breast often - but uttered not a word".

His brother Toby sits quiet on a chair by the bed-side all the while.

Walter Shandy had a special, philosophic reason for his grief, for he is nothing if not a philosopher. According to his theory of noses, a long nose brought good luck, and a flat nose ill luck. He had read many books on noses, which confirmed him in this belief. Our author's digression on the various scholarly books on noses culminates in the long Slawkenbergius's Tale, and is a sharp ridicule on learned folly. After quietly discharging his grief on his bed for a full hour and a half, Walter Shandy speaks of his affliction to brother Toby. Then a philosophic idea strikes him (Walter), and he points to his brother that there are hidden resources - or, what he calls a 'great and clastic power
within us' - for 'counterbalancing evil'. And so, as the 'greatest evil' has befallen his son (through his broken nose), it should be counteracted by the 'greatest good'. This brings us to Walter's theory of names (explained earlier in the novel - I,19). Walter Shandy believed that names had a magic influence on character. There were three categories of names - good (such as, William, Trismegistus, etc.), bad (Andrew, Humpe, Tristram, etc.) and indifferent or neutral (Jack, Dick, Tom, Bobby, etc.). In Walter's scale of names, Trismegistus ranked the highest. So the evil that has befallen his son must be undone by the greatest good, namely, by giving him the name Trismegistus.

The just-born baby is taken ill, and Susannah hurries into Walter's room for the name. He tells her that the child should be christened Trismegistus. The illiterate Susannah fumbles with the name before the curate. She remembers only 'Tris', and the curate, in hurry, names the child 'Tristram'. When Walter comes to know of the christening error, he is shocked. He goes out quietly to the fish-pond. Coming back, he breaks forth into a long learned lamentation on the series of misfortunes that have struck his son's life. Parson Yorick, a friend of the family, suggests that the matter of changing the name be put to the learned divines, who will gather at the Visitation Dinner, which the Shandy brothers also would attend. The Church scholars, after a long dry debate, decide that "the mother is not of kin to her child"; the father, therefore, is still less so. The parents' wishes, for renaming the child, have, therefore, no value at all. The niceties of the theological discourse immensely please Walter Shandy; but his grief returns when he comes back home.
Walter Shandy has a new problem — namely, how to use the legacy of a thousand pounds left him by aunt Dinah. A thousand and one projects flit across his mind. Of these, two — reclamation of Oxmoor common, and sending his elder son Bobby (who is in London) to foreign travels — vie with each other for his acceptance. Walter's problem, however, is solved by the death of Bobby. Bobby's death leads to an inspired oration on death by his father. A whole set of fine sayings on the subject "rushed into my father's head". In his high, philosophic oration on the transitoriness of existence, Walter forgets his personal grief. The learned oration of Walter Shandy in the parlour runs parallel to the simple, heartfelt oration of corporal Trim in the kitchen. Trim has no flights of fancy, nor the 'deep reading' of Walter Shandy. Trim's speech, 'leaving the images on one side, and the picture on the other', goes 'straight forwards as nature could lead him, to the heart'; and the servants of the Shandy household are moved by it.

Towards the close of his speech, Walter refers to Socrates and his children. As he is quoting from Socrates (Walter had written a Life of Socrates, which he "would never consent to publish") —

"I have friends — I have relations, — I have three desolate children".

Mrs. Shandy, who was overhearing and who did not know who Socrates was, bursts into the room to protest to her husband, that he has one more child than she knew of.

"By heaven! I have one less, — said my father, getting up and walking out of the room".

The shocked Mrs. Shandy is gently led out of the room by the good
When affairs in the family have settled a little, Walter Shandy begins a new project — namely, writing a treatise on the education of his son Tristram. He calls it his *Tristrapaedia*. But he goes so slow with it, that in three years he can scarcely complete even half of the work. And all this time the child remains 'totally neglected and abandoned' to his mother. Then comes the crucial accident to Tristram by the window-sash. Tristram was five years at the time. Maid Susannah runs in fear to Toby’s house — 'a much kinder sanctuary'. Toby and Yorick, followed by Susannah and Trim, arrive at Shandy-hall. Walter Shandy, learning of the accident from Obadiah, comes up to the nursery, looks at the injury, and returns:

"with a couple of folios under his arm ... Obadiah following him with a large reading-desk".

The learned Shandy begins reading from his books (on circumcision) and discussing the theories. The poor wife, asking him about medical arrangements for the child’s injury, is advised to send for Dr. Slop. Absorbed in his theorizing, Walter comes to his *Tristrapaedia*, to his theories of health and education of children (as enunciated in the book). His learned exposition of the medical terms, 'radical heat and radical moisture', finds no echo in the words in lay minds of Toby and Trim, who interpret the terms of their past military experience. Walter then comes to his theory of education. He has found out — he says — a short cut to knowledge; he calls it the 'North-west passage to the intellectual world'. Walter’s system of education depends entirely on auxiliary verbs. And when Mr. Shandy, on the very crest of his scholastic enthusiasm, says that the power of his educative engine is 'incredible
in opening a child's head', the simple Toby spoils all the eff-

c ect of his learned brother's speech by replying that it is enou-

g h to 'burst it(i.e., the child's head) into a thousand splinters.

Meantime, Dr. Slop has come and is preparing to fix a

c ataplasm on Tristram's wound, with the assistance of maid Susa-
nah. The foolish and presumptuous Slop indulges a dig at the

modeaty of the maid, and is worsted by her. As she is 'rowing'

the candle but looking another way, while the doctor is fixing

the cataplasm, she accidently sets fire to Slop's wig. The angry

Slop throws the cataplasm at her face, and Susannah returns the

compliment 'with what was left in the pan'. After filing their

c'ross-bills against each other in the parlour', they retire in-
to the kitchen to prepare a fomentation for Tristram.

Walter Shandy's plans to put his son under a private

governor lead to the digression of the Sory of Le Fever. Years

ago, when Toby was engaged in his toy-war on the bowling-green,
a poor unknown soldier, with a son 'of about eleven or twelve ye-

ers of age', arrived at the village inn. He was on a long march
to join a new regiment, and fell sick on the way. At the news of

his distress, Toby was disturbed; he immediately sent his Trim to
the inn for a full report. On receiving the sad report, Toby him-
self went to see the dying soldier and to bring him home for be-
tter medical treatment and care. But Le Fever's life had run its
course;

"he looked up wishfully in my uncle Toby's face, - then
cast a look upon his boy, - and that ligament, fine as it was, - was never broken".46

Toby adopted the boy, sent him to school, and later, at the boy's
own request, sent him to the wars;

"and as my uncle Toby gave him his last kiss, he slipped sixty guineas, tied up in an old purse of his father's, in which was his mother's ring, into his hand, — and bid God bless him". 47

At the time of his proposed appointment as Tristram's governor, 48 young Le Fever was due for return from the wars.

Dr. Slop making a fuss of Tristram's injury, Walter Shandy decides to put his son into breeches. Accordingly, he (Walter) tries to engage his wife in a discussion on the subject of breeching, on one of his 'beds of justice'; but he is disappointed at the complete lack of learned response from her. Mr. Shandy then turns to ancient books on the subject. Getting some clue from the expression, *Latus Clavus* ('Literally, a broad nail; by metonymy the name was applied to the broad purple stripe worn on the tunic by Roman patricians'), he at last orders for Tristram's breeches.

And while the tailor sits making the breeches, philosopher Shandy stands by his side, reading him a lecture upon the *Latus Clavus*.

Narrator Tristram now enters upon 'a new scene of events'; this happened several years back, and relates to his uncle Toby's 'campaigns' on the bowling-green. Toby — it has been said (see ante, pp. 81-2) — hurriedly returned from his sick-bed in London, to stage his wars on the bowling-green. These 'campaigns', beginning in 1701, went on for several years, closely following Marlborough's campaigns on the continent, and ended with the Treaty of Utrecht (1713). Uncle Toby, who delighted in his hobby-horse as in nothing else, felt very sad when he could no longer indulge it. His brother Walter, who understood men's feelings but little, thought that Toby's sadness was caused by his love of war. Toby
was no orator; but he defended his hobby-horse of the science of fortification. In his 'Apologetical Oration', Toby explained his hatred of war, but made a case for a war fought to oppose tyranny and defend freedom and humanity. To beguile his master's sadness, Trim told him a story — that of his own amours. This story ultimately awakened the gentle passion in Uncle Toby. The story of Toby's amours is told in the last two Books (VIII & IX) of the novel. Before that, the narrator inserts a story of his own travels in France (Bk. VII).

Tristram is now grown up enough to undertake the journey to France. He flees to France to escape from Death, who had him too close in England. Tristram's French travels is an impressionistic and 'comic account' of the author's own journey. Tristram gives a gay account of his visits to Calais, Boulogne, Montreuil, Paris, Lyons, and other places. At Lyons he has a mute loving communion with an ass, who has strayed to his hotel-door. The travel account concludes with the delightful rustic chorus, headed by Mennette, the 'sun-burnt daughter of Labour'. It is a scene of surpassing beauty, which moved even Thackeray, Sterne's bitterest critic.

In the last two Books of the novel, Tristram again goes back in time, to the story of his uncle Toby's amours. Widow Wadman, a 'daughter of Eve', had first met Toby and developed a romantic interest in him, when he came with Trim into the country from his sick-bed in London. But Toby's head being full of matters (his 'campaigns' on the bowling-green) at the time, her secret inclinations bore no fruit. When his game on the
bowling-green was over with the Treaty of Utrecht, Toby was sad; and to relieve his melancholy, his faithful Trim told him a story, which ultimately turned out to be a story of Trim's own amours with a fair Beguine (member of lay sisterhood, in Netherlands, not bound by vows, and usually devoted to social service) who nursed him to recovery during his illness in the wars. Trim's story set Toby musing on the amorous sentiment. Mrs. Wadman had been overhearing their conversation from her arbour, which was very near Toby's 'sentry-box' on the bowling-green. (Toby's house and garden "joined and laid parallel to Mrs. Wadman's"). This was the most opportune moment for her 'attack'. So, as soon as Trim ended his story,

"Mrs. Wadman silently sallied forth from her arbour, replaced the pin in her mob, passed the wicket-gate, and advanced slowly towards my uncle Toby's sentry-box: the disposition which Trim had made in my uncle Toby's mind, was too favourable a crisis to be let slipped."

As she was entering Toby's sentry-box, she held up her cambric handkerchief to her left eye, and then coming very close to him asked him to look into her eye for 'a mote — or sand — or something — I know not what'. The simple Toby, 'with his pipe pendulous in his hand, and the ashes falling out of it', looked and looked, and looked again; but in vain; for there was nothing in the eye

"but one lambent delicious fire, furtively shooting out from every part of it, in all directions into thine (i.e., Toby's)".

The eye did its work. Toby confessed to his Trim that he was in love —

"She has left a ball here — added my uncle Toby — pointing to his breast".

Walter Shandy, who regarded love as an evil passion,
wrote his brother a long letter of instructions as to how Toby should conduct himself in the affair. But Trim, who knew love better, advised his master not to submit to the passion tamely. Trim advised Toby to make 'a good thundering attack upon her, in return -', and to tell her 'civilly afterwards'; for he did not want her to know 'anything of your honour's being in love, before hand'. So, according to Trim's plan, Captain Toby marched to Mrs. Wadman's, followed by his corporal Trim. And while the master was talking to the lady (Mrs. Wadman) in the parlour, his servant was doing the same with her maid, Mrs. Bridget, in the kitchen. The practical Trim succeeded; but the childlike Toby, with his 'um mistrusting ignorance of the ten-ace', failed ultimately.

At the close of the novel, the free-spirited Sterne casts an ironic glance at our conventional condemnation of the act of procreation (which is Nature's provision for continuing the race of so great, so exalted and godlike a Being as man'), and at our glorification of war which destroys mankind. And then, with the droll episode of Obadiah's cow and the birth of her calf, the novel which began with the birth of a man (Tristram) comes to a close.

Tristram Shandy: (b) Theme

In the insertion of the sermon on Conscience in T.S. (II, 17) we may trace a clue to Sterne's theme in the novel. The sermon, composed by parson Yorick, who is Sterne himself (Sterne's Sermons, too, were issued under the name of Mr. Yorick), is read by corporal Trim to the Shandy brothers, and is a strong indictment of Roman Catholicism for its rigid insistence on ceremony if it is a very unpleasant reform.
and disregard of human values. The sermon is a vindication of conscience as the vital and guiding principle of religion and life. Conscience is an inner principle of judgment; it is man's innate sense of morality. The moral thought of the 18th century, stressing the essential goodness of man, naturally gave great importance to conscience (Chap. II). This, with the aid of deism (Chap. I), fostered a humanistic view of religion. Right conduct, or morality, was equated to faith, and was set up as the touchstone of religion. The emphasis on morality as the cardinal point of religion, on the virtues of sociability and fellowship, love and cheerfulness, is clear in the *Spectator* papers (see nos. 459, 106, 143, 158, 169, 255, 243, 474, 483, 494, 516). The vogue of moral sentiment fostered the primacy of feeling, of the heart's affections (Chap. II). It promoted the study of human nature in terms of generous emotions, of man's spontaneous affections. In line with the moral thought of his age, Sterne accepts this moral, positive view of life. This leads him to indict Papism, which sets great store by ceremonies, and which believes — as Sterne says — "that there can be religion without mercy". The Conscience sermon dramatizes the horrors of the Inquisition, and closes with an eloquent plea for humanity, for determining the sacred law by the inward principle of love and benevolence. Sterne's ridicule of Dr. Slop springs from this supreme importance to humanity. It may be noted that, Dr. Slop not only admits the uses of the Inquisition and condones human cruelty (which is the worst form of vice, according to Sterne; — Uncle Toby could not even hurt a fly) on religious grounds, and rules out cheerfulness from religion; he has also little faith in human fellowship — which is evident from
his easy spouting of curses on Obadiah on slight or no provocation. Dr. Slop's lack of faith in human values is also evident in his attitude of self-importance and in his splenetic behaviour with maid Susannah during the dressing of Tristram's wound, in his low-rating of love and human affections. It is such aberrations from humanity that evoke the humanist Sterne's comic laughter. It is this dislike of Romanism that prompts Sterne to make fun of certain particular Papist beliefs, like pre-natal baptism, early in the novel.

18th century morality was grounded on feeling. Starvation of feeling stunts the moral growth and the development of the human personality (for, a passion is an 'original existence' — see ante, Chap. II). Exclusive adherence to reason deadens life, by drying up life's vital source, namely, feeling. Scholasticism, by its supine indifference to the functions of the heart and to the realities of life, blocks life's happiness. Walter Shandy is such a pitiful victim of his learning. Though by nature mild and courteous, his mind is ruled by theories. The humanist Sterne laughs at him, by pointing out the ridiculousness of Mr. Shandy's theories and behaviour in the most simple matters of life. Walter Shandy's theories — whether they are of noses or names, or of pro-creation — get rude jolts from the facts of life. He writes his system of education for his son Tristram; he calls it his Tristrapaedia. This system depends on the quiddities of grammar. The absurd character of this system is brought out in the following lines —

(Walter Shandy is referring to the use of auxiliary verbs)
"... the use of the Auxiliaries is, at once to set the soul a-going by herself upon the materials as they are brought her; and by the versability of this great engine, round which they are twisted, to open new tracts of enquiry, and make every idea engender millions."

It may be remembered that Montaigne, the Renaissance humanist, had pointed out the uselessness of scholastic learning; he regretted that

"We learn not for our life, but for the School".78

The fun is, that Walter Shandy, who is writing his short cut to education, and feels not a little proud of it, cannot complete even half of his work in three years - with the comic consequence that he cannot catch up with the growth of his boy, for whom he is writing the treatise. And so, the first part of his work on which Mr. Shandy had laboured most becomes entirely useless;

"every day a page or two became of no consequence".80

And the author comments -

"Certainly it was ordained as a scourge upon the pride of human wisdom, that the wisest of us all should thus outwit ourselves, and eternally forego our purposes in the intemperate act of pursuing them".80

Dr. Laird, in his essay on 'Shandean Philosophy', misses this comic and humanistic 'motif' of Sterne altogether, when he seeks to explain Walter Shandy's 'North-West passage' (short cut to education) as Sterne's 'serious attempt' to improve upon Locke's theory of education. (Locke, it may be noted, had low-rated scholastic education in his Some Thoughts Concerning Education).

Walter's disregard of human values is seen also in his concept of love as a low passion. His scholasticism and consequent starvation of the heart have deprived him of the joys of fellowship, of the spirit of cheerfulness, which the novelist sets up as the supreme bliss of life. Sterne stresses this thematic 'motif'
more than once in his novel (see Chap. IX, section b - Happiness)
True learning fosters humility; but scholasticism, that is, learning which is divorced from life, or exclusive absorption in theories, begets a spleenetic disposition and self-importance. We are not only told of Walter's being subject to 'that little subacid soreness of humour'; we find him referring to his theories with an inflated self-consciousness, with an assumption of finality - whether he is enunciating his theory of education, or explaining the potency of the 'secret spring within us ... that great and elastic power within us of counterbalancing evil', or haranguing on some other theory of his own. His theories fail him repeatedly, but he sticks to them. Life has no lessons for him. Sterne once said that his main plan in the novel was to take in

"the weak part of the sciences, in which the true point of ridicule lies -."

Sterne's theme works eloquently by the positive example of Uncle Toby. If Walter stands for the head, Toby stands for the heart. Though Toby has his hobby-horse in the science of fortification, he has little learning, and less faith in theories. His chief wealth is an ever-active heart, by which he apprehends all experience - a heart that glows with love and benevolence. Sterne's faith in the primacy of the heart works gloriously by the example of Toby Shandy, and of Trim who is his master's shadow. Sterne's importance to the active properties of the heart can be seen from the fact, that not only the scenes where Toby and Trim figure, but other scenes where the novelist evokes pity and compassion and mirth, are the best things in the novel. The Story of Le Fever, Tristram's encounter with the ass at Lyons, the
Nannette scene, so appeal to us, because they are drawn with a fine sensibility, and they illumine the author's basic 'motif' of the holiness of heart's affections. Sterne was not joking when he asserted the serious theme of his novel, calling it 'a moral work, more read than understood'. Elsewhere, in a good-humoured manner, he also calls his novel a book 'of strict morality and close reasoning'. It is unfortunate that even a well-known historian of the English novel, like Baker, who called Sterne 'that amoral person' caring 'nothing for edification', failed to see this higher moral purpose in Sterne.

Sterne's theme has little concern with the manners, or social problems, of his age, with which other novelists preoccupied themselves. This led Leslie Stephen to believe that Sterne is as entirely free as a man can be from any suspicion of purpose.

Leslie Stephen finds the novel (T.S.) wanting in sufficient thematic content.

"Now and then" - says he - "some such question just shows itself for an instant in the background", as, for example, the Negro question; but he regrets that 'more direct agitation' is lacking in Sterne. Leslie Stephen, it appears, did not see that Sterne's theme was of a different nature altogether. Sterne took up the fundamental ethical question of his age. In the Shandy brothers, he draws the head-heart parallelism. With his dominant ethical motive, drawn from the moral philosophy of his age, Sterne stresses the prime importance of the heart in the business of life - that is fulfilled in love and happiness.

"Social question? Yes, indeed. But the ethical question is antecedent"
— said Andre Gide, adding that

"Man is more interesting than men. God made him and not them in his image"

Sterne, for his theme, by steering clear of superficial social manners, or social problems, and taking up the problem of individual ethics, pre-eminently satisfies this test of creative literature laid down by an eminent intellectual of our age.