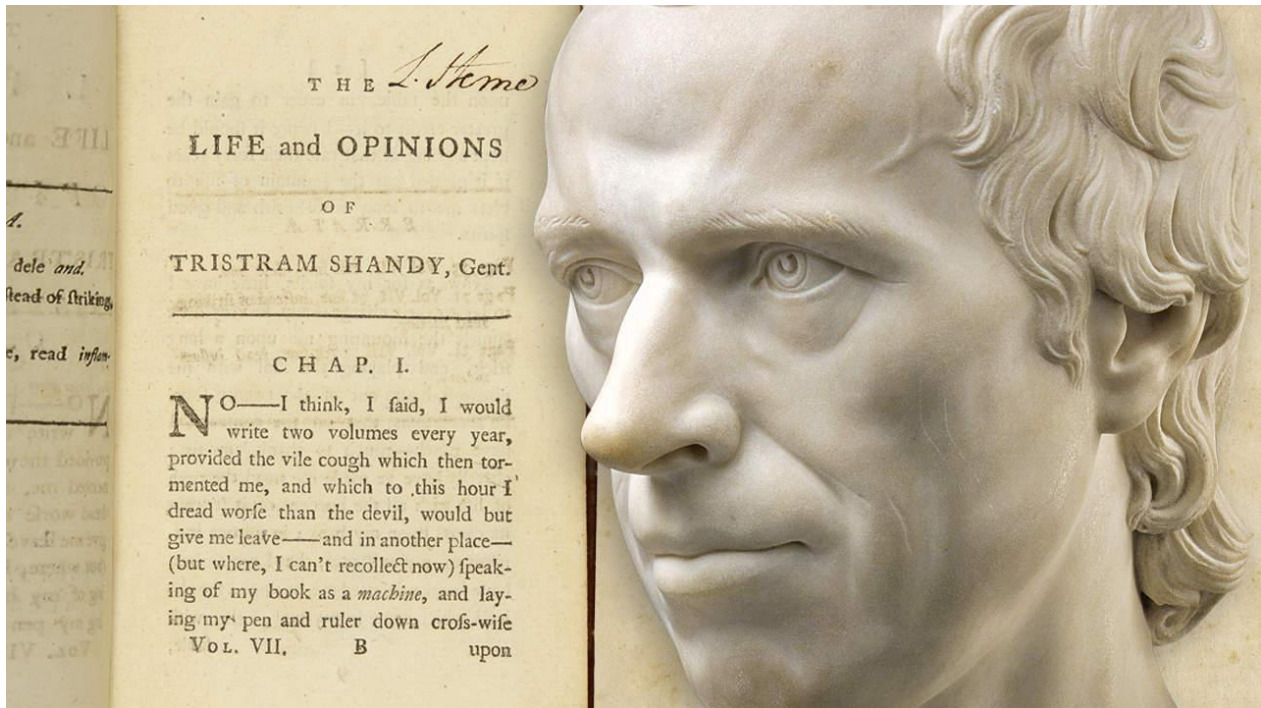


# A Very Modern Eccentric: Laurence Sterne [C1]

Vita e opinioni di Tristram Shandy, gentiluomo venne pubblicato per la prima volta nel 1759 in diversi volumi, con grande successo. Era all'avanguardia della modernità, e il suo autore era un famoso erudito: il sacerdote Laurence Sterne.



In 1776, the [prominent](#) English literary critic Samuel Johnson [delivered](#) his verdict on *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, an experimental novel in nine volumes by Anglo-Irish writer and priest, Laurence Sterne: “Nothing odd will do long.” Nevertheless, the wild and [witty](#) book, initially self-published [in series form](#) between 1759 and 1767 brought Sterne instant fame. It was especially appreciated in Europe, where influential writers including Voltaire and Goethe praised it as innovative and superior.

## RURAL LIFE

Born in County Tipperary, Ireland in 1713, Sterne was sent to school in Yorkshire in the north of England, where he learned Latin and Greek. He studied at Cambridge University (which he hated) and then became a rural

[parson](#) in Coxwold, Yorkshire. He resided with his family in a mid-15th century building called Shandy Hall [from 1760 on](#), while he also made frequent journeys to London and to Europe to research and promote his writing. Sterne's other novels include an ecclesiastical satire called A Political Romance (1759), which [angered](#) the church so much that it was burnt, and A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy, published unfinished after his death in 1768.

## LITERARY HOME

Today, Shandy Hall is a museum and literary house that celebrates the life and works of the author. Built in 1430, it was originally called High Hall before Sterne renamed it. At the heart of the museum is the study where Sterne wrote his books, sermons, journals and letters. It also contains [prints](#), paintings and a magnificent collection of editions owned by Sterne. To find out more, Speak Up [called on](#) Patrick Wildgust, curator at Shandy Hall. As Wildgust explains, for Sterne, innovation was more important than [output](#). **Patrick Wildgust (English accent):** There's not much [in the way of output](#): there's one book, which [arguably](#) isn't finished, which is Tristram Shandy. There's another book: A Sentimental Journey... which is definitely not finished 'cause he died [halfway](#) through and there's his sermons as a [vicar](#), a [preacher](#) and that's the body of his work. But Tristram Shandy is one of the most experimental texts that you could possibly wish to put your hands on: it's imaginative, it's surprising, it was pretty much unique at the time and has been successful ever since it was published — it's never been [out of print](#).

## LITERARY INFLUENCES

Sterne was an admirer of 15th-century Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes, as well as of François Rabelais, a French humanist and [monk](#) of the mid-Renaissance (15th to 16th century) period, who wrote satire, [bawdy](#) jokes and songs. Tristram Shandy brings together literary references and trivial detail with eccentric humour. The best way to approach the book is with an open and curious mind, says Wildgust. **Patrick Wildgust:** One of the ways of helping the reader through the obstacles that the 18th century can present

them with in terms of construction and thought and what is significant and why it is significant (is) best illuminated perhaps by indicating contemporary texts, which played around with the idea of either a linear narrative being scrapped and the narrative being transformed into something which is not predictable, and also the idea of when does a book stop being a book and become an artwork?

## THE AVANT-GARDE

Tristram Shandy plays both with narrative and the concept of what a book was. This was later explored by 19th-century writers, notably by Frenchman Stéphane Mallarmé, himself a huge influence on early 20th century avant-garde artists such as Marcel Duchamp or Pablo Picasso. **Patrick Wildgust:** Tristram Shandy, by its complexity and its delightful, peculiar ways that it plays around with text, can qualify perhaps for being an artwork as much as it is a work of literature, and many books are aspiring towards that particular conjunction of ideas. So that this is a book being pushed to the boundaries as to how far we can establish the fact that it still is a book. Sterne is playing games with the reader and making sure really that the reader contributes as much with their imagination as they possibly can.

## NON-FIXED IDENTITY

Blurring the line between fiction and non-fiction, biography and autobiography in his letters, memoirs, sermons and novels, Sterne played around with his own identity. **Patrick Wildgust:** Laurence Sterne had a different voice in the pulpit from the voice that he had in Tristram Shandy; his sermons are an entirely different kettle of fish, he could preach extempore, he could make it up as he went along. And you can, you can alter how you express something depending on which identity it is that you take on.

## SELF-PUBLISHING

Sterne was also very modern in his preference for self-publishing and marketing his own work, says Wildgust. **Patrick Wildgust:** Sterne marketed his own work. He was clever enough to be able [to fashion](#) his work and introduce it to exactly the right people at the right time. Sterne played around with presentation, he [oversaw](#) how his book was published because he only wanted it to appear in one particular way, and that was the way that made it most [amenable](#) for the reader. He chose the size, he chose the [typeface](#), he paid for it all — [vanity press](#), you might call it. But it wasn't [vanity press](#), it was him making sure that the object that the reader would have was provocative, interesting and [delightful](#). [www.laurencesternetrust.org.uk](http://www.laurencesternetrust.org.uk)

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# Glossary

- **output** = produzione
- **bawdy** = osceni
- **typeface** = carattere
- **vanity press** = autopubblicazione
- **parson** = chierico
- **oversaw** = ispezionare
- **in series form** = in diversi volumi
- **in the way of** = relativo a
- **out of print** = fuori stampa
- **scrapped** = scartare
- **Blurring** = sfocare
- **delivered** = emettere
- **called on** = rivolgersi a
- **from 1760 on** = a partire dal 1760
- **monk** = monaco
- **amenable** = gradevole
- **witty** = ingegnoso
- **arguably** = per così dire
- **extempore** = spontaneamente
- **to fashion** = stilizzare
- **prints** = litografie
- **notably** = particolarmente
- **being pushed to the boundaries** = essere spinto al limite
- **vicar** = pastore
- **angered** = far infuriare
- **halfway** = a metà strada
- **preacher** = predicatore
- **delightful** = deliziosa
- **he could make it up as he went along** = poteva inventarseli mano a mano che andava avanti
- **prominent** = importante, notevole