Writing as Conversation: The Importance of Communication in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

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Writing as Conversation: The Importance of Communication in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Department of English East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in English

by Christie Wilson
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ABSTRACT

Writing as Conversation: The Importance of Communication in Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy

by

Christie Wilson

Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy is a novel consumed with conversation. The conversations that the characters have with each other and the ongoing conversation between Tristram and the reader all address the importance of communication. This study examines the theme of communication as Sterne presents it in his novel. The first chapter explores the personalities of Walter and Toby Shandy with the assumption that an understanding of their eccentricities will illustrate the reasons for the difficulties they encounter when trying to communicate with others. The relationships between the sexes are the subject for the second chapter. Sterne recognized the opportunity that the barrier of gender afforded him in the development of his theme, and he uses these relationships to illustrate the consequences of miscommunication. The final chapter focuses on Tristram’s role as the narrator. His personality and conversations with the reader also speak to the role of communication in the novel.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

From the moment we open The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, we are caught off guard. Books from the eighteenth-century British tradition are not supposed to begin with a ranting narrator. However, we recover momentarily: the modern tradition has prepared us for a narrator like Tristram through figures such as Holden Caulfield. We settle into our chairs, begin to get comfortable, and we turn the page only to find that not only is the narrator ranting, but the reader is talking back to him. This condition is enough to unsettle us because we had thought that we were the reader, not a character in the book. Thus, within two pages, we have already come to realize that this novel is not like other novels. The internal realm of characters and narration is not all this book has to offer. It also stretches itself beyond the boundaries of ordinary literature into our external realm, and its vehicle for accomplishing all of this is conversation.

It is evident from his text that Laurence Sterne was a writer concerned with communication. If he were not, he would not have taken the time to create characters so incompetent in that area. Tristram calls them hobbyhorses, those things that so consume the minds of the characters that they are unable to see anything else around them. Someone else might call it a bit of insanity. Nevertheless, Walter Shandy mounts up each day with the intention of exploring some intellectual breakthrough of a theory and spends his nights attempting to bestow the fruits of his mental efforts on those around him. Toby Shandy rides out each day to the battlefield in order to wage the war that fiercely rages in
his mind. He spends his nights lost in fantasies and actual memories of the war, often triggered by a word from his brother’s nightly speech. Anyone can see that communication is difficult for these two, and that is Sterne’s point.

The first chapter of my thesis explores the characters of the Shandy brothers with the assumption that an understanding of their personalities will provide insight into the difficulties they have communicating with one another. Walter’s insane obsession with developing theories and his even greater fascination with sharing them cause him to become isolated from the other characters. This isolation leads him to indulge in self-pity, and soon he is so consumed with the workings of his own mind that he cannot possibly hope to understand or be understood by anyone else. Though his motives differ from Walter’s, Toby is also lost in the realm of his own mind. His imaginative war games help to heal him, but they also alter his thinking process to such an extent that he begins to filter everything through his imaginative battlefield. Despite their differences, however, the brothers care very deeply for one another, and Sterne uses the emotional connection between the Shandy brothers to prove a point. People will always be individuals, but their differences and inability to communicate with one another do not prohibit them from caring.

All of the relationships in the novel suffer the same sickness as the one infecting that of Walter and Toby. This is especially evident in the conversations between the male and female characters. These relationships contain individuals separated not only by different personalities, but also by the wall of sex. The men cannot dismount their horses long enough to sustain a conversation with the women in their lives, and the women have trouble expressing their frustrations with the behavior of the men. Sterne makes it
strikingly clear that it is the miscommunication and the lack of communication in these relationships that leads to dissatisfaction.

In the second chapter of my work, I examine the relationships between the Shandy brothers and their respective love interests, as they are key to comprehending Sterne’s messages about communication. Toby and Mrs. Wadman demonstrate that hidden agendas and impenetrable modesty are not compatible character traits. Despite their seemingly similar associations with military imagery and language, they cannot find common ground. Their misunderstandings lead to confusion and, finally, embarrassment. Walter and Elizabeth respectfully decline to communicate with one another. This is the result, not of misunderstanding, but of lack of interest. Thus, their communicative deficiency results in frustration.

Out of the frustrated loins of Walter and Elizabeth springs Tristram, the voice of the novel. Sterne expects a great deal from his narrator. Tristram must come to terms with his own past and close the gap between the internal world of the characters and the external world of the readers. He relinquishes the reigns of the novel into Tristram’s eager hands, thereby forcing the reader to follow his narrator at all costs through the winding paths of the volumes and chapters.

The final chapter of my work deals exclusively with Tristram because the theme of communication in the novel begins and ends with him. Tristram is first and foremost a character, formed and influenced by the family members in his life. He exists and operates in the internal realm of the other characters, but he also transcends this boundary by addressing and attempting to converse with the reader. This dialogue between character and reader pushes communication to the forefront of the novel. As Tristram
struggles to separate himself from the mistakes of his father, as he strains to point out the subtleties in his narrative, and as he strives to make the reader understand his reasons for constructing the story in the manner that he does, the reader becomes aware that Tristram is a man searching for appreciation and understanding. This novel is his endeavor to communicate his story successfully, and whether or not he accomplishes this goal depends on the reader.

By the end of the novel, we have grown accustomed to Tristram’s ranting. In fact, we have learned that it is acceptable and expected of us to step out of our comfort zones and talk back. We have begun to relish the asterisks and blank pages as opportunities to speak our minds and express ourselves. We find humor in the misunderstandings that occur in lives of the characters, but we also understand that these mishaps and mistakes are part of the larger theme of communication.
Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is a novel consumed by conversation. The narrator, Tristram, relates the story to the actual reader through a conversation with ideal readers that he addresses as both “Sir” and “Madam.” The internal conversations and characters in the novel itself mirror this external dialogue between Tristram and those he supposes to be his readers. As a result of the dual level on which conversations are taking place, communication becomes a major concern in the work. Sterne carefully constructs the internal communication, or the communication between characters in the novel, in order to comment on the way individuals relate to one another. Walter Shandy and Uncle Toby become his tools for doing so. Though Walter and Toby are brothers, Sterne purposefully crafts these characters with fundamental differences. By creating characters who care for each other and have very distinct personalities, Sterne enables himself to explore the intricacies of relationships and the importance of communication in human relationships. Using Walter and Toby as eccentric boundary lines, Sterne allows conversation (understood and misunderstood), gesture (grand and slight), and speech (narrative and philosophical) to guide his novel through the twisting world of Tristram’s life and opinions.

The mind of Walter Shandy is complex and interesting to explore. Tristram allows the reader access into Walter’s thoughts, which helps the reader understand his character on a psychological level. Walter is an extremely stubborn man who gleans most
of his ideas from books, yet twists the concepts to make them his own. Rather than adjust his views to match those of other people, Walter rearranges the ideas of others so that they correspond to his own. This is how he arrives at many of the theories that dominate his life. As Tristram phrases it, “It is the nature of an hypothesis, when once a man has conceived it, that it assimulates every thing to itself as proper nourishment; and from the first moment of your begetting it, it generally grows the stronger by everything you see, hear, read, or understand” (122). Walter’s speculations about various subjects are vital to his character because they are the means by which he approaches the world (they are his “hobby-horse”), and they demonstrate how lost an individual can become in his or her own mind. An example of this can be seen in Walter’s belief that Tristram should enter the world through a caesarian birth. The shocking realization that the process of childbirth exerts an extreme amount of pressure on a child’s head, coupled with Walter’s knowledge that all intelligence lies in the brain region, and his research that indicates important people have entered the world in this manner leads Walter to this decision. This theory never makes it into practice, however. Tristram says, “He mentioned the thing one afternoon to my mother,—merely as a matter of fact;—but seeing her turn as pale as ashes at the very mention of it, [..] he thought it as well to say no more of it,—contenting himself with admiring—what he thought was to no purpose to propose” (123). The moment it escapes from Walter’s lips into conversation with another person, the theory is deflated. In the passionate pursuit of his hypothesis, Walter has forgotten that his idea will have an adverse reality for his wife. This lack of consideration where consequences are concerned is characteristic of Walter’s self-consumed mind.
There are several other theories that Walter tries desperately to put into practice only to be foiled by inadequate communication. His idea that a name can influence the character of an individual is one of the most important of these as Tristram points out: “All I maintain here, is, that in this one, of the influence of Christian names, however it gain’d footing, he was serious;-- he was all uniformity;-- he was systematical, and, like all systematick reasoners, he would move both heaven and earth, and twist and torture everything in nature to support his hypothesis” (46). This theory is of the utmost importance to Walter because he relies on it to reverse all of the misfortune that has fallen on his son thus far. Walter believes that he can reverse the effects of the ill-timed question and the maiming of the boy’s nose with an extremely powerful name, Trismegistus. Of course, Walter’s son never reaps the benefits of such a name as a result of a breakdown in communication. Susannah can only remember the beginning of the name, and because the curate’s name is Tristram, he makes the assumption that Tristram is the name Walter intends for his son. Tristram, as the reader is well aware by this point in the novel, is Walter’s most hated name. Strene writes, “But, of all the names in the universe, he had the most unconquerable aversion for Tristram;-- he had the lowest and most contemptible opinion of it of any thing in the world,-- thinking it could possibly produce nothing [. . .] but what was extremely mean and pitiful” (46). Thus, as William Siebenschuh comments in “Sterne’s Paradoxical Coherence,” Walter’s “hypotheses cause him much pain” (77). Essentially, he is doomed to a life of misery by his own theories.

Walter cannot see beyond his own intellectual ideas. As a result of this, he is isolated by the theories he is ever creating. He cannot relate to people because he is too busy theorizing instead of acting, and he cannot communicate with others because there
is no common ground. Walter’s irritation from watching all of his ideas wilt before they have a chance to bloom causes him to become somewhat cold and compassionless, especially toward his wife and children. He blames Elizabeth for her question, he sees Bobby as proof of the “crushed head theory,” and he is sure that Tristram is flawed from the manner in which he plays with his top. Sterne deliberately crafts all of Walter’s frustrations, however, to stand in direct contrast to the character of Uncle Toby.

One thing remains constant through all of Walter’s disappointments, and that is Uncle Toby. Uncle Toby is always present to listen to Walter’s problems, and even though he does not always understand, he always attempts to give comfort. He waits while Walter lies on the bed, upset by the crushing of Tristram’s nose. He listens as Walter talks himself out of grief over Bobby’s death. Tristram writes of Toby, “His humour was of that particular species, which does honour to our atmosphere; and I should have made no scruple of ranking him amongst one of the first-rate productions of it” (53). Uncle Toby’s compassion spreads beyond his family as well. An example of this is the scene in which Toby releases a fly instead of killing him, a lesson of “universal good-will” that Tristram states “has never since been worn out of his mind” (92). Another example of this endless sense of pity occurs in a conversation between Toby and Dr. Slop about the nature of the devil. Toby says that he is sorry that the devil is, as Slop phrases it, “cursed, and damn’d already, to all eternity” (147).

Though Toby is much more empathetic with the world around him than his brother, he, too, has somewhat of an intellectual bent. Toby limits his research to the subject of fortifications, which is different from Walter’s wide array of study subjects, but this is not most important difference in the studies of the two brothers. The distinction
should be made in the way each handles the knowledge he gains. Through his research, Walter develops theories that he then attempts to impose on others. Toby researches fortifications simply because he is enthralled by them, and he does not attempt to force his obsessions on others. With the exception of a few curtain rods, some digressions in conversation, and Widow Wadman, Toby’s “hobby horse” is private business. The theories that Walter proposes, however, have significant consequences for those around him as illustrated in the idea of caesarian birth.

Privacy is a subject on which the personalities of Walter and Toby definitely diverge, and this is apparent in their approach to research. Obviously, fortifications by their very nature are more private than names, noses, or caesarian sections, but privacy is one of the reasons that Toby enjoys his play at fortifications to such a degree. Tristram describes Toby’s vision and trip to the green the first time by writing, “[n]ever did lover post down to a belov’d mistress with more heat and expectation, than my uncle Toby did, to enjoy this self-same thing in private;-- I say in private;-- for it was sheltered from the house” (80). Toby appreciates his isolation and the freedom it provides him to pursue his own interests. However, it is relatively clear from the text that Toby bothers little with the opinions of others regardless. Tristram addresses this in a passage about Toby’s hobbyhorse: “In good truth, my uncle Toby mounted him with so much pleasure, and he carried my uncle Toby so well,-- that he troubled his head very little with what the world either said or thought about it” (62). Toby’s preference for privacy and his lack of concern about how other people perceive him is opposite to Walter’s feeling on the subject.
As Walter’s obsession with theories would suggest, his hobbyhorse is the intellect, or more importantly, sharing his intellect with others. He writes dissertations for others to read and never misses an opportunity to speak his opinion on any subject. Walter desires recognition from others, and this leads him to be very sensitive of the way people perceive him. Unlike Toby, he thrives on the attention of others and is subject to a great deal of embarrassment when situations do not turn in his favor. This is illustrated by Walter’s actions on the return trip from London, which did not result in the birth of a new baby. Tristram says that nothing of the whole trip bothered his father as much as “the condolences of his friends, and the foolish figure they should both make at church the first Sunday” (37). In anticipation of this embarrassment, Walter plans how he will act so that everyone will know how this affected him. He decides that “he would give so many numerous and provoking descriptions,— and place his rib and self in so many tormenting lights and attitudes in the face of the whole congregation” (37). The planning stage that Walter goes through in order to maximize the attention he will receive at church is indicative of his deep-seated need to be appreciated and accepted. Another example of Walter’s attentiveness to the perceptions of others occurs when he forces Mrs. Shandy to uphold her end of the marriage contract and lie-in in the country. He recognizes the potential danger that this situation holds for him should something go awry with the birth. If something happens, Walter will be blamed because Elizabeth was not allowed to go to the city. Tristram describes him by stating that “[h]e knew the world judged by events, and would add to his afflictions in such a misfortune, by loading him with the whole blame of it” (39). The discussion about whether or not to put Tristram into breeches after his accident at the window is also, at some level, an attempt to protect Walter’s
reputation. Thus, Walter’s personality drives him to seek attention, while Toby enjoys the privacy of his fortifications.

The theme of privacy is also linked to another topic in which the brothers differ from one another, that of modesty. Modesty is an extremely important aspect of Toby’s character, and it determines a great deal concerning his level of communication with others. When Toby returns injured from the war, Walter takes him into his house and takes great pains to provide him with several visitors. The conversations between Toby and the visitors inevitably turn to the wound in the groin, which is an extremely delicate subject for discussion. Tristram writes, “These conversations were infinitely kind; and my uncle Toby received great relief from them, and would have received much more, but that they brought him some unforeseen perplexities” (63). To avoid the uncomfortable question concerning the location of the wound, Toby ingeniously orders a map and enables himself to show anyone who asks “the very spot” on which he received his wound. This allows him to manipulate conversations onto comfortable ground and maintain his modesty.

Walter never objects to Toby’s modesty unless it interferes with his pursuit of the truth. This is the case in the discussions of Aunt Dinah, however. Tristram writes, “it will seem very strange [. . .] that an event of this kind, so many years after it happened, should be reserved for the interruption of the peace and unity, which otherwise so cordially subsisted, between my father and my uncle Toby” (54). Several years ago, it seems that great Aunt Dinah married a coachman. This act is extremely embarrassing for Toby, especially when Walter relates the story in front of other people, because he feels it brings shame to the family. This is the only time that Toby really addresses Walter in
opposition to him. Tristram says that Toby would “often take my father aside, in the
greatest concern imaginable, to expostulate and tell him, he would give him anything in
the world, only to let the story rest” (55). Walter is enthralled by the story, however, and
refuses to refrain from telling it because it supports his theory of names. Mark Loveridge
comments on this in Laurence Sterne and the Argument about Design. He writes, “In
chapter 21, Walter uses the family story of great-aunt Dinah’s marriage to a coachman to
bolster his theory of the ‘magick bias’ of Christian names. (His point is that as Dinah was
the goddess of hunting and horseriding, Dinah was obviously destined to marry a
coachman.)” (56).

The disregard for Toby’s feelings that Walter shows by repeatedly retelling the
story of Dinah to support his hypothesis is characteristic of Walter’s behavior when in
pursuit of what he thinks is the truth or, in other words, when he is riding his hobbyhorse.
Hobbyhorses are, of course, a very important aspect of this novel. Overton James Philip
addresses the issue of the hobbyhorse as follows: “the hobbyhorse becomes the focal
point of the total personality. It connects the world of thought with the world of actions
and reveals the central irony of each character” (69). The hobbyhorses that Walter and
Toby have function in several ways. Walter’s obsession with theories and oral speech and
Toby’s fascination with fortifications serve to define their characters, to protect them
from the harsh realities of life, and to isolate them enough to make communication
difficult.

Toby loses sight of the reality of his wound through his hobbyhorse. William
Siebenschuh speaks to this issue when he explains, “Toby’s fascination with miniaturized
war games is comical but also healthy. Nothing makes Toby happier than a trip to the
bowling green; no prospect helps so much to heal his wound” (77). The excitement of the building and the acquisitions propel Toby out of his sick bed and into the open air, and because Toby has such great success using fortifications to take his attention away from his wound, he begins to approach everything in this manner. Suddenly, everyday conversations are filled with references to fortifications and the bridge for Tristram’s nose becomes a miniature of the bridge that must be rebuilt after the mishap between Trim and Bridget. Communication, for Toby, is forever altered because of his healing hobbyhorse.

Walter’s hobbyhorse of oral speech functions in much the same way, and succeeds in removing him from the center of a great deal of misfortune. He is found wrapped in oration on several occasions of tragedy. One of the most memorable is the speech that he makes after the death of Bobby. He says of death, “Take away its herses, its mutes, and its mourning,- its plumes, scutcheons, and other mechanic aids- What is it?- Better in battle! Continued my father, smiling, for he had absolutely forgot my brother Bobby” (294). Mark Loveridge writes, “Walter has natural (I mean natural – because – habitual) defense mechanism in his mind which takes the force from all the misfortunes that befall him: when misfortune occurs, he invariably tries to become eloquent” (87). William Siebenchuh comments on Walter’s speech as well: “oratorical eloquence permits him to deal with his son’s death; and his wit-producer of much pain and suffering when it is thwarted and unappreciated – compensates and balances” (77). Walter’s ability to speak serves him well in situations of this nature because he is able to escape reality. Tristram states that the ability is both “his strength-- and his weakness too.-- His strength-- for he was by nature eloquent,-- and his weakness-- for he was
hourly a dupe to it” (291). Thus it is protection and a very telling part of Walter’s character because it allows the reader to see a sadder portion of Walter’s life. As Helene Moglen suggests in The Philosophical Irony of Laurence Sterne, “He would subsume everything under a hypothesis, eliminating all that defies systemization. The disparity between his confidence in rational control and his actual obscurity and lack of sensible response mark him as the most deluded of the Shandys” (52).

The idea that Walter is somewhat “deluded” is interesting because it forces the even further examination of Walter’s hobbyhorse. Walter, more than anyone else in the novel, is alone. He has no one who truly understands, or even desires to understand, his position. The nature of his hobbyhorse screams for attention, yet no one in the house provides him with the consideration he desperately needs. Walter’s failed attempts to find someone to recognize his importance mirrors his inability to achieve his goals. He does not succeed in what he would term a “successful conception” because of Elizabeth’s question about winding the clock. He finally gets his way and Dr. Slop delivers Tristram, but this results in the damaging of Tristram’s nose. Walter’s attempt at saving Tristram through his theory of names falls flat when his son receives what he considers the worst name possible, and the Tristrapaedia is rendered useless little by little as Tristram grows. If Walter has lost his grip on sanity, these are the reasons. Tristram asks, “Will not the gentle reader pity my father from his soul?-- to see an orderly and well-disposed gentleman, who tho’ singular,-- yet inoffensive in his notions [. . .] to look down upon the stage,-- and see him baffled and overthrown in all his little systems and wishes” (47). Tristram recognizes the struggles of his father to some degree, but it is not clear if Walter sees this recognition in his son.
Thus, Walter truly deserves some small portion of pity from the other characters and most of all from the readers. Helene Moglen addresses Walter’s loneliness: “But more often than not Toby merely provides Walter with a convenient presence at which he can philosophize. Unhappily Walter is doomed to be a teacher who cannot teach since Toby is the student incapable of learning” (89). His theories and eloquence are lost on the deaf ears of his family members. William Siebenschuh agrees: “Walter is a born orator but his primary audience for life is Mrs. Shandy and Toby. They are the well-meaning cakes of soap on which he must shower the sparks of his eloquence [. . .] each of his hypotheses generates a plan that produces exactly the results it was designed to avoid” (73). Because he cannot truly communicate with anyone, because he does not receive the kind of pity that he desires when misfortune arises, and also because he seeks to draw attention to himself, Walter often gets lost in self-pity. Tristram writes, “My father, I say, had a way, when things went extremely wrong with him, especially upon the first sally of his impatience,-- of wondering why he was begot,-- wishing himself dead;-- sometimes worse” (305). This pitiful side of Walter arises because of his isolation and his inability to connect with anyone else.

Toby does not experience this sense of abandonment or loneliness, mostly as a result of his compassion for others. He is completely unaware that Walter feels secluded. In fact, he spends a great deal of time sitting with Walter while he deals with tragedies, and he attempts many times to comfort his brother. Something that sets Toby apart from Walter, however, is his friendship with Trim. Toby’s good nature wins him the companionship of Trim. He takes the wounded soldier to be his servant, and it results in one of the most reciprocating relationships in the novel. Toby and Trim are both military
men, they have both been wounded, and they both have a compassionate and emotional side to their personalities as illustrated in the scene with Le Fever. Trim participates with Toby in the building of the fortifications, and he even conceives ideas to enhance the play. He takes Toby’s hobbyhorse as a serious matter, getting lost in the battles himself at some points. While Walter researches and attempts to make speeches that will penetrate the fortifications of Toby’s mind, Toby enjoys not only a healing hobbyhorse but also a healing friendship.

The relationship between Trim and Toby brings another difference between Walter and Toby to light. Walter communicates by persuasive speeches and the very language of these speeches removes them from the realm of everyday life. Toby and Trim speak in the language of everyday people by telling stories. Tristram writes of his father that “he was certainly irresistible, both in his orations and disputations [. . .] Persuasions hung upon his lips, and the elements of Logick and Rhetorick were so blended up in him” (44). Several of Walter’s arguments are very persuasive, such as the “Judas/name” argument, and some of them are quite offensive to Toby. To these, Toby responds not with words of anger and exasperation (with the exception of the Dinah discussions), but simply by whistling. Whistling is a defense mechanism for Toby that allows him to sustain his modesty. Tristram explains, “You must know it was the usual channel thro’ which his passions got vent, when anything shocked or surprised him; but especially when anything, which he deem’d very absurd, was offer’d” (56). Toby’s whistling allows him to block out offensive material and also to distract the other participants in the conversation. Mark Loveridge states that Toby’s whistling is “the
opposite of vibrational or sympathetic harmony, in that it is habitually used by Toby as an alternative to verbal retaliation, to “balancing the account” (122).

Toby is not a stranger to verbal eloquence, however oddly he may react to it. There is evidence of this in the speech “justifications of his own principles and conduct in wishing to continue the war” (380). Walter absolutely delights in this speech. Tristram recalls, “My father was so highly pleased with one of these apologetical orations of my uncle Toby’s, which he had delivered one evening before him and Yorick, that he wrote it down before he went to bed” (380). This is not Toby’s favorite form of discourse, however. He much prefers a narrative to a speech, and there is a very logical reason for this preference. Here again, Toby is a very compassionate man who empathizes with people. Narratives deal with actual people and leave behind the lofty concepts of speeches. This is one reason that Toby and Trim communicate so well with one another. Trim often tells Toby stories, such as the story of his brother Tom, a story about the souls of blacks, and the story of how he fell in love. There is evidence that Toby responds better to narrative discourse in his reaction to Trim’s incorrect date at the beginning of his story about the king of Bohemia. Toby recognizes the mistake immediately because he is actually listening to the story. When Walter tries to communicate a concept through a lengthy web of theories, Toby rarely makes it through the first few words before something Walter says triggers his leap to the bowling green. For example, after Walter gives a discourse on the relationship of heat and moisture to health, it is clear that Toby has only comprehended the first few words by his immediate response with a military story that he has associated with Walter’s subject. The only time that Walter takes pleasure in telling a story is when it supports one of his theories, as in the story of Great
Aunt Dinah. Toby does not enjoy this story, however, because he recognizes the power of the story to bring embarrassment to the family.

In his introductory essay to the novel, Christopher Ricks holds that “Walter Shandy and Uncle Toby, like all people, imaginary or otherwise, are in some ways intelligible (Sterne shows us that), and also ultimately unintelligible (he shows us that too)” (xiv). The relationship between the two brothers in this novel is important because it demonstrates to the reader that two people from completely different sides of the spectrum can connect with each other, and it also illuminates the impossibility of two such people ever fully understanding one another. Leland Warren mentions this issue in “Getting into the Talk: Tristram Shandy through Conversation.” He writes, “Riding their hobbyhorses, Walter and Toby have difficulty in comprehending discourse arising outside their obsessions, and this often makes it hard for those to whom they speak to feel they have any status within the exchange” (63). Walter and Toby often circumvent the problem of misunderstanding one another through speech by communicating with body language and gesture. An example of this occurs after Walter discovers that Tristram’s nose has been crushed. Sterne is careful to have Tristram describe Walter’s exact position so that the reader can feel the dejection in the scene. Toby simply waits in a chair beside the bed through the hour and a half that it takes for Walter to come to terms with his misfortune. Tristram reveals that finally Walter “began to play upon the floor with the toe of that foot which hung over the bed-side; my uncle Toby’s heart was a pound lighter for it” (224). This simple gesture is enough to relieve Toby’s worries for his brother, and after Walter has made an initial “hem,” Toby wishes to speak to him. Tristram continues, “My good uncle Toby [. . .] would have ingrafted a sentence of consolation upon the
opening it afforded; but having no talents, as I said, that way, and fearing moreover that he might set out with something which might make a bad matter worse, he contented himself with resting his chin placidly upon the cross of his crutch” (224). Toby recognizes the possibility that an attempt at verbal communication might cause Walter more grief. Therefore, he settles for a gesture himself to demonstrate his compassion for Walter.

Walter sometimes uses gestures of the hand to communicate with his brother. An example of this occurs during Trim’s reading of Yorick’s sermon. The brothers are discussing whether or not the Parson agrees with St. Paul. Tristram recounts their conversation: “A great matter, if they had differed, replied my uncle Toby,—the best friends in the worlds may differ sometimes.—True,—brother Toby, quoth my father, shaking hands with him,—we’ll fill our pipes and go on” (108). The handshake might seem out of place here, but it is a simple representation of their agreement. Gestures involving hands often take place after Walter has been unkind to Toby, however. An example of this occurs after Walter has expressed his anger at Toby’s attempt to discuss the army in Flanders with Dr. Slop. Toby does not verbally react to the anger. Instead, Tristram says, “He turned his head, without the least emotion, from Dr. Slop, to whom he was addressing his discourse, and look’d up into my father’s face, with a countenance spread over with so much good nature;—so placid;—so fraternal;—so inexpressibly tender towards him;—it penetrated my father to his heart” (92). This peaceful and innocent reaction is more than Walter can bear, and Tristram describes him rising, “hastily from his chair, and seizing hold of both my uncle Toby’s hands as he spoke:—Brother Toby, said he,—I beg thy pardon” (93). This communication between hands
occurs once again after a discussion of Toby’s relationship with Widow Wadman and the possibility of Toby having children. Walter again rises from his seat and states that he would act as a father figure to his brother’s children. This time it is Toby who seeks his brother’s hand. Tristram writes, “My uncle Toby stole his hand unperceived behind his chair, to give my father’s a squeeze” (490). Walter continues the discourse while holding Toby’s hand. This all takes place in the presence of Elizabeth and Yorick, but there is evidence that the brothers do not wish to share their bond with the others because the communication takes place behind the chair.

Walter does employ gesture to demonstrate his frustration with Toby on occasion. Ironically, it is in these situations that Toby most often misunderstands his brother’s actions. This occurs one night after Walter has been translating Sławkenbergius. Toby’s mind wanders off into thoughts of his hobbyhorse, and he neglects to listen to Walter’s discourse. Walter realizes this when Toby makes a ridiculous comment. Tristram describes the scene: “My father thrust back his chair,-- rose up,-- put on his hat,-- took four long strides to the door,-- jerked it open,-- thrust his head half way out,-- shut the door again [. . .] walk’d slowly back [. . .] unbutton’d his waistcoat,-- threw my mother’s thread-paper into the fire,-- bit her satin pincushion in two, fill’d his mouth with bran” (194). This extravagant display is essentially lost on Toby who simply sits through the show and waits for Walter to calm himself. Toby misunderstands Walter’s gestures in another instance as well. This occurs when Walter, frustrated from a discussion with Toby, takes off his wig with his right hand and reaches across his body to retrieve a handkerchief from his right-hand pocket. The effort causes Walter’s face to turn red. Mark Loveridge describes the situation as follows: “Toby has had a military association
engendered in his mind by Walter’s posture, and concludes from the redness of his brother’s face that Walter has seen into his mind and is angry that Toby’s Hobby-Horse should be obtaining nourishment from his own discomfiture” (122). Tristram seems to disagree with this view: “Any man [. . .] but my uncle Toby, the benignity of whose heart interpreted every motion of the body in the kindest sense the motion would admit of, would have concluded my father angry [. . .] My uncle Toby blamed nothing but the taylor who cut the pocket-hole” (134). Walter is angry, and essentially states that Toby is a victim of the “crushed-head theory” that supports caesarian births. Toby misses this conclusion, however, oblivious as ever.

In spite of frequent misunderstandings, verbal communication does occur between the brothers with a somewhat limited success rate. Their contentment with one another when they are in the same room can be measured not by the length of their discourses, but with their silence. On the night of Tristram’s birth, Walter and Toby have been sitting together in silence for an hour and a half. They are comfortable with one another as long as they are lost in their own thought. Sterne enjoys playing with the dynamics of the situation when the brothers are together, however. Thomas Yoseloff addresses this scene in *A Fellow of Infinite Jest*: “Sterne found keen delight in picturing the two men engaged in endless conversations, the one gauging all things by reason and super-sophistry, the other with his too naïve light of judgement” (86). Walter’s discourse on noses is one example of a conversation that does not benefit either Walter or Toby. Tristram remembers, “Whether they were above my uncle Toby’s reason,— or contrary to it,— or that his brain was like damp tinder, and no spark could possibly take hold,— or that it was so full of saps, mines, blinds, curtains, and such military disqualifications to his seeing
clearly [. . .] I say not” (192). Again, the hobbyhorses of both men separate them and confuse communication lines beyond recognition.

More often than not, Walter realizes when Toby has misinterpreted something, but the most comical situations arise when there are misinterpretations on both sides of the conversation. An example of this is the conversation about the health benefits of heat and moisture. Walter expresses his opinion on the subject at length using the word “siege” to make a point. This word sends Toby spiraling back into his days in the military, and the subject reminds him of an experience he had during the war. Toby does not truly comprehend what Walter is talking about, and Tristram explains that Toby’s story “was as much Arabick to my father, as the rites of the Colchi and Troglodites had been before to my uncle Toby; my father could not determine whether he was to frown or smile” (329). Also, on the night of Tristram’s birth Walter mistakes mortars that Trim has made for Dr. Slop’s medicine-grinding tools, and Toby misunderstands the nature of the bridge that Dr. Slop is constructing for Tristram’s nose. Toby believes it to be a miniature replica of the bridge that must be rebuilt as a result of Trim and Bridget’s “accident.” It is easy to see Sterne’s deliberate work in scenes like this one, in which the miscommunications build on one another and the hobbyhorses of the characters have control of the conversations.

Despite the frustrated communication between the two brothers, it is clear from the text that they care for one another very deeply. The extended time they spend with one another is evidence, as is their repeated attempts to relate to one another. Sterne is careful to have Tristram repeatedly make comments about the relationship between the two brothers. Tristram relates, “My father, I believe, had the truest love and tenderness
for my uncle Toby, that ever one brother bore towards another” (55). Walter insists that Toby live with him in order to heal. He provides him with the best apartment and always remembers to bring guests to cheer his brother. Toby returns Walter’s affection by standing by him through all of his misfortunes. He trusts Walter for advice about women, and it is to Walter’s house that he goes after the mishap with Widow Wadman. Before Toby departs from his brother’s house to the country, he is sure to relate his appreciation to Walter. Tristram concludes, “He dwelt long upon the miseries he had undergone, and the sorrows of his four years melancholy imprisonment;-- adding, that had it not been for the kind looks, and fraternal cheerings of the best of brothers,-- he had long since sunk under his misfortunes.-- My father was by: My uncle Toby’s eloquence brought tears into his eyes” (75).

The true testimony to the relationship that the Shandy brothers share comes in what is perhaps the saddest image in the book. Tristram takes the reader forward to Toby’s death. He says that at Toby’s grave “all my father’s systems shall be baffled by his sorrows; and in spite of his philosophy, I shall behold him, as he inspects the lackered plate, twice taking his spectacles from off his nose, to wipe away the dew which nature has shed upon them” (374). Toby is the only person in the novel for whom Walter expresses true emotion. It should be noted that Walter does not talk himself out of this grief, nor does anyone provide a speech to distract him. He simply grieves, and the reader sees for the only time in the novel, despite all the “tragedies,” a truly moving scene.

The emotional connection between the two brothers plays an extremely important role in how Sterne addresses the issue of communication between these two individuals. He goes to great lengths to demonstrate their differences. They have different
hobbyhorses, they have different views on issues such as modesty, and, essentially, they connect to the world around them in completely different ways. The point that Sterne makes with this relationship is that people do not understand each other, but that does not stop them from caring for one another. By creating such opposite characters as Walter and Toby and providing them with such a strong connection, Sterne illustrates the possible and impossible in communication. Communication is attempted at all times, through speeches and stories, through gestures and silence; yet people are so often consumed with their own worlds; they misunderstand one another. Misunderstandings do not shut down the lines of conversation, however. They simply make it more interesting.
CHAPTER 3

WHEN A MAN MISUNDERSTANDS A WOMAN AND VICE VERSA:
RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE SEXES

Tristram Shandy is, on the outside, an account of Tristram’s observations of and opinions about the individuals who move in the realm of his life. Critic Mark Loveridge writes, “Tristram Shandy is written as if it were a documentary, a retrospective approach to certain characters” (167), and it is true that a large portion of Tristram’s narrative is devoted to descriptions of hobbyhorses and mannerisms that demonstrate the unique personalities of the characters as individuals. However, much of the novel is dedicated to the relationships between the individual characters. As illustrated in the relationship between the Shandy brothers, communication between characters who understand the world in different ways is not always successful. This is evident in the relationships that the brothers experience with the opposite sex as well. Tristram states, “There is nothing shews the character of my father and my uncle Toby, in a more entertaining light, than their different manner of deportment, under the same accident -- for I call not love a misfortune, from a persuasion, that a man’s heart is ever the better for it” (483). Whether their hearts are better for it or not, Walter and Toby have great difficulty communicating with their respective love interests, and though the relationships of each address larger issues in the novel, such as parenting and sexism, their inadequate communications result in faulty relationships. Thus Sterne uses the miscommunication in the relationship between Uncle Toby and Mrs. Wadman and the deficiency of communication in the
Shandys’ marriage to further his discussion of communication and to illustrate that this insufficiency can lead to dissatisfaction and a lack of fulfillment.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Uncle Toby’s hobbyhorse is an essential part of his character and plays an important role in his life throughout the novel. His obsession with miniature fortifications pushes him towards recovery from his war wounds and allows him to escape from the confines of his sick bed. Thus, when the war comes to an end and Toby perceives an end to his hobbyhorse, it comes as a shock. Tristram says of the situation, “in strictness of language, he could not be said to dismount his horse at all -- his horse rather flung him -- and somewhat viciously, which made my uncle Toby take it ten times more unkindly” (384). Toby reacts to the Treaty of Utrecht, which ends the war, with great despair, and Tristram states that “to the end of his life he never could hear Utrecht mentioned upon any account whatever, -- or so much as read an article of news extracted out of the Utrecht Gazette, without fetching a sigh, as if his heart would break in twain” (379). The true testament to the fact that Toby is greatly affected by this treaty is the fact that he composes an eloquent speech detailing his reasons for wishing the war to continue. This speech is powerful because it comes as an exception to the general rule that Tristram establishes for Toby’s lack of eloquence. Walter enjoys the speech so much that he takes the time to record it. Despite Toby’s sincerest wishes and Walter’s approval, however, the war ends, and it appears that Toby’s hobbyhorse will die with it. Critic Overton Philip James addresses the death Toby’s hobbyhorse: “Tristram wheels off the ordinance by having the Treaty of Utrecht and the demolition of Dunkirk bring an end to the war games and provides Uncle Toby leisure for courting Widow
Wadman” (139). Consequently the conclusion of the war provides the opportunity for Uncle Toby’s interests to move from the battlefield to the bedroom.

Toby is first introduced to the idea of seeking Widow Wadman’s attention through Trim. Elizabeth Kraft writes, “After the Treaty of Utrecht creates a vacancy in Toby’s life, he is more susceptible to love. But it is Trim, not the widow herself, who most effectively turns the captain’s thoughts from war to romance” (93). Trim accomplishes this through the power of storytelling. He relates to Toby an account of a relationship between himself and a girl named Beguine after his injury in the war. Trim heightens Toby’s awareness of passion when he describes a scene that occurred during the time Beguine attempted to nurse his knee back to health. He says, “The more she rubb’d, and the longer strokes she took -- the more the fire kindled in my veins -- till at length [. . .] my passion rose to the highest pitch -- I seiz’d her hand -- And then, thou clapped’st it to thy lips, Trim, said my uncle Toby -- and made a speech” (479). Tristram goes on to say that whether or not Toby’s ending was correct, it was “enough that it contain’d in it the essence of all the love romances which ever have been wrote since the beginning of the world” (480). Because Trim relates the concept of male / female love as a story to Toby, it seems attractive and understandable. It is the language of Trim’s descriptions, however, that ensures Toby’s interest in pursuing a relationship.

Trim not only tells Toby stories to introduce him to the world of love, but he also uses “war” language to attract Toby’s attention. Trim says to Toby, “for Love, an’ please your honour, is exactly like war, in this; that a soldier, though he has escaped three weeks compleat o’Saturday-night, -- may nevertheless be shot through his heart on Sunday morning” (478). Helene Moglen writes of the comparison of love and war: “Toby’s new
excursion into romance with the Widow Wadman serves the same purpose as his experimentation with the war games. They represent different expressions of the same impulse” (86). To Toby, love seems like the perfect replacement for his lost hobbyhorse. Like war, it makes a wonderful story, and it is full of attacks and operations. Accordingly Toby enters the romantic battlefield, but he is not prepared for the attacks and the operations of this war, nor is he equipped to deal with his all-too-ready opponent.

Toby’s character is interesting because of its seemingly contradictory nature. He loves war, yet he is a very tender and emotional person. Tristram states that Nature herself took pains to ensure that Toby was well suited for matrimony. He writes, “With regard to my uncle Toby’s fitness for the marriage state, nothing was ever better: she had formed him of the best and kindliest clay -- had temper’d it with her own milk, and breathed into it the sweetest spirit -- she had made him all gentle, generous and humane” (525). Despite these wonderful qualities, Toby is untrained for love because of his lack of experience. A prime example of this occurs when Toby pinches himself with a saddle on a ride with Walter. Because he has no prior experience with love, he assumes that what he is feeling is love. Tristram says, “Part of the blood had got betwixt the two skins, in the nethermost part of my uncle Toby [. . .] which [. . .] he had taken for a part of the passion -- till the blister breaking in the one case -- and the other remaining -- my uncle Toby was presently convinced, that his wound was not a skin-deep-wound -- but that it had gone to his heart” (484). The humor of Toby’s misunderstanding grows when Walter inquires about his relationship by asking about the state of his ass. Toby, thinking that Walter is referring to the blister, replies that it “is much better” (489). This sends the room into laughter and exposes Toby’s good-humored naïveté.
The emotional and inexperienced side of Toby leaves him ill prepared for the attacks of Widow Wadman. Mrs. Wadman herself expects a full-fledged war and is prepared to fight to obtain Toby’s love. William Freedman addresses Mrs. Wadman’s aggression: “If Walter is all bluster and cynicism and Toby all innocence, the Widow is all calculation, wheeling her veneral eyes about like canons, she assaults Toby in his own sentry box. A deftly placed hand, a fortuitously stationed thigh, and the unsuspecting Toby is a smitten man” (111). It seems that everyone is aware of Mrs. Wadman’s attempts at conquest except Toby. Walter says, “That widow Wadman has been deeply in love with my brother Toby for many years, and has used every art and circumvention of woman to outwit him into the same passion, yet now that she has caught him -- her fever will be pass’d it’s height” (492). Walter’s comment is significant because it illustrates the fear that the Widow is only in the relationship for the chase. Even though this is not the case, it is clear that Wadman’s pursuit of Toby’s love is on a much more aggressive level than his quest for hers.

Mrs. Wadman is aggressive throughout the entire relationship. She does not simply state her love to Bridget as Toby does to Trim. Evidence of her love appears more passionately. When Toby decides to move to the country in pursuit of his hobbyhorse, he must stay at Mrs. Wadman’s house while Trim prepares a place to live. Tristram recounts that Toby had resided in the Widow’s house for two days before she gives in to the disruption of her routines. When Bridget, as usual, moves to tuck the Widow’s feet into bed on the second night of Toby’s stay, she kicks the pin out of Bridget’s hand, “from all of which it was plain that widow Wadman was in love with my uncle Toby” (457). From this point on, Mrs. Wadman attempts to gain the love of Toby. She plans attacks and
keeps a close eye on the fortifications, and she is as much a part of the battle landscape as he is because of the location of the miniature war games. Tristram states that the location “put all the occasions into her hands which Love-militancy wanted; she could observe my uncle Toby’s motions, and was mistress likewise of his councils of war” (461). Tristram continues to describe the way she gains further access to the activities by arranging for a gate to be built through “mediation of Bridget.” This gate, Tristram writes, “enabled her to carry on her approaches to the very door of the sentry-box; and sometimes out of gratitude, to make the attack, and endeavour to blow my uncle Toby up on the very sentry-box itself” (461). The language surrounding Mrs. Wadman reinforces her military role, but Toby is unaware that her presence should indicate a threat to him, or at least a threat to his heart.

The attacks that Mrs. Wadman wages against Uncle Toby are important because they demonstrate her desperation to obtain his attention. They also illustrate the differences in their characters. Toby wanders in his make-believe world of fortifications, while Mrs. Wadman takes somewhat extreme measures to secure a place in Toby’s fantasy world. She seeks to ensure physical contact, and she hopes that these encounters will cause Toby’s passions to rise. The “hand” attack is one of the first mentioned in the text, and it occurs while Toby and Wadman are examining a map. It should be noted that Mrs. Wadman disarms Toby of his pipe during this scene in order to guarantee that the proper contact can take place. Tristram recounts, “[Uncle Toby] would lay his hand flat upon it [. . .] and Mrs. Wadman, by a manœuvre as quick as thought, would as certainly place her’s close besides it; this at once opened a communication, large enough for any sentiment to pass or repass, which a person skill’d in the elementary and practical part of
love-making, has occasion for” (464). This particular attack escalates from hand contact, and soon Mrs. Wadman’s leg rests against Uncle Toby’s. Though Tristram writes that these attacks sometimes put Toby’s “center into disorder,” he does not respond to them, and the window of communication opened by the Widow passes unused.

Despite Toby’s unresponsiveness, Mrs. Wadman does not give up; she simply works harder to calculate her moves. An example of this occurs after she overhears a discussion concerning love between Toby and Trim. As she listens to Trim recount his love story to Toby, Mrs. Wadman immediately recognizes Toby’s vulnerability at this moment. She knows that he is beginning to consider the possibilities of love, and she wants to reinforce this association with her presence. Tristram writes, “As soon as the corporal had finished the story of his amour -- or rather my uncle Toby for him -- Mrs. Wadman silently sallied forth from the arbour [. . .] the disposition which Trim had made in my uncle Toby’s mind, was too favourable a crisis to be let slipp’d” (480). Counting on Toby’s strong reaction to the love story he has just heard and inspired by it herself, Mrs. Wadman bypasses the attempts to touch Toby’s hands and legs and pretends that she needs his help removing something from her eye. It is this attack that is the most successful perhaps because of the lack of physicality. Tristram depicts Mrs. Wadman’s eye with a softer tone than any of the previous descriptions of her character contain: “but ‘twas an eye full of gentle salutations -- and soft responses -- speaking -- not like the trumpet stop of some ill-made organ [. . .] but whispering soft” (482). This description is really contradictory to the portrait that Tristram paints of Mrs. Wadman up until this point. This leads one to question whether Toby falls in love with the real Mrs. Wadman,
or if he falls for his perception of her on this particular day. Regardless, the attack is a success and Toby decides that he is in love with Mrs. Wadman.

Once this decision is made, Toby realizes that he knows nothing about love as Tristram relates, “Now my uncle Toby did fear; and grievously too: he knew not (as my father had reproached him) so much as the right end of a woman from the wrong, and therefore was never altogether at his ease near any one of them” (505). His unease and inexperience leads him to prepare for the relationship as he would prepare for a battle. Walter and Trim reinforce this behavior with discussions on the right breeches to wear, the appropriate way to speak to Mrs. Wadman, and the measures that should be taken in approaching the house. Toby is not accustomed to acting in real situations, however, and his naïve view of love leads him to believe that the situation calls for no other action than to say the magic words. Therefore, after a walk across the yard to Mrs. Wadman’s house, made somewhat lengthy by a discussion with Trim, Toby finds himself seated next to Mrs. Wadman stating his purpose. Tristram declares, “When he had told Mrs. Wadman once that he loved her, he let it alone, and left the matter to work after its own way” (531). Hence, when Toby simply states the matter and leaves it, Mrs. Wadman feels that she has to fill the awkward silence that ensues. She begins to make inquiry into his thoughts on family life. Once again, Toby feels he can simply state his matrimonial intentions; however, he begins to feel “beyond his depth,” as Tristram puts it. In an attempt to find more solid ground, Toby looks to another source to answer Mrs. Wadman and begins to read the Biblical account of the siege of Jericho. Despite this strange behavior and odd marriage proposal, Mrs. Wadman is determined to gain Toby. She only
seeks the answer to one question to ensure her participation in the relationship and that is whether or not their relationship will be affected by Toby’s wound.

The wound is not the first source of misunderstanding between Mrs. Wadman and Toby, but it is the most powerful. When the discussion of the wound arises, Toby feels he is on comfortable ground. For years, he has been giving the same conditioned response to questions about his wound, and it never enters his mind that Mrs. Wadman might want to know more than a map can reveal. While Mrs. Wadman is resolving within herself the conflict between what she feels is appropriate action and the action she truly wants to take, Toby sends Trim to retrieve the map. Mrs. Wadman understands what has happened immediately, but she refuses to remedy the situation with an explanation. As usual, the burden of clarifying the situation is left to Trim: “The Corporal had advanced too far to retire – in three words he told the rest – My uncle Toby laid down his pipe as gently upon the fender, as if it had been spun from the unravellings of a spider’s web” (540). Once again Mrs. Wadman has disarmed Toby of his pipe in the most devastating mix up between the two.

The wound misunderstanding leads to the downfall of the relationship for several reasons. First of all, it is clear that despite the military associations of both characters, they understand the world in very different ways. Secondly, Mrs. Wadman’s blatant interest in sexuality offends Toby. He simply cannot fathom the Widow’s sexual desire, though it has been present all along while she chases his hands across maps and presses her legs against his. Toby misses the implications of all of Mrs. Wadman’s attacks and only decides that he loves her after a story from Trim and a non-physical encounter looking in her eye. William Freedman suggests, “Her question as to where Toby received
the wound takes him back to the battle at the gate of St. Nicholas, but it takes the Widow directly to his groin; and when the disparity of interests is discovered the affair is at an end [. . .] and emerges a new melodic line composed largely of the themes of sex, war, and failed communication” (103). The failed communication in this relationship leads to the lack of fulfillment that occurs. Neither character reaps anything from the situation besides embarrassment.

Walter’s reaction to his brother’s situation reveals an interesting aspect about the female characters in this novel. Walter is outraged at what has happened and says that “the devil was in women, and that the whole affair was lust” (541). Though Walter is well aware of the fact that Mrs. Wadman had been in love with his brother for several years, the idea that she might desire a fulfilling sexual relationship is disgusting to him. Elizabeth Harries comments on the female characters in the novel and explains that “Women are presented either as passive, a-sexual nonenties or as threatening adversaries in sexual combat” (113). This brings up the issue of sexism and the almost utter impossibility of the sexes ever hoping to understand one another.

Walter, more than his brother in most cases, is uncomfortable when women are in a dominant role, and in no other situation does this occur more often than in pregnancy. Walter says, “Of all the riddles of a married life [. . .] there is not one that has more intricacies in it than this -- that from the very moment the mistress of the house is brought to bed, every female in it [. . .], becomes an inch taller for it; and find themselves more airs upon that single inch, than all their other inches put together” (233). Walter attempts to control the aspects of Elizabeth’s pregnancy by proposing a caesarian birth and insisting on the presence of Dr. Slop. He is denied in both cases, nevertheless, and forced
to concede to a natural birth handled by a midwife. It is clear that these concessions do not arise out of compassion for Elizabeth, however. Tristram writes, “Another political reason which prompted my father so strongly to guard against the least evil accident in my mother’s lying-in in the country, -- was, That any such instance would infallibly throw a balance of power, too great already, into the weaker vessels of the gentry” (41). He goes on to say that this possible balance of power would “prove fatal to the monoarchial system of domestick gov’t established in the first creation of things by God” (41). Walter attempts to prove his right for control over his wife through the order of the “first creation,” but when he is denied this right, he seeks to rob Elizabeth of her power over the child [Tristram] after birth. He states that “the offspring [. . .] is not so under the power and jurisdiction of the mother [because] [. . .] She is under authority herself” (323). Walter’s need to exert authority over his wife and his attempts to dominate her illustrate the wideness of the gap between the sexes, and with these attitudes it is not surprising that the sexes have problems communicating.

The principle female characters in the novel, Mrs. Shandy and Mrs. Wadman, do share commonalities. They have similar mannerisms in some cases, and Tristram describes them both listening to conversations between men outside of doors. Both women suffer from a repression of their names. Throughout the text, the character in love with Toby is identified only by those delineations that her previous relationship with a man has left behind. These are the terms “widow” and “Mrs. Wadman.” This coupled with the lack of a first name and Tristram’s early statement that he will not develop her beyond “a daughter of Eve,” puts her at an unfair advantage from the beginning (455). Elizabeth is only called by her first name in her marriage contract, and as Mrs. Shandy
and mother, names prescribed by the roles she plays in the lives of the males in her
family after that.

Names are not the only aspect of Mrs. Shandy and Mrs. Wadman that are
repressed. Their sexuality suffers this as well. Martha Bowman addresses this in an
article concerning the women in the novel: “Mrs. Shandy and Mrs. Wadman have more
in common than their weapon like eyes; they also have borne the burden of their
husbands’ sciatica. That this has made their marriages less than pleasurable is clear from
Widow Wadman’s concern with Toby’s wound” (43). Mrs. Shandy understands the
concern Mrs. Wadman has regarding Toby. Overton Philip James agrees: “Elizabeth
Shandy sees nothing in the widow’s curiosity ‘to make the least bustle about’: in a case as
doubtful as that of Uncle Toby any woman would want to make sure that the suitor was
able to beget children” (150). Despite a lack of any real relationship between the two,
Elizabeth and Mrs. Wadman seem to have many of the same concerns.

It is interesting that Toby is the man most injured by a woman in the novel
(though Walter might argue differently) because it is Toby whom Tristram compares to a
woman. He describes Toby’s heart, “There was a plainness and simplicity of thinking,
with such an unmistrusting ignorance of the plies and foldings of the heart of a woman”
(378). The similarity that Tristram describes between Toby’s emotional state and that of a
woman explains why he does not respond well to Mrs. Wadman’s “man-like” aggression.
It also allows him to connect with Elizabeth at some level.

The relationship between Toby and Elizabeth demonstrates the width of the gap
between Walter and his wife. It also demonstrates that, contrary to Walter’s opinion,
Elizabeth is capable of conversation and intelligence. Toby often sympathizes with
Elizabeth, and Tristram describes a conversation between the two that occurs after the unsuccessful trip to London: “in a word, as she complained to my uncle Toby, he would have tired out the patience of any flesh alive” (37). Toby takes up for Elizabeth when Walter wants to blame her for Tristram’s misfortunes. Tristram relates a conversation between Walter and Toby: “What a teasing life did she lead herself, and consequently her foetus too, with that nonsensical anxiety of hers about lying-in in town? I thought my sister submitted with the greatest patience, replied my uncle Toby” (244). Almost always, Toby attempts to see the best in Elizabeth’s character. This occurs in the midst of the argument about the midwife when Walter is complaining of Elizabeth’s refusal to have Dr. Slop assist with the birth. Toby says, “Then it can be out of nothing in the whole world [. . .] but MODESTY: -- My sister, I dare say, added he, does not care to let a man come so near her ****” (81). Walter, of course, simply views this as part of Toby’s naïveté. Though the relationship between Toby and Elizabeth functions on a seemingly normal level for a brother and sister in-law, there is no evidence that it enhances their contact with other members of the opposite sex.

Toby’s lack of experience in sexual matters and his apparent lack of sexual desire skews his perception about some issues. An instance of this can be seen when Toby expresses his views concerning Walter’s participation in sexual acts. He says, “My brother does it [. . .] out of principle” (93). On this subject, the brothers are in total agreement. Sex is for the principle of raising a family, and it is a duty rather than a pleasure. The marriage contract between the Shandys illustrates this idea in some ways because it essentially, with Toby’s interjection, states the rules of the game. Elizabeth has the right to give birth in the city; however, Toby’s clause protects Walter from excessive
expense because she forfeits this right for the next turn if an unnecessary trip is made. Toby’s insertion compares to a military tactic. It is important not only because it sets Tristram’s life on the downward spiral of a country birth, but also because the clause assumes an intelligence on the part of Elizabeth that Walter would have never acknowledged existed. The idea that Walter needs to be protected indicates the possibility that Elizabeth is capable of manipulation, and though Walter agrees with the clause and holds her to the agreement, he does not recognize this potential in her character.

This denial of Elizabeth as a thinking individual is the beginning of the couple’s inability to communicate. When Elizabeth refuses to allow Walter to have his pick of Dr. Slop, he says “cursed luck! [. . .] for a man to be master of one of the finest chains of reasoning in nature, -- and have a wife at the sametime with such a head-piece, that he cannot hang up a single inference within side of it, to save his soul from destruction” (118). It is interesting to note Walter’s vanity in this passage in contrast with his views of his wife’s intellectual capabilities. He cannot tolerate what he assumes to be ignorance in Elizabeth’s character, as Tristram describes: “It was a consuming vexation to my father, that my mother never asked the meaning of a thing she did not understand. -- That she is not a woman of science, my father would say -- is her misfortune -- but she might ask a question” (390). Tristram goes on to say that Elizabeth never did ask a question and it is for this reason that “a discourse seldom went on much further betwixt them, than a proposition, -- a reply, and a rejoinder; at the end of which it generally took breath for a few minutes” (390). Overton Philip James speaks to Mrs. Shandy’s lack of curiosity when he writes, “But Mrs. Shandy, whom he presents as never asking a question, asks what are perhaps the most important questions in the book: Did Walter Shandy forget to
wind the clock? Was Uncle Toby in love with Widow Wadman? And what is *Tristram Shandy* all about?” (71). Thus, it is not that Elizabeth refuses or is incapable of asking a question, it is that Walter will not acknowledge their importance.

One question of Elizabeth’s, however, that Walter cannot ignore is the first question of the novel. Tristram writes, “Pray, my dear, quoth my mother, have you not forgot to wind up the clock? -- Good G-! cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time, -- Did ever a woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?” (6). There are several things to note about this passage. First, Walter’s phrase “interrupt a man” seems to delineate the sexual act as a man’s act. Second, Mrs. Shandy’s question indicates her lack of interest in the matter at hand. Walter gives Elizabeth no reason even to attempt to participate in their sexual life. In “Tristram and the Animal Spirits,” Valerie Grosvenor Myer states that “Some critics have seen Walter as frustrated by his wife’s sexual apathy. My own reading is that the problem is less her ‘frigidity’ than Walter’s diminishing potency. He fails, disastrously, to engage her attention during intercourse; she finds his attentions, which occur only once a month, so boring she starts chattering in medias res” (109). Walter sees sex as a duty that he must perform in order to continue his family, and it is so mundane a duty that he lumps it with other ordinary routines. Tristram describes Walter’s monthly ritual of winding the clock, and goes on to state, “He had likewise gradually brought some other little family concernments to the same period, in order, as he would often say to my uncle Toby, to get them all out of the way at one time, and be no more plagued by them” (9). Walter’s use of the word “plagued” illustrates his true
feelings about the sexual act. It is something he wishes he did not have to perform, and he
gets it over with as quickly as possible each month.

Walter seems to regard those who have interest in sex as lesser human beings. In fact, Walter views passion as weakness. He goes so far as to remove the word “passions” from his vocabulary. Tristram remembers, “That for many years of my
father’s life, ‘twas his constant mode of expression -- he never used the word passions
once -- but ass always instead of them” (487). Walter attempts to pass this idea along to his wife and convince her that heightened emotion during sex reduces one to an uncivilized, animal-like state. He says, “I still think and do maintain it to be a pity, that it should be done by means of a passion which bends down the faculties, and turns all the wisdom, contemplations, and operations of the soul backwards [. . .] and makes us come out of our caverns and hiding places more like satyrs and four-footed beasts than men” (541). Therefore, Elizabeth is not excited by the monthly bedroom escapades because Walter refuses her that privilege, and their marriage becomes and remains stagnant because Walter is too busy with other pursuits. Helene Moglen agrees: “Involved as he is in the excitement of his own ideas, he is able to see his wife only as an object, a piece of personal property whose functions, abilities, interests, and life itself are defined as they relate to him” (72).

The Shandys’ sex life is not the only portion of their relationship that is in trouble. In fact, their difficulties in the bedroom are only a symptom of a much bigger problem of communication. As was already stated, Walter does not view Elizabeth as having the capability to converse with him on what he believes to be his more intellectual plane. There is evidence, however, that it is not Elizabeth’s incapacity for understanding that
prohibits her from communicating with Walter, but rather Walter’s prohibition of Elizabeth’s development. For example, the advice that Walter gives Toby about dealing with women is very telling. He writes Toby a letter full of suggestions about how to handle Mrs. Wadman that states, “Avoid all kinds of pleasantry and facetiousness in thy discourse with her, and do whatever lies in thy power at the same time, to keep from her all books and writings which tend thereto” (494). From this letter it is clear that Walter does not want Elizabeth to be educated; he simply wants to complain about her lack of interest in obtaining his knowledge. He does not want her to explore the world and learn from others, but he does want her to be excited about the spoon-fed information he sees fit to give her.

Further evidence of this power play can be found in the establishments of Walter’s “beds of justice” themselves. Tristram writes, “When any difficult and momentous point was to be settled in the family, which required great sobriety, and great spirit too, in its determination, -- he fixed and set apart the first Sunday night in the month, and the Saturday night which immediately preceded it, to argue it over, in bed with my mother” (361). Walter designates a time for communication with his wife. It is as if the effort can only be made once a month to try and persuade her about his newest idea or theory. By doing this, he releases himself of the guilt of not consulting her on matters, and he attempts to ensure that she will react in the matter that suits him. Having set this particular time to converse with his wife, Walter bypasses any other opportunity, even when it is of grave importance, to speak seriously with her. An example of this occurs on the day of Bobby’s death. Elizabeth has stopped to listen to a conversation between Toby and Walter because she hears the word wife and assumes that the two are
speaking of her. When she hears Walter quote Socrates and say that he has three children, she bursts into the room and says, “You have one more, Mr. Shandy, than I know of. By heaven! I have one less, -- said my father, getting up and walking out of the room” (305). Even at the death of their son, Walter refuses to communicate with his wife. This is in part because he has already, in a sense, dealt with the death by making a speech about it. Another reason that he does not tell Elizabeth is that he is so self-consumed. He says, “I have one less” not “we have one less son,” and with this word choice it is clear that Walter is only concerned with how this is going to affect him. Another example of Walter’s refusal to converse with his wife at an important juncture comes at the circumcision of Tristram. Instead of speaking to her, he chooses to consult books on the matter, and when she asks him “only tell us, cried my mother, interrupting him, what herbs,” he directs her to Dr. Slop (317).

On the rare occasion that the Shandys do attempt a conversation, it is clear that both parties are aware of the battle for control. An example of such a conversation occurs in a bed of justice scene after Tristram’s circumcision by the window. The chapter opens, “We should begin, said my father, turning himself half around in bed, and shifting his pillow a little towards my mother’s, as he opened the debate – We should begin to think, Mrs. Shandy, of putting this boy into breeches” (362). With this said Walter goes on to state his case, and Mrs. Shandy agrees to every statement he makes throughout the conversation, even when they are contradictory. She does this on purpose, however, not because she does not understand what Walter is saying. Walter realizes the tactic his wife is taking, and it begins to frustrate him. When he speaks of Tristram’s height and not knowing whom Tristram takes after, Elizabeth says that Tristram is tall and she does not
know whom he resembles in the family. This irritates Walter, and he says, “I am very short myself” (363). When Elizabeth agrees with this statement, Walter can no longer handle it: “Humph! Quoth my father to himself, a second time: in muttering which, he plucked his pillow a little further from my mother’s, -- and turning about again, there was an end of the debate for three minutes and a half” (363). It is evident from this conversation that Elizabeth is well aware of how to handle her husband, yet the two cannot communicate properly. Helene Moglen suggests, “Their misfortune arises not so much from their own individual circumstances as from the impossibility of combining their two temperaments” (94).

It is all too clear from the text that the Shandys have a problem communicating on a sexual and verbal level. They also have difficulty relating on a physical level as illustrated by the scene after Mrs. Shandy expresses an interest in spying on Toby and Mrs. Wadman through the keyhole. Tristram describes the position of the couple, “My mother was then conjugally swinging with her left arm twisted under his right, in such wise, that the inside of her hand rested upon the back of his -- she raised her fingers, and let them fall” (501). Walter has just accused his wife of having a “guilty” motive for wanting to look through the keyhole, and this tap bewilders him, as he cannot determine if she is admitting guilt or reprimanding him. Their gestures become confused, and Tristram writes that Walter “turn’d his face suddenly the other way, and my mother supposing his body was about to turn with it in order to move homewards, by a cross movement of her right leg, keeping her left as its center, brought herself so far in front, that as he turned his head, he met her eye -- Confusion again!” (501-502). The elaborate description of the physical encounter and the confusion rush when Walter meets
Elizabeth’s eye illustrates their inability to communicate with one another even through simple body language. The guilt that Walter feels from accusing his wife, however, illuminates the fact that some small portion of his character does care for his wife.

Lack of communication, not miscommunication, is the Shandys’ major dilemma. Walter’s disappointment at Mrs. Shandy’s lack of interest in him and their struggle over parenting issues illustrates problems in the lines of communication. Yet it is evident from the text that the Shandys do have an understanding of one another’s character. Tristram states that his mother understands Walter enough to know that he really will hold her to the stipulation concerning childbirth in the marriage contract. In fact, the marriage contract is an example of how well the Shandys know one another. As Mark Loveridge concludes, “The Shandys’ marriage-settlement, with Toby’s added clause, sets out in due form and process the Shandys’ knowledge of each other’s wishes, and also demonstrates their knowledge of each other’s characters” (52). This knowledge of one another does not ensure proper communication, however, as Walter and Elizabeth are simply reluctant to put forth the effort to please one another. Therefore, there is a lack of fulfillment in their lives.

Thus the male / female relationships in Tristram Shandy illustrate, very poignantly, that clear communication is necessary in order for relationships of this nature to remain healthy. The relationship between Mrs. Wadman and Uncle Toby demonstrates how miscommunication can destroy and separate. The Shandys’ marriage and their reluctance to attempt to accommodate one another leave them to spend their lives together, but in conflict.
CHAPTER 4

WRITING AS CONVERSATION: TRISTRAM, HIS NARRATIVE, AND HIS
RELATIONSHIP WITH THE READER

Tristram Shandy is a maze of associations, asterisks, commentary, dialogue, dashes, and narratives. It is a tale that offers the reader an opportunity to interact with and react to the text by drawing a portrait of Widow Wadman, mourning with the blackness of Yorick’s death, and guessing at the identity of the elusive Jenny. The work forces the reader to make associations or otherwise be lost in the associations of the mind of Tristram. Critics have addressed the twisting nature of the text in various manners. Elizabeth Davidson says, “While Sterne remains aloof playing the humorous omniscient, Tristram struggles, the reader struggles, the story veers along seemingly without direction” (55). Seemingly is the key, however, because the novel is brimming with direction, intention, and purpose, all of which Tristram carefully entangles in digression. This novel is Tristram’s world, and Sterne’s decision to turn it over to him and appoint him writer and narrator results in a novel that reveals only what Tristram wants to be known. Communication is a concern of Tristram’s, and as the previous two chapters have shown, it is a major concern of the entire novel. Communication occurs on both internal and external levels. Internally, the characters are communicating with one another through their conversations, their hobbyhorses, and their gestures. Externally, Tristram converses with the real reader by creating what Daniel Wilson calls “satirized readers whose behavior the author does not wish his intended reader to emulate” (849). Thus, Tristram is the pivotal character of the novel because he is the bridge between the internal
and external worlds that this work touches, and he is the voice that the reader must follow through the maze of story and symbol. Upon his shoulders rests the success of the novel, and it is his responsibility to communicate the story of his life and his opinions effectively to the reader.

On first perusal of The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, one might question why so much of the novel focuses not on the life and opinions of Tristram, but on the lives and opinions of the other characters. The reason for this is that Tristram’s life and opinions only become significant when seen in the light of the other members of his family. Tristram is an interesting character because he is a product of those family members he has observed throughout his life. In an article entitled “Narrative of Narrative,” Jeffery Williams makes some suggestions concerning Tristram’s family life and his narrative: “If one takes the primary plot of the novel to be Tristram’s biography, in a sense Toby’s adventures at Namur and with the widow Wadman are then digressive and outside the course of the plot. However, […] Tristram’s biography lies within the larger field of background of Shandy family history” (1036).

Tristram recognizes the importance of his family members in his development. He also understands that in order for a successful conversation to take place between the reader and himself, the reader must be familiar with his background. By recounting the actions of his family members, he gives the reader an inside peek at his past, and he suggests that these scenes have a greater potential to communicate truth than it might seem. This is especially true of Toby’s relationship with Widow Wadman. Tristram writes, “I have all the way, looked forwards, with so much earnest desire; and that is the campaigns, but especially the amours of my uncle Toby […] No wonder I itch so much as I do, to get at
these amours -- They are the choicest morsel of my whole story!” (277). Claiming that the most important scene in the novel is one he himself has no part in enables Tristram to set the stage for digression and storytelling in his narrative. It also prepares the reader to view the family stories as important pieces of the Tristram Shandy puzzle.

It is clear that Tristram respects for his family and sees possibility for meaning in their differences of character. He says, “Our family was certainly a simple machine, as it consisted of a few wheels; yet there was thus much to be said for it, that these wheels were set in motion by so many different springs, and acted one upon the other from such a variety of strange principles and impulses” (295). Each of the characters in Tristram’s family is driven by something different, and Tristram finds that he can easily extract meaning from these differences. Therefore, he spends a great deal of time relating conversations and misunderstandings between family members to the reader to illustrate the humor and difficulty that comes when people try to communicate from different angles. He says of his family, “I here put off my cap and lay it upon the table close beside my ink-horn, on purpose to make my declaration [. . .] that I believe in my soul, [. . .] the hand of the supreme Maker and first Designer of all things, never made or put a family together [. . .] where the characters of it were cast or contrasted with so dramatic a felicity as ours” (192). As discussed in the first chapter, Walter and Toby Shandy are evidence of the “contrast” in members of the family, which makes Tristram an even more remarkable character because he is a combination of them both.

Tristram’s personality contains many facets, and one of these is compassion. There is evidence that he cares for the people around him and that he does not wish to harm anyone with his narrative. He writes, “What a rate have I gone on at, curvetting and
frisking it away, two up and two down for four volumes together, without looking once behind, or even on one side of me, to see whom I tread upon! -- I’ll tread upon no one, -- quoth I to myself when I mounted -- I’ll take a good rattling gallop; but I’ll not hurt the poorest jackass on the road” (245). This tendency to take the feelings of others into consideration no doubt originates from Uncle Toby. Toby is the most selfless member of Tristram’s family. He shows his sympathy for others by taking the wounded Trim to be his servant and best friend and by making Le Fever’s son his own. Tristram recalls one particular incident of compassion involving his uncle that affects him a great deal. It is the scene in which Toby catches a fly that has been bothering him at dinner, only to release it out of a window. Tristram says, “I was but ten years old [. . .] but whether it was, that the action itself was more in unison to my nerves at that age of pity [. . .] I know not; -- this I know, that the lesson of universal good-will [. . .] imprinted by my uncle Toby, has never since been worn out of my mind [. . .] I often think I owe half of my philanthropy to that one accidental impression” (92). The proof of the effect this scene has on Tristram comes later in the novel during the travel section. Tristram stops at the gate and begins to converse with an ass who is blocking the entrance. He starts to feel pity for the ass as it stands chewing on a bitter artichoke, and he gives the animal a macaroon with the admission that part of him only wanted to see how the ass would eat it. He then encourages the animal to move with a tug at his halter, and says “as I pull’d at his halter, it broke short in my hand -- he look’d up pensive in my face -- ‘Don’t thrash me with it -- but if you will, you may’ -- If I do, said I, I’ll be d – d” (433). Tristram’s pity for the ass is a direct descendant of the compassion his uncle has for the bothersome fly.
The fact that Tristram recognizes his uncle’s act of charity towards the fly as one of the most influential in his life and then goes on to emulate his example illustrates the respect he holds for his uncle Toby. The true depths of his emotions concerning his uncle Toby are revealed shortly after he recounts the fly scene: “My heart stops me to pay to thee, my dear uncle Toby, once for all, the tribute I owe goodness. -- Here let me thrust my chair aside, and kneel down upon the ground, whilst I am pouring forth the warmest sentiments of love for thee, and veneration for the excellency of thy character, that ever virtue and nature kindled in a nephew’s bosom” (182). Tristram goes on to recount the wonderful and generous qualities of Toby’s character, and he vows that while he is capable, the path from Toby’s door to the bowling green shall never be overgrown with weeds. The deep emotional tie that Tristram feels for his uncle Toby is one of the things that he and his father, Walter, have in common. Tristram rarely exhibits this type of emotional display for another, just as Walter mourns no other tragedy than the death of his brother with such passion. This is only one of the many aspects in which Tristram resembles his father, however.

The odd circumstances that lead to Tristram’s crushed nose and unlucky name arouse a sense of self-pity in the narrator, and this demeanor can be likened to Walter’s feeling that he has also been slighted by the circumstances of Tristram’s birth. Tristram says, “I was doom’d by marriage articles, to have my nose squeez’d as flat to my face, as if the destinies had actually spun me without one” (36). Walter, too, feels that he has been somewhat “doomed” by his marriage situation, and he makes an effort to blame the misfortunes of Tristram’s birth on Mrs. Shandy’s untimely question and her dissatisfaction at having to stay in the country during her pregnancy. This sense of self-
pity cause both father and son to bemoan their own existence at times during the novel. Walter often cries out for sympathy from the other characters. An example of this occurs after Dr. Slop crushes Tristram’s nose. Walter says, “Did ever man, brother Toby, cried my father, raising himself up upon his elbow, and turning himself round to the opposite side of the bed [. . .] did ever a poor unfortunate man, brother Toby, cried my father, receive so many lashes?” (225). While Walter grumbles of his misfortunes to Toby, Tristram complains to the reader. Of his conception, he writes “I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me [. . .] Had they duly weighed and considered all this [. . .] I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that, in which the reader is likely to see me” (5).

Tristram’s comments about how he appears to the reader bring to light another similarity between Walter and himself. As discussed in the first chapter, Walter is very concerned with the way in which others perceive him. He is afraid of what the people at his church will say when he returns from London without a new child, and he attempts to avoid taking the blame for the mishaps during Tristram’s birth by letting Elizabeth have her way in certain situations, such as with the midwife. Tristram also falls victim to the idea of maintaining appearances. He wants to ensure that the reader perceives his character in a particular manner. In the first volume of the novel, he states that he wishes to please those readers who “find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last” (8). He goes on to say that “[i]t is in pure compliance with this humour of theirs, and from a backwardness in my nature to disappoint any one soul living, that I have been so very particular already” (8). Thus he seeks to please others, but
he also wants them to know what type of person he is. Arthur Cash speaks to this desire in Tristram: “All is percolated through the mind of Tristram, Tristram’s personality dominates the novel, and Tristram’s avowed purpose is to reveal his character and ‘what kind of mortal’ he is” (125). Tristram wants the reader to understand his true personality and character, including his intellect.

Tristram and Walter are both concerned with learning and matters of the intellect. Like Walter, Tristram finds himself theorizing about situations. Mark Loveridge points out the similarity in the way Walter and Tristram deal with intellectual matters. He suggests that “Walter’s fascinated interest in a variety of systems of knowledge is matched in intensity by Tristram’s fascinated interest in his father, a fascination which leads him to adopt or assume some of Walter’s own attitudes as he writes” (57). An example of this occurs when Tristram considers the question of baptism. The letter that he writes to the Doctors of Sorbonne rings of Walter’s influence. He asks the doctors “whether, after the ceremony of marriage, and before that of consummation, the baptizing all the HOMUNCULI at once, slap-dash, by injection, would not be a shorter and safer cut still; on condition, as above, That if the HOMUNCULI do well and come safe into the world after this, That each and every one of them shall be baptized again” (51).

Tristram’s interest in this issue of course results from his own unfortunate baptism experience, but his attitude and language are reminiscent of his father’s.

Though it may appear that Tristram’s approach to understanding and education is similar to his father’s, this is not the perception that he wants his readers to have. His references to other texts, such as the plays of Shakespeare and the work of Cervantes, and his use of other languages serve to illustrate his education to the reader, but they also
begin to set him apart from his father. He even takes the time to give the reader a list of books that Walter never read: “He had never read Cicero nor Quintilian de Oratore, nor Isocrates, nor Aristole, nor Longinus amongst the ancients; - nor Vossius, not Skioppuis, nor Ramus, nor Farnaby amongst the moderns” (45). Though this comment appears in a discussion in which Tristram says that his father was somewhat eloquent, Tristram ends the passage with an admonition to the reader not to let “odd opinions” enter the brain and “claim a kind of settlement there” as his father has done (45). Tristram realizes that his father’s approach to the intellect and his attempts to communicate with others failed miserably. Thus Tristram, wanting desperately be to more successful in these areas than his father before him, takes great pains to separate himself and the work that he is doing from his father’s theories and work on the Tristapaedia.

The Tristapaedia is a sort of encyclopedia of knowledge that Walter begins for his Tristram to counteract the misfortunes of his birth. He aims to complete a comprehensive book that will assist Tristram in every aspect of his life, but Tristram grows at a greater rate than the work, and parts of it become useless. Walter’s Tristapaedia is an attempt to impart his knowledge to his son and, therefore, become somewhat immortal by living on in his son’s mind. Walter receives great gratification from communicating his knowledge to others through speech and writing; however, Walter’s inability to write at the rate Tristram grows renders the work useless. Tristram, though he sets out to write a comprehensive text similar in scope to his father’s Tristapaedia, wants to ensure that the reader understands the differences between his hobbyhorse (or writing) and his father’s. He explains, “I must here observe to you, the difference betwixt My father’s ass and my hobby-horse [. . .] For my hobby-horse, if you recollect a little, is no way a vicious beast
[. . .] But for my father’s ass [. . .] ‘tis a beast concupiscent -- and foul befall the man, who does not hinder him from kicking” (488).

Tristram’s intentional detachment from his father can be seen in other areas as well. In fact, Tristram says, “From the moment I sat down to write my life for the amusement of the world, and my opinions for its instruction, has a cloud insensibly been gathering over my father. -- A tide of little evils and distresses has been setting in against him” (175). It is true that the narrative is full of ill tides for Walter, and there is evidence that Tristram believes he can do a better job than his father has done in both his life and his writing. For example, Tristram writes about the creaky door hinge that his father resolved to have fixed repeatedly but never did: “By all that is good and virtuous! if there are three drops of oyl to be got, and a hammer to be found within ten miles of Shandy-Hall, - the parlour-door hinge shall be mended this reign” (165). The word “reign” here is significant because it illustrates, just as the fact that Tristram’s book and not his father’s Tristrapaedia is published, that the Shandy estate has changed hands. Another indication of Tristram’s “reign” is his comment on a chapter in the Tristrapaedia. He states that the chapter upon sash windows and the forgetfulness of chamber maids is “the most original and entertaining one in the whole book,” but then goes on to say “[t]hat, in order to render the Tristrapaedia complete, -- I wrote the chapter myself” (317). There is a sense of succession here as the reader realizes that this work truly belongs to Tristram and not to his father or the other characters of the novel. Tristram simply uses the characters to communicate truths that he believes are essential to the readers. He wants the reader to make the connection between his family traits and his personality, but he also wants them to recognize that he has risen above the communication faults of his family members. In
Tristram’s version of the Shandy family history, scenes can be rearranged in order to convey a message without damaging the reality of the story.

There is much evidence that Tristram manipulates the scenes and characters in the novel for his own use, yet he sustains the illusion that the novel is truly concerned with the actions of the characters very carefully. One of his tools for successfully accomplishing this task is sleep. The first time Tristram uses sleep in the novel comes before the account of his birth. All of the characters are engaged in other activities, and Walter and Toby fall asleep while they await the birth. Tristram writes, “All my heroes are off my hands; - ‘tis the first time I have had a moment to spare, - and I’ll make use of it, and write my preface” (157). This comment is very indicative of the atmosphere that Tristram strives to create in the novel, as if he has to move the characters like game pieces into safe resting places so that he can comment himself. Walter Freedman asserts that, “Things go on together in the world and in the mind, people speak at once, and Tristram, dedicated to a representation of the way things are, works against the limitations of his medium toward the reproduction of reality” (67). Thus, as Freedman indicates, this novel is not operating on one specific level. There is the world of the characters, which reside in the past, and there is the world of Tristram, who is recounting all of these events to his readers. Though he is not necessarily opposed to disrupting the narrative with his intrusions, as several scenes indicate, sleep offers him a realistic opportunity to find some space for his opinions without interrupting the narrative.

He again uses sleep in a later passage when he says that he “is very willing to give any one of ‘em [a critic] a crown to help me with his tackling, to get my father and my uncle Toby off the stairs, and put them to bed” (234). A few pages later he says that he
wishes he could write a chapter about sleep and that a “fitter occasion could never have presented itself, than what this moment offers, when all the curtains of the family are drawn” (238). Tristram rambles a bit more about sleep in this chapter, and the opportunity that the slumber of the other characters affords him to ramble is perhaps the most significant thing about the chapter. The characters are once again “put away,” and he is free to write on whatever subject enters his mind. The last example of the freedom Tristram gains when everyone is asleep occurs in the travel section of the novel. He is having a conversation about motion verses rest and expressing the opinion that motion is life. He says, “Hollo! Ho! -- the whole world’s asleep! -- bring out the horses -- grease the wheels -- tie on the mail -- and drive a nail into that moulding -- I’ll not lose a moment” (407). Thus Tristram feels that periods of slumber allow him perfect occasions to express himself and communicate with the reader.

Communicating with the reader is truly the most important objective in the text for Tristram. Critics spend a great deal of time commenting on the identities of the readers and the differences in Tristram’s subject matter and tone when he is speaking to “Sir” as opposed to “Madam,” and there is a distinction. However, one of the most important aspects of the readers, as William Bowman Piper suggests, is that “[a]ctual readers of Sterne’s novel, you and I, may line ourselves up with the members of this audience whom Tristram thinks of as both listeners and readers” (66). Tristram carefully develops the characters of the readers in the novel so that he can expound upon his subject matter more openly with the real reader. This is why he makes such an effort to become more intimate with the readers in the narrative. He writes, “Besides, Sir, as you and I are in a manner perfect strangers to each other, it would not have been proper to
Tristram encourages the reader to become familiar and comfortable with him by encouraging conversation. Elizabeth Kraft holds that “Tristram Shandy is a conversation; Tristram does most of the talking, to be sure, but we readers are the listeners and our part in the conversation is far from negligible” (49). Tristram even refers to his writing as conversation. He states, “Writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation” (88). Tristram invites conversation and intimacy with the reader openly throughout the text. An example of this occurs when Tristram tells the reader that a map will be added to the work at a later date to help with such passages “as shall be thought to be either of private interpretation, or of dark or doubtful meaning after my life and my opinions shall have been read over [. . .] by all the world; - which, betwixt you and me [. . .] I am determined shall be the case. -- I need not tell your worship, that all this is spoke in confidence” (32). Tristram continues to build the relationship between himself and his readers by asking them questions. He requests permission to “squeeze in a story” in the midst of Walter’s attempt to deal with Bobby’s death (290), and he asks the reader to forgive his debt of a chapter about chamber-maids and a chapter about buttonholes (299). He even provides the reader a place to curse when he sells his writing along with his chaise (438).

Not all of the conversations between Tristram and the reader, however, are amicable. In fact, on at least one occasion he tells the reader a deliberate lie. After Tristram tells the story of Margarita, Madam comments that it was a very strange story.
Tristram agrees, “I wish I never had wrote it: but as I never blot any thing out – let us use some honest means to get it out of our heads directly” (422). His statement that he never “blots any thing out” is false. He has commented to Sir earlier about a chapter that he has torn out of the book: “But the painting of this journey, upon reviewing it, appears to be so much above the stile and manner of any thing else I have been able to paint in this book, that it could not have remained in it, without depreciating every other scene; and destroying at the same time that necessary equipoise and balance” (260). He continues in this same passage to say “in my opinion, to write a book is for all the world like humming a song -- be but in tune with yourself” (260). Consequently it seems that the passage about Margarita was “in tune with” Tristram as he wrote it, and despite the remarks he makes to the reader, he leaves it in because he feels it has an important place. His attitude in this situation is interesting because it demonstrates that he is willing to lie to the reader in order to defend the structure of his text.

Tristram also becomes demanding of the reader at some points in the narrative. This often occurs in the scenes when he is most concerned with relaying a particular scene or communicating a specific point to the reader. For example, before Trim relates the story of Bobby’s death to the kitchen, Tristram says “[n]ow as I perceive plainly, that the preservation of our constitution in church and state, -- and possibly the preservation of the whole world [. . .] may in time come to depend greatly upon the right understanding of this stroke of the corporal’s eloquence -- I do demand your attention” (298). Whether or not the “preservation of the whole world” depends on Trim’s remarks is left for the reader to decide, but Tristram wants to ensure that his readers can at least form an opinion about the matter.
Perhaps the most forward of these harsh conversations with the reader occurs in volume one, chapter twenty, when Tristram accuses the reader of missing the fact that his mother was a papist. The reader, whom Tristram addresses as Madam, replies that the information was not in the chapter, and thus a battle ensues with Tristram finally ordering her to reread the chapter. When she comes back to the present chapter and holds her ground that the comment was not in the text, Tristram relinquishes the information about where to find the clue (48). This scene is important because it is one of the first times that Tristram gives his readers specific directions, and it leads to the discussion of what type of reader Tristram desires.

After he has interrupted the narrative with an anecdote or other tale, Tristram often provides his readers with instructions about how to conduct themselves when reading the book. These instructions are an attempt to control the reader’s reaction to his interruptions. After the story about how the midwife received her license, he suggests that the reader put the book down and contemplate the scene; and after the Slawkenbergius tale, he tells the reader to “throw [herself] down on the bed, a dozen times -- taking care only to place a looking-glass first in a chair on one side” so that she can consider her nose (223). By placing directions in specific locations throughout the text, Tristram compels the reader to think about his reasons for incorporating certain anecdotes into his text. He also hopes to force the real reader to consider his reasons for inserting them.

By continually providing instructions for the readers in the novel, Tristram attempts to produce his ideal reader. However, he is not only guiding the readers in the novel in this direction, but he is also pushing the real readers of his work to pay more attention to his narrative decisions. He says that he “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” (149). This illustrates Tristram’s desire that his readers trust him. Howard Anderson recognizes the role of trust between the reader and Tristram in “Tristram Shandy and the Reader’s Imagination.” He writes, “Willingly or grudgingly [. . .] trust him we must -- not only because we must otherwise close the book; but also because he has demonstrated a larger conception of our mutual situation than the narrow literary one we have implicitly been entertaining. He has suggested a way of looking at our relationship that hadn’t occurred to us” (966). Tristram desires more than simple willing suspension of disbelief, however. He wants his readers to engage with him in the world of the novel. He says that he despises those readers who enter a book simply for the story. He declares, “This self-same vile pruriency for fresh adventures in all things, has got so strongly into our habit and humours, -- [that] the subtle hints and sly communications of science fly off [. . .] I wish it may have it effects; - - and that the good people, both male and female [. . .] may be taught to think as well as read” (49). Ironically, because Tristram does not believe that his readers read and think simultaneously, he uses their habitual adventure seeking practices to ensure that they at least keep reading. An example of this occurs at the end of volume two when he encourages the reader to imagine the origin of Toby’s modesty or how he came to be called the one name his father abhors, and then states “but I tell you before-hand it will be in vain [. . .] The reader will be content to wait for a full explanation of these matters till the next year, - when a series of things will be laid open which he little expects” (124). By issuing this challenge and hinting of important things to come, Tristram makes an effort to hold the reader’s attention.
It is evident from Tristram’s behavior that he does not trust the reader to engage in his narrative and to understand his methods. This is why he continually provides the reader with hints of the things hidden in the text. Tristram states, “It will seem very strange, -- and I would as soon think of dropping a riddle in the reader’s way, which is not my interest to do, as set him upon guessing [. . .] my way is ever to point out to the curious, different tracts of investigation, [. . .] with the officious humility of a heart devoted to the assistance merely of the inquisitive” (54). Thus, he points the reader to several passages that contain some type of message he wishes them to comprehend. For example, after recounting that the accident of his circumcision was the direct result of Trim’s dismantling of windows to obtain parts for Toby’s sieges, Tristram states, “A great moral might be picked handsomely out of this, but I have not time” (312). This occurs more directly later in the novel when he writes, “What a vast adventure is traveling! only it heats one; but there is a remedy for that, which you may pick out of the next chapter” (406).

All of Tristram’s hints and explanations illustrate his need to control the reader. He manipulates the reader in other ways as well. For example, it appears that he is encouraging the reader to take an active role in reading when he enjoins the reader to “imagine to yourself a little, squat, uncourtly figure of a Doctor Slop” (85). The word “imagine” seems to indicate that Tristram is seeking active participation from the reader. However, he continues to repeat the “imagine” command and soon has given the reader a description that requires no real imaginative powers. Another method of manipulation that Tristram uses is to plant ideas into the readers’ minds. While writing about noses, he approaches the reader as if to give a warning: “I define a nose, as follows, - intreating
only beforehand, and beseeching my readers, both male and female [. . .] to guard against
the temptations and suggestions of the devil, and suffer him by no art or wile to put any
other ideas into their minds, than what I put into my definition” (178). Simply by making
these statements, it is Tristram and not the devil who plants the suggestion that “nose”
might signify something else within the text.

When he is not manipulating the readers, however, Tristram spends a great deal of
time ensuring that they do not misunderstand his motives for structural decisions within
the novel. On several occasions he feels the need to relate the reasons for his narrative
organization. This occurs at the beginning of volume two when he states, “I have begun a
new book, on purpose that I might have room enough to explain the nature of the
perplexities in which my uncle Toby was involved, from the many discourses and
interrogations about the siege of Namur, where he received his wound” (67). It happens
once again after Walter reads of Bobby’s death. Tristram ends chapter two of volume five
by saying “How my father went on, in my opinion, deserves a chapter to itself” (289),
and he begins the following chapter “-- -- And a chapter it shall have, and a devil of a one
too -- so look to yourselves” (290). By blatantly stating his purpose, Tristram attempts to
ensure that the reader will recognize the rationale of his structure. He does this again after
issuing a warning to Toby about the dangers of his hobbyhorse and then suddenly ends
the chapter. In the next chapter he exclaims, “I would not give a groat for that man’s
knowledge in pen-craft, who does not understand this, -- That the best plain narrative in
the world, tack’d very close to the last spirited apostrophe to my uncle Toby, -- would
have felt both cold and vapid upon the reader’s palate; -- therefore I forthwith put an end
to the chapter, -- though I was in the middle of my story” (74). Tristram’s tendency to overexplain reinforces his desire to be understood by his readers.

Tristram recognizes the possibility that the reader may get lost in his twisting narrative. Therefore, he tries to provide reasons for his narrative decisions and guideposts to follow. One way he accomplishes this aim is by repeating lines at the beginning of chapters. An example of this takes place in the twenty-first chapter of volume one just as Mrs. Shandy is about to go into labor. Walter asks Toby as they are sitting together downstairs “What can they be doing brother?” (52). Tristram gives a short description of Toby’s gestures and then begins to digress into the story of Aunt Dinah, Toby’s wound, and various other matters. Nine chapters later, Tristram returns to the scene and opens the chapter by repeating Walter’s question. He uses this method again in volume six, chapter thirty-three when he opens with “I told the Christian reader” and then stops to say that he hopes the reader is a Christian. He attempts to start again, but then states that “when a man is telling a story in the strange way I do mine, he is obliged continually to be going backwards and forwards to keep all tight together in the reader’s fancy [. . .] I hang up in some of the darkest passages, knowing that the world is apt to lose its way, with all the lights the sun itself at noon day can give it” (383). After all of this discussion, he declares that he must begin again and opens the next chapter with the same lines. The last time he uses this method of keeping the reader on track occurs toward the end of the book. He starts chapter two of volume eight with the statement “it is with LOVE as with CUCKOLDOM,” but then recounts his opinion of the best way in which to begin a book (450). Therefore, he must attempt to make his point once again two chapters later with
the same opening. By using this technique, Tristram guides the reader through his
digressions and helps him or her to make associations between chapters.

Digressions, obviously, are a major component in Tristram’s narrative. He states
“Digressions, incontestably, are the sun-shine; -- they are the life, the soul of reading; --
take them out of this book for instance, -- you might as well take the book along with
them” (58). Tristram believes that he has mastered the art of digression so that it is not a
hindrance to his work, but rather a benefit. He writes, “From the beginning of this, you
see, I have constructed the main work and the adventitious parts of it with such
intersections, and have so complicated and involved the digressive and progressive
movements, one wheel within another, that the whole machine, in general, has been kept
a-going” (59). William Piper agrees with Tristram on this point. He writes, “Tristram’s
digressions are the result of his great concern for his audience. He has produced virtually
all of them to fulfill his different communicative obligations -- to explain, to instruct, and
to amuse; and he has so composed them that his audience should benefit as he intended”
(75). Digressions serve several purposes for Tristram. They allow his work to be, as he
calls it, “digressive and progressive.” By this he means that he can communicate his
opinions and follow the associations of his mind, while simultaneously expanding the
reader’s knowledge. Digressions also provide him the narrative space necessary for
holding conversations with the reader.

In chapter twenty-three of volume one, Tristram tells the reader that he has “a
strong propensity in [him] to begin this chapter very nonsensically,” and he does (59). He
writes of the legendary window in the human breast. He says that if there were such a
thing “nothing more would have been wanting, in order to have taken a man’s character,
but to have taken a chair and gone softly, as you would to a dioptrical bee-hive, and
look’d in, -- view’d the soul stark naked” (59). Essentially, Tristram’s narrative is the
glass window in his breast. Tristram invites the reader to pull up a chair and watch as he
deconstructs his past and builds from it a new story, full of meaning and message for his
readers. His struggle to relate the problems with communication his family members
have and his efforts to move past these difficulties in his own life result in the sometimes
confusing, but ever rewarding book that the reader holds in her hands.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

It is common knowledge in critical circles that Laurence Sterne’s The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman is somewhat of a reactionary novel. Eighteenth-century British literature is filled with the correspondence of Samuel Richardson’s characters, the chronological plot lines of Henry Fielding’s novels, and the travel narratives of Tobias Smollet. Tristram Shandy is Sterne’s reply to these writers and his contribution to that century’s discussion of how to define and best execute a novel. Thus, from the very outset, the novel was concerned with communication.

Communication pervades every aspect of this novel, and it is clear that Sterne felt it was one of the most important themes that he could explore. He demonstrates this through the careful construction of his characters, his narrative, and his narrator as distinct creations unlike any that had appeared until that time. Through these areas he comments on the various facets of communication.

Even though Walter and Toby Shandy are brothers, they approach the world in completely different manners, and it is my feeling that this was Sterne’s intention. He deliberately set these two characters on opposite sides of the personality spectrum in order to demonstrate how frustrating it is for individuals to try to communicate outside of their own realm of comfort. The hobbyhorses of Walter and Toby define their personalities and limit their ability to communicate effectively. Isolation is the result of Walter’s inadequate communicatory skills, and oblivion is the result of Toby’s. However, Sterne also purposely plants the depth of emotion that the brothers have for one another
into their characters, and through this he illustrates the sentimental idea that individuals can care for one another despite the impossibility of understanding each other.

Some of the most humorous scenes in the novel originate from conversations between the sexes. Sterne recognized that male/female relationships offered him an important angle from which he could explore his ideas about communication because of the natural barrier of gender as an obvious obstacle in conversation. Toby and Mrs. Wadman experience the true power of this barrier in ironic ways. One might think that Toby’s effeminate tendencies and Mrs. Wadman’s masculine inclinations would help them to connect with one another. However, this is not the case, and their misunderstanding leaves both of them humiliated. Walter and Elizabeth have the benefit of knowing one another very well. Nevertheless, this only serves to separate them further from each other because they have mastered the art of avoiding communication. With these two relationships, Sterne shows the destructive power of miscommunication and lack of communication.

The entire theme of communication and even the success of the novel hinges on Tristram himself. Sterne’s decision to put the novel in the hands of Tristram is the most direct bolstering of his ideas on communication. Tristram is the product of an ill-timed conversation. Therefore, he has experienced first hand the disastrous effects of such an event. Tristram’s attempts to move beyond his family’s tradition of miscommunication are evident in his strong desire to control the reader and help her to recognize his narrative techniques. More than anything, Tristram wants to avoid being misunderstood, and that becomes his primary strength as a narrator. He invites the reader into the text by
providing direction and conversation and because of this allows the novel to enter a new realm.

Communication is the over-arching subject of the entire novel. The characters reinforce this theme, the narrative emphasizes it, and, finally, Tristram makes it even more apparent. This novel is unique because it not only opens an internal world of characters and narrative, but it also unfolds a new territory for literature. As a reader, the benefit of being able to step into the work is that it allows for more than mere recognition of the theme of communication. It encourages participation in the conversation and immersion in the problem.
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