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Examining Fatherhood Through Historical Empathy in 
*Tristram Shandy*

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Reading novels from a vastly different time period comes with a host of challenges. Not only do present-day readers have to learn to read the prose in such a way as to make the stylistic differences intelligible, but there also remains the fact that the characters and experiences depicted in the novel come from a hugely different context than that of the present day. To surmount this challenge, when we read novels from earlier centuries, we must try to read with “historical empathy;” that is, we must immerse ourselves in that time period's mindset in order to understand the actions and choices of characters in the novel. Of course, historical empathy can never be true empathy since our present-day context disallows us much shared experience with the eighteenth-century context. However, the core of the idea points to how we should orient our reading of the novel as readers who attempt to resonate with the novel's cultural context. Reading a novel from a current-day perspective allows us to see patterns in history as well as to get a feel for the difference between the things that change over time and the things that are timeless. However, if we begin to blame a novel’s characters for not measuring up to present-day expectations, we run the risk of missing an important nuance or aspect of a character or situation.

This dynamic exists especially with Walter Shandy in the eighteenth-century novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne. It becomes all too easy to blame Walter Shandy for being a bad father. Among other things, he ignores his wife’s wishes during her pregnancy, he appears absentminded and unsympathetic to her while she is in labor, and he receives his son’s birth with more disappointment than joy. By twenty-first century standards, he presents himself as a selfish and critical father, and by our present-day standards, we may be right about that. However, the concept of historical empathy may lead readers to different conclusions, allowing for a more sympathetic reading of Walter Shandy. When we consider the importance of family lineage or the dangers associated with childbirth through the historically empathetic lens, we can understand why mortality might raise the unstated anxiety that affects his fatherhood. In this sense, his expression of fatherhood is not so much about his emotional connection with his family but rather his intention to pass on all the wisdom he gains in life to the next generation. His fatherhood is his desperate attempt to exert some control over life and death: by “passing on” wisdom and life to his bloodline, he fulfills his definition of a life well-lived and can defy the
anxiety of passing into the unknown. I will explore alternate readings to Walter’s “unsympathetic” actions by exploring the connections between Walter’s Tristrapaedia and the death of his barely-mentioned son Bobby’. I also want to explore, through the lens of historical empathy, how Walter’s expression of his fatherhood role results in behavior that reveals his anxiety regarding mortality.

The manner in which Walter Shandy deals with his wife’s false pregnancy reveals his anxiety concerning the next generation of Shandys. At the time of the false pregnancy, Walter’s first son Bobby has been born and Tristram has not yet been born. Bobby occupies a very peripheral space in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. In fact, Sterne writes Bobby’s name only ten times in the whole novel, and the moment at which Bobby is mentioned the most is a moment that intersects the scene of Mrs. Shandy’s false pregnancy. It is interesting to think that, at the time preceding the false pregnancy, Walter already prepares for Bobby’s death but seems so sure that the second child will be a son. When Mrs. Shandy’s false pregnancy occurs and the couple realizes there are no children, he expresses as much disappointment as if a child had actually died, mostly because he had already convinced himself of the certainty of another child:

> [f]or the next two whole stages, no subject would go down, but the heavy blow he had sustain’d from the loss of a son, whom it seems he had fully reckon’d upon in his mind, and register’d down in his pocket-book, as a second staff for his old age, in case Bobby should fail him. The disappointment of this, he said, was ten times more to a wise man, than all the money which the journey, etc., had cost him, put together, — not the hundred and twenty pounds, — he did not mind it a rush. (Sterne 69)

This passage shows how Walter’s disappointment concerning the false pregnancy does not arise from the sadness of a lost emotional connection with a child of his own. Rather, he feels disappointment when he “fully reckon’d upon” this false pregnancy birthing a baby who would be a back-up heir of sorts in the next generation of the Shandy line. Walter explaining his actions as being done “in case Bobby should fail him” is just another way of saying Walter wants the security of multiple potential heirs to inherit the Shandy line and keep it going if the eldest should die. Walter does not mourn the loss of a child. Instead, he mourns the loss of the security he had for a while when he was so sure of his wife birthing him a son that he “register’d [it] down in his pocket-book.”

This loss of security may seem extremely solipsistic if read from today’s perspective. The phrase “if Bobby should fail him” defines Bobby only in relation to Walter Shandy, which shows that Walter sees his son as a function in his own life instead of a separate, autonomous individual. However, we can see that Walter’s pragmatic outlook stems from a fear that has several implications. First of all, the “second staff in his old age” indicates that Walter intends to rely on his posterity to take care of him in his old age, so the thought of the next generation dying before he does arouses the practical fear that no one will take care of him in his elder years. The second implication is more existential. The
“heavy blow” is the very real anxiety that, if Bobby dies at this point (after Mrs. Shandy’s false pregnancy and before she conceives Tristram), then the Shandy line ends with Walter. If the Shandy line ends with Walter, then everything the family is simply dissolves. The property, the knowledge, and both material and immaterial expressions of what it means to be “the Shandy family” all disappear. The entire history of the family would become irrelevant to society, and the Shandy line would pass away, forgotten.

Perhaps we cannot understand this anxiety in today’s world, when in some cultures family ancestry seems more like an interesting anecdote than a facet of identity. But when we consider how one might define oneself today versus in the eighteenth century, we realize how much we focus on individualistic achievements today; instead, for someone like Walter, his own self-worth depends on him fulfilling his responsibility to perpetuate the Shandy line. Considering the importance of lineage from a perspective of historical empathy makes Walter’s fear of not continuing the Shandy line all the more pressing. The false pregnancy leads him to expect not only another son but another potential inheritor and perpetuator of the family, which would bring about relief, a sense of security, and even an increase in self-esteem, since he would be fulfilling his definition of success in life. The news that he and Mrs. Shandy beget no child at all must shake him to the core. Reading with an eye towards Walter’s definition of success in life—that he fulfills his duty for the Shandy family—enables readers to sympathize with his anxiety that he might, in fact, not be living up to his own standard of a life well-lived.

The event of the false pregnancy foreshadows Bobby’s death around the age of twenty. The scenario of “in case Bobby should fail him” does come true for Walter when a messenger comes with a letter reading that Bobby has unexpectedly died just as Walter chooses whether to send Bobby (now a young adult) on a European tour or to enclose more land for the Shandy estate. This moment illustrates again the difference between what looks heartless from today’s perspective and what might actually be a more nuanced form of understanding Walter from his historical context. He does not cry when he receives news of his son’s death, and instead he finds it a relief that he can be free to choose the pasture enclosure now that funding a trip to Europe would be irrelevant. Tristram, writing about his father’s reaction, reports:

[It is an irresistible and natural passion to weep for the loss of our friends or children—and Seneca (I’m positive) tells us somewhere, that such griefs evacuate themselves best by that particular channel—And accordingly we find, that David wept for his son Absalom—Adrian for his Antinous— … My father managed his affliction otherwise; and indeed differently from most men either ancient or modern; for he neither wept it away, as the Hebrews and the Romans—or slept it off, as the Laplanders—or hanged it, as the English, or drowned it, as the Germans—nor did he curse it, or damn it, or excommunicate it, or rhyme it, or lilabullero it. —– —–He got rid of it, however. (347)
Tristram takes time to expound on many epic moments of heroes throughout the ages grieving for their dead loved ones. However, he also juxtaposes his father’s lack of tears against these grand situations. Walter does not succumb to the poetic “irresistible and natural passion” of grief but rather “managed his affliction otherwise.” This second statement sounds like it has all the sensitive sterility of a business conflict resolution or a medical report, and some might argue that Walter demonstrates nothing more than heartlessness by not crying for Bobby’s death. Yet I believe some sentimentality hides in the quote and comes to light when one looks at the pauses, represented by dashes. The pauses could indicate silence between thoughts, and in this case, they could also indicate Walter struggling to process the shocking news of his firstborn son’s death or Tristram’s meditation on his father’s reaction as Tristram writes about it. Even if Sterne meant to convey no sentimentality in the pauses that illustrate this episode, at least we still hear that Walter suffers an “affliction” of grief, which means he does feel something when his son dies, even if he successfully “manages” it. Perhaps Walter does not express it in the glorious and noteworthy way of the epic heroes (no weeping, cursing, damning, or excommunicating for Walter), but he does deal with this shock in his own way.

And how exactly does he deal with the shock? He sits down to write down everything he knows in a book for his remaining son and only heir, Tristram. Walter writes what he calls the Tristra-pedia to pass along all his knowledge and wisdom for Tristram to absorb as he grows up. This gesture not only represents a way of dealing with grief but also of dealing with the inevitable fact that Walter himself will one day die and that he accepts that Tristram will be the one to carry on his legacy. Walter goes about writing the Tristra-pedia shortly after news of Bobby’s death arrives:

[the first thing which entered my father's head, after affairs were a little settled in the family … was to sit down coolly, after the example of Xenophon, and write a Tristra-pedia, or system of education for me; collecting first for that purpose his own scattered thoughts, counsels, and notions; and binding them together, so as to form an institute for the government of my childhood and adolescence. (366)]

In typical Walter Shandy fashion, Walter assigns himself a task “coolly” and devotes himself to this passion of transcribing all the knowledge he possesses and passing it on in written form to Tristram. Walter over-intellectualizes his grief, turning the loss of his firstborn son into motivation to assist the remaining son. However, despite how this narrowly directed intellectual passion might seem insensitive and unfeeling to present-day readers, the Tristra-pedia proves that Walter Shandy truly does care about his family. He cares that Tristram grows up to live out the Shandy title as an informed inheritor of Walter’s words, ideas, and intellectual ramblings, and we can see Walter’s attempt to organize his writings into something official and structured through the Tristra-pedia’s description as an “institute for the government of [Tristram’s] childhood and adolescence.”
The muted emotion, the practical description of his endeavor, and the informational nature of the Tristra-paedia itself all lend themselves to Walter’s concern with the future of the Shandy family. The Tristra-paedia offers closure for Walter as he experiences the loss of his first-born son through intellectual rather than emotional passion, since the quiet study suits Walter more than the wailing burial grounds. While today we might regard such abrupt closure to be heartless, we could regard Walter’s response as it connects to his disappointment in the case of the false pregnancy. This time, he has learned enough to not let the disappointment of a lost child cut him so deeply, and instead he manages it through reason. Perhaps Walter feels no need to waste time and energy weeping. Instead, these resources go towards providing as much as possible for his only remaining heir, Tristram, and we do see a depth of passion here in Tristram’s lines:

I was my father’s last stake—he had lost my brother Bobby entirely … there was but this one [son] left; and accordingly my father gave himself up to it with as much devotion as ever my uncle Toby had done to his doctrine of projectils. (366)

The death of the first child motivates Walter to offer the second son as many resources as possible, and the qualification of “much devotion” illustrates how Walter really does care very deeply in his own way. By focusing on this writing endeavor as a response to the mortality that suddenly encroaches upon the Shandy family, Walter assuages his anxiety in the face of this fear by ensuring some piece of him can transcend his own death and pass on to assist the next generation through the Tristra-paedia.

Walter values legacy over affection. Walter’s definition of success lies not in personal achievement or social connection, but rather in the fact that the family line continues, and that each member of the family does his part to perpetuate the line. The last time Bobby’s name appears in the entire work happens right as Walter begins to write the Tristra-paedia, which may indicate that Walter habitually moves on from aspects of the past that he views as failures and instead focuses only on what he can consider successes. It certainly seems less painful for Walter to forget rather than to remember the sources of his disappointment. We see many instances in which Walter finds himself incapacitated and utterly overwhelmed when aspects of life do not end up fitting into his very rigid scheme of how things should go. Upon Tristram’s birth, for example, Walter works himself into such a state over the injury of his newborn son’s nose:

[n]o doubt, the breaking down of the bridge of a child’s nose, by the edge of a pair of forceps—however scientifically applied—would vex any man in the world, who was at so much pains in begetting a child, as my father was—yet it will not account for the extravagance of his affliction, nor will it justify the unchristian manner he abandoned and surrendered himself up to. To explain this, I must leave him upon the bed for half an hour—and my uncle Toby in his old fringed chair sitting beside him. (24)
Walter, whose epithet could include such phrases as “the most regular man in everything he did,” and “wayward intellect,” suddenly has a terrible “extravagance of his affliction” when he discovers that his son’s nose has been crushed by the doctor’s forceps. His mild manner disappears, and we can understand through this scene that his passion runs quite deep when it comes to the physical and mental wellbeing of his offspring. At this point, too, it is important to note that Walter and Mrs. Shandy have already experienced one false pregnancy. The second disappointment to Walter comes in the form of the bad luck surrounding Tristram’s birth; finally, by the third stroke of bad luck in Bobby’s death, Walter processes his grief in a much more rational and distanced manner, as we see when he begins to write the Tristra-paedia. However, his obsession with providing for Tristram with the Tristra-paedia shows that this anxiety about the death of himself or his family has not disappeared. Instead, he pours it out into intellectual pursuits, and in this manner, he expresses his fatherhood not through affection but through the only support he knows how to offer: all his random tidbits of information, bound together in one book for his remaining son.

If we could return these ideas to the scene of Bobby’s death, we might find some new connections to make with these new ideas. The scene of Tristram’s birth (and crushed nose, and misfortunate name, etc.) takes place between the false pregnancy and Bobby’s death, and in this scene Walter reacts to what is beyond his control by lying prostrate and refusing to respond to those around him. This detached response intermediates his outbursts in the false pregnancy scene and his response to Bobby’s death, because in the case of Bobby’s death, he spins so far into his intellectual philosophizing that he actually forgets about his son’s death for the space of a conversation:

'Is better in battle than in bed, said my uncle Toby. —Take away its heresies, 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 — 'tis terrible no way — for consider, brother Toby; — when we are — death is not; and when death is — we are not. My uncle Toby laid down his pipe to consider the proposition; my father’s eloquence was too rapid to stay for any man — away it went, — and hurried my uncle Toby’s ideas along with it. — (351-352)

This episode of philosophizing begins with Walter’s addressing the news of his son’s death by quipping some of his philosophical phrases concerning mortality. However, what begins as a halting eulogy ends in a spirited jousting of wits between Walter and his brother Toby. Walter clearly relishes the chance to debate with his brother, but most people might think it would be impossible to forget about the news of one’s son’s death mere moments after the news is delivered. However, Walter Shandy, wayward as always, somehow manages to do just that. He starts talking about death as a way to deal with Bobby’s death and ends up forgetting his son completely in the philosophy of it all, which some might think inexcusable. As baffled as I am by Walter, and as hard to argue this
point might be, I still think the best way I can respond to his oversight is to simply smile sadly at the merriment in the time of death. I think it is especially important to note that Walter has been through a lot by this stage in terms of receiving blows to his deepest obsession. His bloodline still remains his primary focus, but by this point, news of an eldest son’s death hits so hard that it passes right through him, at first. True, he does go on to write the Tristra-pedia in response to the death of Bobby. But the lack of tears and even the instance of forgetting about his own son’s death come first, and it is important not to write these moments off as character flaws but rather to accept them as part of a deeper response to prolonged suffering than initially seems apparent.

So how do we leave Walter in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*? Is he the distracted and oblivious male presence in the Shandy household? Or is he the gatekeeper to the family honor and the one most concerned with passing on all he can to the next generation? Perhaps he is a bit of both. Walter’s theories and foibles do create an interesting character, but he is also the one who cares deeply about the family’s continuation, to the point that the anxiety of death (and the fear of not passing on the inheritance) influences quite a large portion of his behavior. Walter Shandy certainly is an enigma, but he does seem to be a well-meaning man rather than a malicious one. The next question to ask addresses his son Tristram’s legacy: would Walter be proud of his son, even though he does not marry and pass on the Shandy name to a new generation? If Walter defines a well-lived life as one that does the Shandy bloodline duty, Tristram does not seem to live up to this standard. However, he and his father do have their own obsessions that might arise from parallel origins: Walter Shandy writes his Tristra-pedia in order that he might pass on his knowledge to the next generation, and Tristram Shandy writes his *Life and Opinions* to memorialize the thoughts and musings of the last generation of the Shandy line. In terms of historical empathy, it seems like Tristram (or, shall we say, Sterne) is doing the best he can to offer modern audiences with something to ponder over and interpret. At least in writing, the Shandys live on, and hopefully Walter’s anxiety about passing into the void may be assuaged with the knowledge that yes, the family’s odd anecdotes and bits of stories still live on in the form of Tristram’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*.

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