

Laurence Sterne

(1713-1768)

Text 1

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy

Preliminary task

Read the following excerpt from Volume VI and write who the characters are, where they are, what the main topic of their conversation is and who the narrator is.

characters: ...

setting: ...

topic:

narrator: ...

(from Vol. VI, Ch. 18)

We should begin, said my father, turning himself half round 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 breeches¹. —

We should so, — said my mother. — We defer² it, my dear, quoth³ my father, shamefully. —

I think we do, Mr Shandy, — said my mother,

— Not but the child looks extremely well, said my father, in his vest and tunics. —

He does look very well in them, — replied my mother. —

— And for that reason it would be almost a sin, added my father, to take him out of 'em. —

— It would so, — said my mother: — But indeed he is growing a very tall lad⁴, — rejoined my father.

— He is very tall for his age, indeed, — said my mother. —

— I can not (making two syllables of it) imagine, quoth my father, who the deuce⁵ he takes after. —

I cannot conceive, for my life, — said my mother. —

Humph! — said my father.

(The dialogue ceased for a moment.)

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy is an eccentric novel published in nine volumes, depicting the story of Tristram Shandy's life and family.

1. **breeches** = trousers.
2. **defer** = postpone.
3. **quoth** = (arch.) said.
4. **lad** = boy.
5. **deuce** = (arch.) devil.

— I am very short myself, — continued my father gravely.

You are very short, Mr Shandy, — said my mother.

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.

— When he gets these breeches made, cried my father in a higher tone, he'll look like a beast in 'em.

He will be very awkward in them at first, replied my mother. —

— And 'twill be lucky, if that's the worst on't, added my father.

It will be very lucky, answered my mother.

I suppose, replied my father, — making some pause first, — he'll be exactly like other people's children. —

Exactly, said my mother. —

— Though I should be sorry for that, added my father: and so the debate stopped again.

— They should be of leather, said my father, turning him about again. —

They will last him, said my mother, the longest.

But he can have no linings⁶ to 'em, replied my father. —

He cannot, said my mother.

'Twere better to have them of fustian⁷, quoth my father.

Nothing can be better, quoth my mother. —

— Except dimity⁸, — replied my father: — 'Tis best of all, — replied my mother.

— One must not give him his death, however, — interrupted my father.

By no means, said my mother: — and so the dialogue stood still again.

I am resolved, however, quoth my father, breaking silence the fourth time, he shall have no pockets in them. —

— There is no occasion for any, said my mother. —

I mean in his coat and waistcoat, — cried my father.

— I mean so too, — replied my mother.

— Though if he gets a gig⁹ or a top¹⁰ — Poor souls! it is a crown and a scepter to them, — they should have where to secure it. —

Order it as you please, Mr Shandy, replied my mother. —

— But don't you think it right? added my father pressing the point home to her.

Perfectly, said my mother, if it pleases you, Mr Shandy. —

— There's for you! cried my father, losing temper — Pleases me! You never will distinguish, Mrs Shandy, nor shall I ever teach you to do it, betwixt a point of pleasure and a point of convenience. — This was on the Sunday night; — and further this chapter sayeth not¹¹.

6. **linings** = material sewn inside a coat or pair of trousers.

7. **fustian** = thick coarse cotton cloth.

8. **dimity** = cotton material used for curtains.

9. **gig** = whirligig, spinning top.

10. **top** = a toy which twirls and spins.

11. **sayeth not** = (arch.) does not say.

Tasks

1. Focus on the father's remarks and list them below. One example is given.

putting the boy into breeches

Do his remarks follow a logical sequence or jump from one topic to another?

2. Focus on the mother's remarks and state what kind of attitude they convey. Choose from the following list and give reasons for your answers.

interest
involvement
passivity
indifference
submission
authority

(tick)

3. Point out how many times the conversation stops. When the conversation is resumed

it seems as if it had been carried on without interruptions
new contradictory ideas are brought in
the same ideas are repeated

(Choose the most suitable answer)

4. Underline such expressions as 'said my mother' etc.
They are used

to increase the rhythm of the conversation
to emphasize the role of the narrator who is witnessing the action
to give the impression of watching a play
to show lack of communication between the two characters
to show contrasting attitudes between the two characters
to emphasize the comic aspect of the scene
other: ...

(Tick the answers you consider most appropriate, add more if you wish)

5. At the end of the passage the father loses his temper. Write the reason for this in your own words.

6. From the information you have gathered can you make hypotheses about the personalities of the father and the mother?

the father is ...

the mother is ...

Their personalities are mainly deduced from

- the way they speak
- their actions
- the way they are described
- the narrator's intervention

(Tick the answer you consider most appropriate)

7. Focus on the narrator (see preliminary task, p. 39) and state whether he is detached or involved in the event he narrates. Give reasons for your answer.

8. Consider what you have found in the previous tasks about

- the situation
- the topic of the conversation
- the parents' attitude towards the topic
- the relationship between father and mother
- the way the conversation is carried on
- the narrator's attitude

and decide what the prevailing tone is. Choose from the following list:

- comic
- satirical
- ironic
- sentimental
- passionate