

Is it difficult to believe the writing of Laurence Sterne?

When I first began reading Laurence Sterne's novel I was frustrated. I understood what I was reading very clearly, I just didn't believe any of the words on the pages. This of course isn't something an individual should get upset about, but I did. I of course wasn't throwing the novel across my room in disgust; I was simply rereading whole pages with a look of confusion on my face. At several points in the early chapters my face was completely stuck with a look of utter disbelief. I believe that my main frustration was formed from the idea that Tristram Shandy was very similar to a close friend of mine. Both get into ridiculous situations and they can never explain what occurs by being simply straightforward and [direct](#). With all of these thoughts running through my head I realized very quickly that if I was going to get any enjoyment out of Laurence Sterne's most famous piece I would simply have to believe what I was reading and question nothing that I read. This was a new concept to me but one that worked well for this particular novel.

With my own issues of belief being raised while reading this novel, I began to think how an eighteenth century audience would react to this piece. Would they be confused, alarmed, or off put by what they were reading? The answer to this is that they loved aspects of the novel but they didn't like the comedy. This makes some sense, as there weren't many authors during this time period with a similar writing style as Sterne. It is interesting to note that both eighteenth century and modern day readers debate the issues that they find within his work. Readers have a lack of belief in Sterne as an author as they don't necessarily trust his ideas and this taints their view of his work overall.

An audience from the eighteenth century may have also found issue with Sterne's work because of his lack of religious context within his novel. A comparable text we've read from this semester would be Denis Diderot's Encyclopedie in that they both deal with the issue of belief without involving religion. Both Diderot and Sterne explain their understanding of belief without touching on situations beyond those, which can be fully measured and explained. An eighteenth century audience may have found such a text by Sterne difficult to accept because of his obvious lack of religious belief. These two texts offer a more modern view of the world and don't focus heavily on religion when compared to Daniel Defoe's famous novel Robinson Crusoe. These differences are stark but all three authors get their ideals across well to their readers. It's also interesting to note that Defoe deals with both the sides of the belief spectrum by writing about Crusoe as both religious and non-religious.

Within the first two chapters of the novel the word believe is found. Sterne uses the word to draw the reader in and take them away from using their logic. "Believe me, good folks, this is not so inconsiderable a thing as many of you may think it" here Sterne is explaining to the reader early on that they may not believe many details outlined in this novel but what he is going to write about isn't as far fetched as you may think. Many readers ignore this simple request and fail to realize how important it is for an individual's reaction to Sterne's work. Sterne doesn't begin his novel by telling outlandish stories that are obviously untrue; he starts small and explains to the reader that if things for his parents had been slightly altered he would have been a different person. People can willingly accept this idea and may be more inclined to accept more of Sterne's words as they continue to read on.

The nature of the reading experience as imagined by Sterne is difficult to understand. We as readers appreciate that he does inform us that many of the things we will read will be hard to believe, however, by beginning with this information it somewhat appears that he is underestimating the readers common sense and logic. By constantly informing the reader that what they are reading has a chance to be untrue Sterne fails to understand that he has an intelligent readership that can understand certain points without his constant input.

Sterne was aware that many of the ideas he expressed in his novel would be deemed controversial. Multiple times throughout The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy he writes "I believe" and "believe me" this is his way of confirming to the reader that what he is saying is the truth and shouldn't be questioned. This is of course not the reaction we as readers have to his work initially. We understand his work to be lies, not upsetting lies or disrespectful lies but lies nevertheless. Sterne understands this and begins to ask the reader directly whether they believe what he is saying to be the truth "Can the reader believe?" Sterne is once again emphasizing the idea that what he is talking about is difficult to believe but there's a chance that all of the events depicted actually occurred. After some time readers stop struggling with their natural reaction to question everything they read and once again accept what they're reading as situations that could possibly occur.

Sterne writes ""Nay if you don't believe me, you may read the chapter for your pains" following his initial claims that he is telling the truth to the reader. Sterne understands and acknowledges that readers may have grown weary of his exaggerated writing style and he addresses these critiques. Stern writes that even though the reader may not believe what is being written in this novel they need to continue to read because Sterne himself believes in his [work](#). This is powerful and emphasizes the mindset that Sterne had with this controversial novel, he believed in his work regardless of what others thought. In his mind regardless of whether the reader believed the words on the page they would respect the belief that Sterne had in himself to create a novel such as this one.

This same respect can be found in the works of both Diderot and Defoe. Readers may not fully agree with the ideas outlined by these authors but they respect their visions of an enlightened society. In the Encyclopedie Diderot writes "These principles cannot be contested without destroying reason and throwing mankind into all manner of confusion." this idea of belief can be seen in Sterne's text as it does contain scenes from a destructive society with no true belief system. Diderot teaches the reader that society isn't perfect and that we must strive to question everything, Defoe uses his text to highlight how society will turn to a higher power they don't fully believe in when times are difficult, and finally Sterne unknowingly shows how an individual characters life can become so difficult if he fails to believe in anything at all.

Further on into the novel Sterne writes, "I do intreat the candid reader to believe me" this is a noticeable difference to his earlier idea that if you don't believe him you should continue reading regardless. In this quote he is imploring the reader to believe in the claims he is making. Over the course of the novel it may be argued that Sterne's need to be accepted as an author has increased and his somewhat harsh demeanor has softened. Many events have occurred since he first asked the reader to believe him in chapter one and he is changed because of this. Earlier he believed in himself and his work now he is close to begging the reader to accept what he is telling as the truth and there's a clear shift in the narrative tone.

By changing the narrative tone Sterne acknowledges that his relationship with the reader has changed. No longer does he strive for their affection. At this point during his work Sterne may feel as though he's lost control over the reader and decides to go in a completely different narrative direction. This doesn't surprise the reader as much as Sterne would hope, but we do acknowledge the change occurs. Sterne's work still is structured well and flows easily but the shift in tone suddenly makes it aware that readers were right to initially question his claim that the situations he is writing about may have actually occurred.

During the novel Sterne asks the reader to believe in him, his work then changes and he doesn't care whether readers believe in him or his work. This back and forth interaction with the reader is tedious. Readers of the time period would've wanted a more straightforward plot and they simply weren't receiving this from Sterne. I believe modern audiences feel the same way. Sterne's work is very similar to the boy who cried wolf in the sense that Sterne calls you over saying that what he claims is believable and the truth, you listen to him, walk over and realize that it's another lie. Eventually even if he does need you for an actual truth you don't even acknowledge him and he request falls on deaf ears. This is disappointing and when I was finished reading his novel I felt as though I didn't fully appreciate the work because I was counting the number of things that couldn't have occurred. I had to remind myself not to over think things when reading this novel which is something I've never done before. I do however think that Sterne achieved what he wanted to from his readership. Regardless of whether we believe in what Sterne is writing about we believed in him as an author and respect his [vision](#).