



Laurence Sterne: A Sentimental Journey

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Laurence Sterne's 1768 novel, "A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy," is a largely plotless. Following the wildly successful "Tristram Shandy," Sterne crafts a much smaller, but no less intense work, recounting the misadventures of Parson Yorick. As a 'sentimental traveler,' Yorick's account of his travels is not descriptive, but emotive, revealing his conflicted, if warm-hearted psychology. The novel begins in the middle of a conversation between Yorick and his servant over a French policy in the eighteenth century of seizing the property of a foreigner who dies in France. Eager to discover the truth of the matter, Yorick impulsively throws a few shirts in a bag and departs for Calais, France. His initial purpose is forgotten upon his arrival. The scrapes Yorick get himself into are as much a critique of pure sentiment as an exploration of the uses and practicality of human sympathy. Laurence Sterne is playing with a tradition of moral philosophy, including the likes of such authors as Shaftesbury and Adam Smith, the latter of whose "Theory of Moral Sentiments" (1759) was at the forefront of popularizing and pragmatizing fellow-feeling. Through the excitable and impulsive Yorick, Laurence Sterne plays with these ideas along with those of David Hume, somehow managing to fashion a witty and clever series of scenarios while displaying a very human look at the world. A forerunner of the focused genre of sentimental fiction like Mackenzie's "The Man of Feeling" and the more refined imaginative sensibilities of many Romantic Era authors, Laurence Sterne's "A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy," along with "Tristram Shandy" made immediate cultural impact throughout Europe. Sometimes confusing, often amusing, reading Laurence Sterne's "Sentimental Journey" is a great way to while away a summer afternoon.

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