The Oval Portrait

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

Edgar Allan Poe's life was tragic from the beginning. He was abandoned by his father before he was a year old, and his mother died of consumption (tuberculosis) only a year later. After being taken in by a wealthy merchant and slave trader, Poe received an excellent education but struggled for social acceptance. He drifted between attempts to conform and his need to find himself throughout his life. Poe served in the military in various capacities, only to be discharged after several failed attempts to meet expectations. His gambling debts and argumentative nature eventually led to the loss of his foster family's support and his reputation. Poe drank to excess, and his dark, despairing moods often took disturbing life in his works. Despite this, he went on to write a prolific body of work, including dozens of poems and short tales, several essays, and two serialized novels. A life that began with tragedy ended in much the same way when Poe was found incoherently shouting on the streets of Baltimore in someone else's clothes. He was taken to Washington Medical College, where he died a few days later. Poe's work outlived him, however, and today he is considered one of the most important voices in 19th century American literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Poe wrote "The Oval Portrait" during the Romantic period, during which time notions like individuality, the aesthetic experience, and a communion with nature flourished in literary and artistic circles. This emphasis on spirituality and emotional openness contrasted with the rational ideals of the Enlightenment that preceded Romanticism. Poe's poetic, macabre stories like "The Oval Portrait" are reflective of this movement, as he and many of his contemporary writers and artists tapped into powerful human emotions like love, terror, and awe. Although "The Oval Portrait" doesn't mention any specific historical events, it does allude to a real historical figure. The story's unnamed narrator remarks that the portrait has been executed in a style reminiscent "of the favorite heads of Sully"—a reference to the American portrait painter Thomas Sully (1783–1872), to whom several alleged portraits of Edgar Allan Poe himself have been (mistakenly) attributed. Mistaken likeness aside, Poe may have been influenced by the restrained Gothicism that characterizes some of Sully's portraits.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Oval Portrait" is one of a cluster of Poe stories focused on the death of a beautiful woman, which Poe believed was "unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world." Other prominent stories in this cluster include "Berenice" (1835), "Morella" (1835), and "Ligeia" (1838). "The Oval Portrait" can also be situated in a broader literary context. Critics have frequently commented on the similarities between Poe's tale and Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birth-Mark" (1843), which also features a creative male protagonist whose obsessive perfectionism brings about the destruction of his submissive wife. Additionally, the motif of the animated work of art, and the related idea that the boundary between art and life is a fluid one, are both commonplaces of European and American literature, and Gothic fiction in particular makes frequent use of them. "The Oval Portrait" has been compared and contrasted with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, an 1891 novel by Oscar Wilde, who was profoundly influenced by Poe. In *Dorian Gray*, the formula of "The Oval Portrait" is reversed: whereas Poe's "model" wife declines and dies as her vital energies are absorbed by the painting, Wilde's Dorian remains permanently youthful while his image ages.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Oval Portrait
- **When Written:** 1842
- **Where Written:**
- **When Published:** April 1842
- **Literary Period:** Romanticism
- **Genre:** Gothic frame story
- **Setting:** An abandoned chateau in the Apennines sometime during the early 19th century
- **Climax:** The artist looks up from the completed portrait of his wife, only to discover that she has died.
- **Antagonist:** The destructively obsessive tendencies of artists
- **Point of View:** First-person, third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Spare Me the Details. "The Oval Portrait" is a shortened and somewhat modified version of an earlier story entitled "Life in Death". "Life in Death" features more of a backstory for the narrator, but Poe eventually decided to suppress these extra details as he considered them irrelevant to the main thrust of the plot.

Everyone's a Critic. Though he won fame (and infamy) as a short-story writer and poet, Poe also produced a considerable volume of art criticism and was well-versed in painting and sculpture—which explains the close attention he paid to visual

culture in works such as "The Oval Portrait," "The Philosophy of Furniture," and others.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Oval Portrait," a brief frame story (essentially, a story within a story), is set in an abandoned chateau in the Apennines, a mountain range in Italy. It takes place in an unspecified year, sometime in the early 19th century. The story opens with the unnamed narrator and his valet (servant), Pedro, breaking in to the chateau. This drastic action is necessary because the narrator is severely wounded (for reasons which are never revealed) and cannot spend the night out in the open.

The narrator and Pedro hole up in a small room in a remote corner of the building, and find it to be tattered yet richly decorated—a romantic mixture of gloom and grandeur. The walls of this room are hung with tapestries, "armorial trophies," and numerous paintings in decorative gold frames. The narrator, whose unspecified injury has thrown him into a state of semi-delirium, is captivated by the paintings. Instructing his valet to shut the curtains against the night, he contemplates the images by the light of a tall candelabrum. On his pillow, he also finds a guide book that gives more insight into the paintings in the chateau.

The narrator reads and gazes deep into the night, and is utterly entranced by what he sees; Pedro, meanwhile, has fallen asleep. Shifting the candelabrum to alter the light in the room, he notices a painting he hasn't yet seen—a portrait of a young girl on the cusp of womanhood. He shuts his eyes involuntarily, unsure why he has done so, and then considers the reasons behind this "impulsive movement." He quickly concludes that it isn't related to the execution of the painting—a vignette in the style of the artist Thomas Sully—or with the radiant beauty of the girl it depicts. Rather, it's to do with the extreme lifelikeness of the image, which has simultaneously startled, confused, subdued and appalled him. Awed, the narrator returns the candelabrum to its former position, shutting the painting from view, and proceeds to read about the painting in the guide book.

The book describes the sitter as a "maiden of rarest beauty." Full of life and love, she hates only one thing: the artistic vocation of her new husband, a renowned painter who injects wild passion into his work. In fact, she regards Art—personified with a capital "A"—as a rival for his attentions. Nonetheless, she's also meek and submissive, and doesn't protest against his burning desire to paint her. The painter spends day and night laboring over the portrait, and the closer to completion he brings it, the more physically weak and psychologically distraught his wife becomes—almost as if her vital energies are being drawn from her and into the image. But the painter, totally engrossed in his work, barely shifts his eyes from his canvas, and fails to notice his wife's plight until it's too late. Just as the painting reaches a height of lifelike perfection, he finally deigns to look up at her—only to discover that she has died.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Artist – The unnamed artist only appears as a character in the inner story of the narrative. The guide book that the narrator reads contains an account of his interactions with his young wife, the model for the titular oval portrait, is at the heart of Poe's thematic concerns. The artist is a renowned portrait painter known for the obsessive and moody passion he injects into his work, and for his remarkable ability to create lifelike images of people. His passion for his art, however, eclipses the living, breathing reality of his wife, over whose portrait he labors day and night, seemingly unaware of the fact that this process is physically and psychologically detrimental for her. Poe implies that he's a vampire of sorts—not in the sense of literally drinking people's blood, of course, but in the sense of draining the vital energies of his model in order to imbue his work with a maximum degree of lifelikeness. He seems to regard his wife less as a fellow human being than as an inspiration for his art, and his wife ultimately dies while he overlooks her health to focus on the portrait. Poe uses the character of the artist to dramatize his critique of obsessive perfectionism, and also to suggest that artistic creation also inevitably entails some kind of destruction.

The Artist's Wife – The artist's wife appears in the flesh only in the inner story, but her image—an "immortalized" painted portrait of her mortal self, remarkable in its lifelikeness—startles and appalls the narrator in the narrative's outer story. The guide book that the narrator reads describes her as vivacious and full of love for everything but the painter's vocation, which she regards as a rival for his affections. Her dominant character traits are meekness and submissiveness. Although she intensely dislikes the being painted—a process with deteriorates her physically and psychologically—she never protests about it because she loves the artist and doesn't want to stand in the way of the pleasure he takes in his work. In the end, this unconditional love results in her demise, as she dies while the artist is completing her portrait. The artist is subtly portrayed as a sort of metaphorical vampire in the way that he sucks the youth and health out of his wife in order in order to immortalize her, although her immortalization is, of course, a figurative one on canvas. Poe uses the wife's character to critique the subjection of women in the patriarchal society of his day, and also to emphasize the potentially dehumanizing effects of the male gaze. Her character is somewhat of a two-dimensional one, and this may be a deliberate ploy on the part of the Poe, as an attempt to represent the way women were often perceived in his day.

The Narrator – The narrator is a man whose background remains a mystery for the reader: Poe reveals nothing about him other than the fact that he's seriously injured and takes refuge in a chateau in the company of his servant, Pedro. In this chateau, the narrator is enchanted by a portrait of a beautiful young woman, whom he learns from a guide book was the wife of the painting's artist. It's can be inferred that the narrator is an educated individual who, like Poe himself, seems well-versed in the visual arts: he remarks, for example, that the oval portrait has been executed in a style similar to that of Thomas Sully, an American portrait painter, and has a knowledge of art terms such as "Moresque" and "vignette." The fact that the narrator is suffering from "incipient delirium," though, may lead some readers to question the reliability of his narration. The narrator ends up ironically falling into the same preoccupation with the woman's portrait that the painter himself did. The story's abrupt ending implies that he may have died in the midst of this, just as the painter's wife died while he was lost in his obsession with capturing her beauty.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Pedro – Pedro is the narrator's servant, and is only mentioned briefly at the beginning of the story. His role in the narrative seems to be purely functional: it's with his help that the injured narrator gains access to the chateau, but his involvement essentially ends there.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LIFE VS. ART

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait" is a **frame** story (essentially, a story within a story), which centers around life and art. The outer story follows the unnamed narrator as he spends the night in an abandoned chateau in the mountains. While there, he admires the impressive paintings that adorn the walls and becomes particularly taken with a portrait of a beautiful young woman, which is encased in an oval frame. The inner story explores the life of the woman in the portrait and her husband, who was the painter. Even though the portrait is wildly beautiful and moving, the couple's story wasn't a happy one: the husband was obsessed with his art, so much so that he didn't notice that his wife was dying right before his eyes while he was painting her portrait. Through the couple's tragic story and the narrator's captivation with the painting, Poe spins a cautionary tale about pursuing art at the expense of real life outside of the canvas, but also suggests that perhaps disconnecting from reality is simply the cost of great art.

Through the character of the painter, the story suggests that being an artist requires an intense—perhaps even fanatical—level of devotion to one's work that necessarily forces the artist to disengage from reality. In Poe's words, the painter "grow[s] wild with the ardor of his work, and turn[s] his eyes from the canvas rarely, even to regard the countenance of his wife." In other words, the painter is so passionate and enthusiastic about art that he lets it absorb his attention completely. Even though he's painting his wife's portrait, and is thus studying her face closely, he doesn't truly see his wife's "countenance," or appearance. Despite being in close quarters with her and looking at her face day in and day out, the painter doesn't notice that she's growing pale, weak, and sickly—the reality he's creating on the canvas becomes more real in his eyes than the reality beyond the painting's confines.

The painter becomes so detached from reality that he begins to mistake his art for reality itself, which proves beneficial for his craft but disastrous for his real life. The painter, "entranced before the work which he [has] wrought," starts to view his wife exclusively through the lens of the painting. The real object of his "ardor," or obsession, is not his living, breathing spouse—it's the arrangement of shapes and colors on the canvas that simulates her presence in an ideal way. As the painter grows more invested in painting the perfect portrait, he fails to see the real-life impact his single-minded devotion is having on his wife: he "would not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sat beside him." When he puts the finishing touches on his painting, the artist cries out, "This is indeed *Life* itself!" Ironically, though, the painter has grown shaky and pale by this point, and his wife has already wasted away and died—the painter's fanatical dedication to his art has sapped him and his wife of their vitality.

Poe thus seems to suggest that art is not necessarily a mere interpretation of real life that leaves reality itself unaffected. The model, described as a "maiden of the rarest beauty" who is "just ripening into womanhood," is drained of life over the course of the painting's creation, growing "daily more dispirited and weak," and finally dying just as the painting reaches the height of its perfection. Through the wife's tragic death and the painter's blind devotion to his art, the story drives home the idea that getting lost in art—mistaking it for reality—is dangerous and has serious costs.

In the outer story of the narrative, the narrator's obsession with the painting seems to rival the painter's, suggesting that consuming art can be just as absorbing, forcing the viewer to detach from reality. When he first sees the painting, the narrator immediately snaps his eyes shut, unaware of why he is doing so. Once he thinks about it, he realizes that the painting

was so lifelike and startling that he needed to take a moment to compose himself and make sure his eyes aren't deceiving him. Even though closing his eyes is an attempt to "calm and subdue [his] fancy for a more sober and more certain gaze," shutting his eyes upon seeing the painting seems to reflect the way that art can make a person shut out the rest of the world. Furthermore, even before he finds the specific portrait for which the story is named, the narrator is entranced by the other paintings in the mansion: "devoutly, devoutly I gazed. Rapidly and gloriously the hours flew by and the deep midnight came." Here, the narrator becomes out of touch with reality as he loses track of time, highlighting how art can deeply impact the viewer and disconnect them from real life.

In "The Oval Portrait," Poe crafts a characteristically bleak and chilling tale. Through the narrator and painter's dual obsession with the painting, Poe emphasizes the dark side of art, suggesting that it can make artists and viewers alike disconnect dangerously from reality. However, it's important to remember that Poe, too, is an artist, and that his story isn't a condemnation of art or a protest against creative passion—he's not even suggesting that the painter shouldn't have created the titular portrait. Instead, "The Oval Portrait" serves as an unsettling reminder of art's towering power, and leaves readers to wonder if perhaps all great art comes at a steep human cost.

AGENCY AND OBJECTIFICATION

"The Oval Portrait" relies on—and, arguably, critiques—the traditional pairing of male artist and female model, where masculinity tends to be associated with inspired creativity, activity, and seeing, and femininity with creative inspiration, passivity, and being seen. The early 19th century, when Poe was writing, was a largely patriarchal era during which time male-produced literature and art tended to underplay or even ignore female agency. At first glance, this seems true of "The Oval Portrait," too. In the story, male characters are always gazing upon and admiring the wife's beauty, but the wife herself has very little agency or depth to her character—she's characterized as an object for men to admire and venerate, but not a full person in her own right. However, it's possible that Poe crafts his characters in this way to actually criticize the dehumanizing power of the male gaze, which subjugates and objectifies female subjects.

On one hand, it might appear that the author is bending to his times in terms of how he presents the dynamic of the relationship between the painter and his "model" wife (pun intended). With broad strokes, Poe "paints" the wife as a one-dimensional stereotype of the ideal 19th-century woman—a passive "angel of the house." The wife exists as an object for the painter's contemplation, and her own agency and subjectivity are downplayed to the point of virtual nonexistence: "She was humble and obedient," Poe writes, "and sat meekly for many weeks in the dark high turret-chamber where the light dropped upon the pale canvas only from overhead."

While the wife evidently sees the painter as a human being, and suffers his passions out of love for him, aware that he takes "a fervid and burning pleasure" in the act of painting, the painter sees not the wife herself but the *idealization* of her that he's creating on the canvas: "[he] turned his eyes from the canvas rarely, even to regard the countenance of his wife." Furthermore, whatever love he may have for his wife is eclipsed by the "ardor of his work." The relationship between husband and wife, paralleling the relationship between artist and model, is a clearly unequal one, and the reader may initially conclude that Poe is presenting this dynamic as a social given—simply the way things are.

On the other hand, it's also possible to read "The Oval Portrait" as Poe's subtle and indirect critique of female objectification and the denial of female agency. The story's tragic climax—the painter finally looks up from the perfected canvas, only to see that his wife has died—may force the reader to re-evaluate the author's intentions. Yes, the model does indeed exist on the page solely as a one-dimensional stereotype. But perhaps that is because the reader is effectively being made to see her through the eyes of the painter—who, blind to the living reality of his wife, inadvertently causes her death through neglect—rather than directly through the eyes of the author himself. In other words, perhaps Poe fails to flesh out the wife's character, to turn her into a three-dimensional human being, not because he is himself complicit in the dehumanization of women, but rather because he's actually emphasizing the blindness of those who do so.

The physical form of the portrait itself is also thematically significant in this regard. Poe describes it as a "mere head and shoulders, done in what is technically termed a vignette manner." The girl's head and shoulders, effectively severed from the rest of her body, come to serve as a decorative object intended to appeal to the (male) eye. And indeed, the language Poe uses to evoke the narrator's visual fixation on the portrait: "I remained, for an hour perhaps, […] with my vision riveted upon the portrait." This suggests that he derives aesthetic pleasure from the very act of looking at it. The painter has failed to represent the entirety of the girl's body, and by extension, perhaps, he has failed to represent her true nature and full self as well—she has become the proverbial "pretty face," existing exclusively for male gratification.

It might be tempting to object that all manner of portraits are only partial depictions of the human body, and that this doesn't necessarily imply an act of dehumanization or objectification on the part of the artist. Nonetheless, in the context of Gothic fiction, and in the context of "The Oval Portrait" in particular, it's quite likely that this severe mode of **framing** the female body represents an act of metaphorical dismemberment. And it seems legitimate to argue that Poe uses this stark visual imagery to criticize the gendered politics of his day. Overall,

then, Poe uses "The Oval Portrait" to explore the subtle interrelationships between agency, gender, and artistic works, identifying particular social structures that define who sees and who is seen—and arguably critiquing these structures in an indirect, though highly effective, fashion.

VAMPIRISM

The trope of the vampire is a commonplace of Gothic fiction. Though it stereotypically involves the drinking of blood by the fang-y undead and the subsequent siring of new immortals, these are only its outward attributes. In essence, vampires are individuals who drain or absorb people's vital energies in order to revitalize themselves—gore, the supernatural, and dodgy Transylvanian accents are optional extras.

As might be expected from Poe's trademark style, the vampirism in "The Oval Portrait" is abstract and subtle: instead of fangs and black capes, Poe imbues his story with a creeping feeling of dread and the slow sapping of energy—something one might call *psychic vampirism*. And instead of a vampire drinking actual blood, Poe presents readers with an artist's painting his subject. The artist's wife, the model for this portrait, has her life force essentially drawn out of her (literally and figuratively) and into the painter and his canvas, upon which her image is immortalized for posterity, and she becomes a husk of her former self as a result of this "blood loss." Through the elements of vampirism present in the inner story about this husband and wife, Poe seems to make two implicit assessments, one social and historically specific, the other more broadly philosophical. The former is that marriage in a patriarchal society may well result in a lopsided power dynamic: the wife gives, the husband takes, and there is no reciprocity. The latter is that artistic creation inevitably brings about its opposite: destruction.

Marrying the painter has catastrophic consequences for the girl. Immediately after marrying her husband, she is described as being "full of glee; all light and smiles, and frolicsome as the young fawn." But she begins to decline, physically as well as psychologically, as soon as her husband embarks on her portrait, her "health and spirits" withered by "the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret." The husband, in contrast, "grow[s] wild with the ardor of his work." This is psychic vampirism in action: the girl is progressively being sucked of her innocent youth and her health, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for the destructive consequences of marriage in a society that restricts women.

Poe's most explicit hint that his story is dealing with a transfusion of vital energies comes when the guide book asserts that "the tints which [the painter] spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sat beside him." This assertion makes it unambiguous that the wife's well-being is inversely related to the degree of the portrait's completion. In other words, the longer she spends in this state of married entrapment, the more enfeebled and powerless she becomes.

It's also clear, however, that Poe's treatment of vampirism in "The Oval Portrait" is specifically bound up with questions of artistic representation—the story is as much about models and artists as it is about wives and husbands, and it seems to insist that creative acts are also—at least inadvertently—simultaneously destructive ones. If, as the guide book makes clear, the painter's "real" bride is "Art," personified by dint of the capital "A," the model herself is de-personified as the life-draining process of depiction proceeds. The process of depiction may be regarded as one which transforms the living girl into an object that is possessable, in both the economic and sexual senses of the word. (It is significant that she's described as "just ripening into womanhood"—in other words, on the verge of sexual maturity.) As a vampire's victim is literally immortalized, so too is the girl is immortalized on the canvas—reduced to the status of a viewable commodity—but only at the expense of her existence as a fluid, living subject.

It's evident, then, that the presentation of vampirism of "The Oval Portrait" differs significantly from vampirism as it tends to be understood in popular culture. In fact, the narrative is so utterly devoid of vampiric clichés that casual readers may easily overlook the presence of this theme in Poe's story. Nonetheless, Poe uses the theme to explore power dynamics within marriage, but he also uses it to comment on the ambiguous nature of artistic representation, which seems to entail destruction as well as creation.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FRAMES

Frames, both physical and abstract, play a major role in "The Oval Portrait," symbolizing the danger of trying to capture and exert ownership over physical beauty. The framed portrait of the artist's wife represents a kind of metaphorical imprisonment—the physical frame is symbolically akin to the walls of a prison cell wherein only the young woman's outer beauty, rather than her inner self, is essentially held captive for the viewer's appreciation. In this sense, the frame also represents the general objectification she faced as a physically attractive woman, since the story implies that men (including her own husband) viewed her as nothing but a beautiful sight to look at, as opposed to a complex individual. At the end of the story, it is revealed that the artist's wife died while he was preoccupied with painting her portrait and deeming it as "*Life* itself." In light of this, the frame around her picture encapsulates the danger of conflating life with art, as

the young woman's essence is now limited solely to the confines of this frame, and thus her husband's idealized interpretation of her. Yet her actual, real-life beauty and the nuances of her personality were consequently lost forever in the process.

Interestingly, the failure of the frame to reinforce the boundary between art and life is reflected in the very structure of Poe's tale, which is a frame tale, or a story within a story. The narrator begins reading the guide book, which transports the reader into the world of the inner story—but Poe never returns to the outer story of the narrator's own predicament. The suggestion is, perhaps, that the narrator never manages to reach the end of the description of the painting, and succumbs to his injuries just as he reads about the death of the model, bringing both inner and outer stories to an abrupt and premature close. This abstract framing of the story, then, ironically reinforces the same cautionary tale against focusing on life over art that the framed portrait represents, since the narrator presumably dies while committing the very same mistake as the artist himself: focusing too intensely on art, rather than life. The reader, too, is implicitly involved in this cycle of being drawn into the painting simply by reading the outer and inner stories through the narrator's perspective. The physical and metaphorical frames of the story, then, are defined boundaries that broadly represent both the artist and the viewer's flawed tendency to objectify and capture beauty as something separate from reality.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Doubleday edition of *Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* published in 1984.

The Oval Portrait Quotes

The chateau into which my valet had ventured to make forcible entrance, rather than permit me, in my desperately wounded condition, to pass a night in the open air, was one of those piles of commingled gloom and grandeur which have so long frowned among the Apennines, not less in fact than in the fancy of Mrs. Radcliffe. [...] Its walls were hung with tapestry and bedecked with manifold and multiform armorial trophies, together with an unusually great number of very spirited modern paintings in frames of rich golden arabesque. [...] [I]n these paintings my incipient delirium, perhaps, had caused me to take deep interest.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Pedro

Related Themes:

Page Number: 568

Explanation and Analysis

The opening paragraph of "The Oval Portrait", in which the injured narrator describes how he and his servant, Pedro, break in to the abandoned chateau and hole up in one of its "remote turrets," serves to introduce the story's central theme of art and its relationship with life. The allusion in the very first sentence to Ann Radcliffe, an English pioneer of Gothic literature, subtly reminds the reader that "The Oval Portrait" is itself an artistic creation governed by particular conventions and norms, and that it isn't merely a naturalistic "slice of life."

By mentioning Ann Radcliffe and emphasizing the "gloom and grandeur" of the chateau, Poe generates a particular set of expectations in the reader. The story's setting conforms with the norms of Gothic and Romantic literature, so the reader naturally forms expectations for the behavior of the story's characters and the situations in which they are placed to follow suit. In light of the opening sentence and its explicit nod to the Gothic genre, readers familiar with stock Gothic tropes will recognize the cliché of the animated portrait, which collapses the distinction between art and life, as soon as they encounter the phrases "spirited modern paintings" and "incipient delirium." The latter phrase should also put readers on their guard: a delirious narrator is unlikely to be a reliable one, potentially making it difficult to distinguish between fact (life) and fiction (art).

The portrait, I have already said, was that of a young girl. It was a mere head and shoulders, done in what is technically termed a vignette manner; much in the style of the favorite heads of Sully.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Artist's Wife

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 569

Explanation and Analysis

Having shifted the position of the candelabrum to view the painting in his room, the narrator finally notices the story's titular portrait—a vignette—and proceeds to give a brief description of it. Effectively severed from the rest of her

body, the girl's head and shoulders serve as a decorative *object* intended to appeal to the (male) eye. It could be argued that, having failed to represent the entirety of the girl's body, the painter has, by extension, failed to represent her true nature as well—she has become a proverbial pretty face, existing exclusively for male gratification. The ornate frame in which the portrait is hung, too, emphasizes this, as it portrays the girl as trapped within a boundary (both literal and figurative) that limits people's perceptions of her to the artist's objectification of her physical beauty.

It is true that all manner of portraits are only partial depictions of the human body, and this doesn't necessarily imply an act of dehumanization or objectification on the part of the artist, Nonetheless, in the context of Gothic fiction, and in the context of "The Oval Portrait" in particular, it's quite likely that this severe mode of framing the female body represents an act of metaphorical dismemberment of sorts. Poe seems to use this stark visual imagery to criticize the gendered "visual politics" of his day, as the male gaze dissects the girl, and therefore dehumanizes her as a kind of specimen.

> I had found the spell of the picture in an absolute life-likeliness of expression, which, at first startling, finally confounded, subdued, and appalled me.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Artist, The Artist's Wife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 569

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is utterly mesmerized by the portrait of the artist's wife in his chamber room at the chateau. Although the image of the girl never literally comes to life, as might be the case in other works of Gothic fiction, the narrator perceives it as absolutely life*like*—a notion that will take on particular significance once the reader learns, along with the narrator, that the model's vital energies were progressively drawn out of her and into the canvas throughout the painting of the portrait.

The narrator is rendered powerless at the sight of the portrait, paralleling the powerlessness of the model, who was (inadvertently) stripped of her agency while the artist was creating her likeness. By contrast, the portrait—an inanimate object—seems to have acquired a quasi-agency of its own. Poe's use of the verb "subdue"—a very strong verb in this context—suggests that the portrait is capable of exerting a potentially malevolent power over its viewers, similar to the domineering power that the artist exerted over his wife.

> She was a maiden of rarest beauty, and not more lovely than full of glee. And evil was the hour when she saw, and loved, and wedded the painter. He, passionate, studious, austere, and having already a bride in his Art; she a maiden of rarest beauty, and not more lovely than full of glee; all light and smiles, and frolicsome as the young fawn; loving and cherishing all things; hating only the Art which was her rival; dreading only the pallet and brushes and other untoward instruments which deprived her of the countenance of her lover. It was thus a terrible thing for this lady to hear the painter speak of his desire to portray even his young bride. But she was humble and obedient, and sat meekly for many weeks in the dark, high turret-chamber where the light dripped upon the pale canvas only from overhead.

Related Characters: The Narrator , The Artist's Wife , The Artist

Related Themes:

Page Number: 569-570

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is reading the guide to the paintings in the chateau, and learns, together with the reader, about the painter and his wife. Both exist largely as archetypes—the artist's wife represents beauty and innocence, while the artist represents objectification and creative obsesion. Zealously passionate about his work, which he values more than anything else, the painter is the quintessential Romantic artist. Significantly, his "Art" is personified by dint of the capital "A"—it takes on the form of a quasi-human "bride" that the wife regards as an adversary and a competitor for his affections. The wife herself, meanwhile, is the quintessential Victorian woman—beautiful, meek, and submissive, she provides creative inspiration for the artist while seemingly being denied her own voice, viewpoint, and agency.

It might be argued that Poe is *perpetuating* female objectification and dehumanization by reducing the wife to a proverbial pretty face here; equally, however, it might be argued that he's actually *criticizing* these same discourses by holding a mirror up to society's values (in other words, he

fails to present her in a more complex light because the society of his day failed to see women as complex human beings). Poe also takes care to stress that, before the artist embarked on the portrait, his wife was brimming with life and energy. This suggests that the artist's fixation on his wife's beauty has an underlying vampiric quality, and that this creative obsession (along with the institution of marriage) tends to be dehumanizing and draining for women.

> […] [T]he painter had grown wild with the ardor of his work, and turned his eyes from the canvas rarely, even to regard the countenance of his wife. And he would not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sat beside him

Related Characters: The Artist's Wife , The Artist

Related Themes:

Page Number: 570

Explanation and Analysis

According to the guide book, the painter eventually becomes wholly engrossed in painting the portrait of his wife, so much so that he barely looks up to engage with the living reality of his wife—a reality that has been eclipsed, in his eyes and mind, by the image he's creating on the canvas. This paint-and-canvas simulation now seems to take precedence over the flesh-and-blood original for him.

Furthermore, as evidenced by the second sentence in the quote, the simulation is actually *displacing* the flesh-and-blood original: its colors do not merely mimic the coloring of the girl's flesh but are "drawn" from it. Poe may well be using the verb "to draw" as a form of wordplay here: the process of representation, he seems to be saying, is not a neutral one, and inevitably involves "extraction" or "exhaustion" of some kind.

This is where the theme of vampirism—associated in the story with unequal power dynamics within marriage—takes center stage. The painter is exhausting the vital energies of his wife to fuel the creative process, but he's giving her nothing in return. There's no reciprocity in evidence here; the wife exists purely as a source of inspiration for the male creator's eye.

> And then the brush was given, and then the tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice, 'This is indeed Life itself!' turned suddenly to regard his beloved: She was dead!

Related Characters: The Narrator , The Artist's Wife , The Artist

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 570

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator continues to read the guide book, which now describes the model's tragic end. The artist, in his creative frenzy, hasn't noticed that his wife has been suffering, physically and psychologically, and with ever greater intensity, during the painting of the portrait, and it therefore comes as an utter shock to him that she has died just as the portrait is finally completed. The vampirism theme is brought to its logical conclusion here: since the portrait, filled with the vital energies of the model, has reached a height of perfection, the model herself must necessarily succumb to death. This is perhaps a warning on the author's part: do not allow art to eclipse living, breathing reality, he seems to be saying, or the consequences may be terrible and tragic.

Interestingly, Poe never returns to the outer story of the narrator's own predicament. The suggestion is, perhaps, that the narrator never manages to reach the end of the description of the painting, and succumbs to his injuries just as he reads about the death of the model, bringing both inner and outer stories to an abrupt and premature close. In this sense, the framing of the inner and outer stories parallels with the artist's literal framing of his wife's portrait—just as the artist's wife died because of his obsession with capturing her beauty, the narrator dies when he is drawn into their story and subsequently focuses on art over life.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE OVAL PORTRAIT

"The Oval Portrait" opens with the unnamed narrator and his servant, Pedro, making "forcible entrance" into an abandoned chateau in the Apennine Mountains. For reasons never made clear, the narrator is severely injured, slightly delirious, and therefore incapable of spending the night in the open air. The two men hole up in a remote bed chamber whose decorations are "rich, yet tattered and antique." It is an oddly-shaped room that is full of nooks due to the chateau's "bizarre architecture." The chamber boasts a number of tapestries, "armorial trophies," and "an unusually great number of very spirited modern paintings in **frames** of rich golden arabesque." The paintings arouse the narrator's interest. Wishing to contemplate them, he commands Pedro to light a tall candelabrum that stands at the foot of the bed. He also finds on his pillow a small book that provides an overview of the room's pictures.

The opening sentences of "The Oval Portrait" establish a typically Gothic atmosphere by emphasizing the isolation and gloom of the chateau and the semi-delirium of the narrator. In light of this opening—which functions, among other things, is an indicator of the story's genre. Readers familiar with the Gothic will entertain certain expectations about the nature of the titular oval portrait even before it's actually mentioned in the narrative. Namely, these dark, macabre stories tend to bring inanimate objects to life—and the animated portrait is a commonplace of Gothic literature. The story's central theme of the relationship between art and life is therefore present, if implicit, from the very outset.

While Pedro sleeps, the narrator scrutinizes the paintings and reads this guide book, completely engrossed, until at length the hour of midnight comes. Dissatisfied with the position of the candelabrum, he moves it so as to shed more light on the book—and suddenly notices a painting that has so far escaped his attention. It's a portrait of a girl who is "just ripening into womanhood." The painting exerts an immediately overwhelming yet ambiguous effect on the narrator, forcing him momentarily to close his eyes and to wonder precisely what it is about the image that he finds so startling.

The narrator is riveted by the room's paintings, seemingly deriving pleasure from the very act of looking at them. This speaks to the notion of the male gaze, as the portrait places emphasis on the young girl's sexuality and invites male viewers (and, indeed, the reader) to objectify her physical beauty without knowing anything else about her. Poe uses the narrator's overwhelmed reaction to emphasize art's power to influence those who consume it. The portrait may be a mere "image," but it exerts an almost visceral effect on the narrator.

The narrator gives a brief description of the portrait. It is a "*vignette*" painted "much in the style of the favorite heads of Sully." It depicts the girl's head and shoulders, with the rest of her body unseen. The narrator admires the painting's execution and the beauty of its subject, but is truly astounded by a third factor—its absolute lifelikeness, which "confounds," "subdues," and "appalls" him. He gazes at the portrait for an hour, eyes riveted upon it, before returning the candelabrum to its previous position and turning to the relevant description in the guide book.

The notions of agency and objectification come to the forefront here. It's significant that the portrait is a vignette—only the girl's head and shoulders have been depicted, which, in the context of Gothic fiction, may be interpreted as an act of metaphorical dismemberment. The narrator, meanwhile, is left both literally and figuratively paralyzed by the sight of the portrait, which "subdues" him and leaves him unable to do anything other than to keep looking at it.

The guide book contains an account of the portrait's painter and its subject, who turn out to be husband and wife. The former, a renowned portrait painter, is a brooding, passionate man who's wholly devoted to his work, to the point that it seems like he already has "a bride in his Art." The latter is "a maiden of rarest beauty, and not more lovely than full of glee." The artist's wife hates nothing but the vocation of her husband, since she regards his art as a rival for his affections. Vivacious though she is, the girl is also meek and submissive, and bends to the will of her husband, who's eager to paint her portrait, because she knows how greatly he values his work.

In the inner story told by the guide book, Poe further develops the themes of agency and objectification while arguably critiquing the patriarchal society of the early nineteenth century. The wife exists to be seen by her artist husband, and all non-physical aspects of her identity and personhood are downplayed to the point of nonexistence. In addition, Poe warns his readers that, if pursued with sufficient intensity, art—and especially personified "Art"—has the power to eclipse reality.

The painter begins work on the portrait—and the physical and psychological state of his wife immediately begins to decline, her health and spirits "withered" by the process. The painter, however, fails to see this—he's too engrossed in his art, and pays almost no attention to his wife. She, for her part, does not complain. As the painting nears its completion and becomes ever more lifelike, the girl declines further, almost as if her vital energies are being drawn out of her and into the canvas. Just as her image reaches a height of perfection, the painter finally deigns to look up at his wife—only to discover that she has died.

Poe reveals the painter to be a kind of vampire. Though he does not conform to the stereotypical persona of a vampire in popular culture, he does seem to drain the vital energies of his wife in order to fuel his work—a metaphorical assessment, perhaps, of marriage as a detrimental institution for women. The wife is immortalized on the canvas, just as a vampire immortalizes his victims—but only at the price of her real life. The implicit characterization of the painter and a vampire, and his wife as the victim, highlights the danger of ignoring reality in favor of art, and of objectifying people's beauty at the cost of their independence and wellbeing.

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