The Oval Portrait
by Edgar Allan Poe, 1842

WORDS TO KNOW

château: a grand, stately home – especially one made in the style of a French castle: fortress, manor, mansion, palace
valet: a male servant who cares for his employer’s personal needs (such as laundry)
turret: a small tower – especially one attached to a castle or fortress
armorial trophies: items bearing a family’s coat of arms
arabesque: characteristic of Arab art or architecture, particularly by having an ornamental design of intertwined flowing lines: Moresque
incipient: beginning; becoming apparent
candelabrum: a candlestick with multiple branches allowing it to hold several candles (also spelled candelabra)
subdue: make less intense: control, repress
dissipate: break apart: disperse, scatter
vignette: 1. a picture where the image fades off gradually into the surrounding paper. 2. a short literary description of a brief incident or scene
filigreed: decorated with delicate, complex designs of twisted gold, silver, or copper wires

Moresque: characteristic of Moorish art or architecture, particularly by having complex and intricate decoration: arabesque
riveted: held firmly: fixed
austere: stern and cold in appearance or manner
in reveries: in a state of distracted meditation or fanciful visions:
dreaming
pined: yearned intensely and persistently, especially for something impossible to obtain
fervid: blazingly hot: fiery
wrought: formed, molded, shaped, worked
in sooth: in truth; in reality
ardor: extreme energy or passion
sate: 1) an old spelling of “sat”, past tense of “sit” 2) to indulge past the point of being merely satisfied (it implies losing interest in something because of doing it too much)
tremulous: shaking due to fear or weakness: trembling
pallid: lacking color: pale
aghast: struck with amazement, terror, or horror

The château 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 Appennines\(^1\), not less in fact than in the fancy of Mrs. Radcliffe\(^2\). To all appearance it had been temporarily and very lately abandoned. We established ourselves in one of the smallest and least sumptuously furnished apartments. It lay in a remote turret of the building. Its decorations were rich, yet tattered and antique. 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. In these paintings, which depended from the walls not only in their main surfaces, but in very many nooks which the bizarre architecture of the château rendered necessary—in these paintings my incipient delirium, perhaps, had caused me to take deep interest; so that I bade Pedro to close the heavy shutters of the room—since it was already night—to light the tongues of a tall candelabrum which stood by the head of my bed—and to throw open far and wide the fringed curtains of black velvet which enveloped the bed itself. I wished all this done that I might resign myself, if not to sleep, at least alternately to the contemplation of these pictures, and the perusal of a small volume which had been found upon the pillow, and which purported to criticize and describe them.

Long—long I read—and devoutly, devotedly I gazed. Rapidly and gloriously the hours flew by and the deep midnight came. The position of the candelabrum displeased me, and outreaching my hand with difficulty, rather than disturb my slumbering valet, I placed it where it stood by my head of the bed—and to throw open far and wide the fringed curtains of black velvet which enveloped the bed itself. I wished all this done that I might resign myself, if not to sleep, at least alternately to the contemplation of these pictures, and the perusal of a small volume which had been found upon the pillow, and which purported to criticize and describe them.

But the action produced an effect altogether unanticipated. The rays of the numerous candles (for there were many) now fell within a niche of the room which had hitherto been thrown into deep shade by one of the bed-posts. I thus saw in vivid light a picture all unnoticed before. It was the portrait of a young girl just ripening into womanhood. I glanced at the painting hurriedly, and then closed my eyes. Why I did this was not at first apparent even to my own perception. But while my lids remained thus shut, I ran over in my mind my reason for so shutting them. It was an impulsive movement to gain time for thought—to make sure that my vision had not deceived me—to calm and subdue my fancy for a more sober and more certain gaze. In a very few moments I again looked fixedly at the painting.

That I now saw aright I could not and would not doubt; for the first flashing of the candles upon that canvas had seemed to dissipate the dreamy stupor which was stealing over my senses, and to startle me at once into waking life.

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\(^3\). The arms, the bosom, and even the ends of the radiant hair melted imperceptibly into the vague yet deep shadow which formed the back-ground of the whole. The frame was oval, richly gilded and filigreed in Moresque\(^4\). As a thing of art nothing could be more admirable than the painting itself. But it could have been neither the execution of the work, nor the immortal beauty of the countenance, which had so suddenly and so vehemently moved me. Least of all, could it have been that my fancy, shaken from its half slumber, had mistaken the head for that of a living person. I saw at once that the peculiarities of the design, of the vignetting, and of the frame, must have instantly dispelled such idea—must have prevented even its momentary entertainment. Thinking earnestly upon these points, I remained, for an hour perhaps, half sitting, half reclining, with my vision riveted upon the portrait. At length, satisfied with the true secret of its effect, I fell back within the bed. I had found the spell of the picture in an absolute life-likeness of expression, which, at first startling, finally confounded, subdued, and appalled me. With deep and reverent awe I replaced the candelabrum in its former position. The cause of my deep agitation being thus shut from view, I sought
eagerly the volume which discussed the paintings and their histories. Turning to the number which designated the oval portrait, I there read the vague and quaint words which follow:

"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. But he, the painter, took glory in his work, which went on from hour to hour, and from day to day. And he was a passionate, and wild, and moody man, who became lost in reveries; so that he would not see that the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health and the spirits of his bride, who pined visibly to all but him. Yet she smiled on and still on, uncomplainingly, because she saw that the painter (who had high renown) took a fervid and burning pleasure in his task, and wrought day and night to depict her who so loved him, yet who grew daily more dispirited and weak. And in sooth some who beheld the portrait spoke of its resemblance in low words, as of a mighty marvel, and a proof not less of the power of the painter than of his deep love for her whom he depicted so surpassingly well. But at length, as the labor drew nearer to its conclusion, there were admitted none into the turret; for the painter had grown wild with the ardor of his work, and turned his eyes from canvas merely, 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 sate beside him. And when many weeks had passed, and but little remained to do, save one brush upon the mouth and one tint upon the eye, the spirit of the lady again flickered up as the flame within the socket of the lamp. 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!

1. The Appennines (now spelled "Apennines") are a mountain system which runs the entire length of the Italian peninsula.
2. Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823) was a distinguished writer of Gothic romances employing vivid description, startling events and horrors.
3. Thomas Sully (1783-1872) was a well-known painter of portraits. It is thought by some that he painted certain portraits of John and Frances Allan, Poe's foster parents.
4. The Moors were people of Arabic and Berber descent who lived in northwest Africa. In the 8th century, they were converted to Islam, then conquered the southern half of Spain. Moresque art and architecture is known for its complex and intricate design, including high arches.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. What Gothic elements are found in this story?
2. Is the testament of the narrator of this story trustworthy? Why or why not?
3. What kind of relationship was there between the artist and his wife? … between the artist and his art?
4. What natural explanation could there be for the bewitching nature of the portrait? What supernatural explanation might there be? Which do you prefer?
5. Who could be the author of the painting’s description? (Hint: Consider who comes off looking better, the artist or his wife? Whose feelings and inner thoughts are revealed?)
6. Why do you think such a vivid painting is hidden in a dark corner? What might have happened in the château right before the travelers arrived?
7. What is the effect of using the traveler’s intrusion into the château as the context for reading about this painting? How is the story itself like a vignette painting with an ornate frame?
8. It is often argued either that “art imitates life” or that “life imitates art.” How are each of these ideas applied, in a natural and potentially supernatural sense, in this tale?
9. Paradoxically, the artist’s passionate, obsessive act of creation causes an almost vampiric destruction, sucking the life out of the original the more that it is completed. In what ways can the action of creation be destructive or vampiric? How can obsessions or addictions likewise be vampiric or destructive?

IDEAS TO KNOW

A doppelgänger [evil twin, look-alike, wraith], which comes from the German “Doppelgänger” (meaning “double-goer”), is the double or ghostly counterpart of a living person. To meet your doppelganger (or to have a vision of him/her) was considered a bad omen, often indicating that you would soon die. A variety of related beliefs about evil doubles are found in cultures around the world. A voodoo doll is an “image” of the person whom, supposedly, can be used to control them. People’s images in mirrors were thought in some cultures to reflect their souls, not merely the light reflecting off their bodies. Hence, breaking a mirror was seven years bad luck and photographs (being an exact, mirror image of the self) could steal your soul. One legend is that if you ever meet your doppelganger (in person) or see your double (in a mirror, photograph, or painting), your soul could become confused about where it belonged and jump into the identical image. Another related concept is that everyone has an evil twin somewhere in the world. A science fiction take on this theme is that a time traveler must absolutely never meet the past or future version of himself or herself.

Metempsychosis [reincarnation, transmigration of the soul] is the belief that, after death, the soul is transferred from one body into some other human or animal body.