

Edgar Allan Poe

The Oval Portrait

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 Appennines**, not less in fact than in the fancy of Mrs. Radcliffe. 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 chateau 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 criticise 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 so as to **throw its rays more fully upon the book**.

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. 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**. **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 **sat** 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!