

~ The Oval Portrait ~

Edgar Allan Poe *The Complete Tales (1842) ~ slightly abridged~*

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, had been lately abandoned. It was one of those piles of commingled gloom and grandeur which have so long frowned among the Apennines. We established ourselves in one of the smallest and least sumptuously furnished apartments in a remote turret of the building. Its walls were hung with tapestry and bedecked with armorial trophies, together with an unusual number of very spirited modern paintings in frames of rich golden arabesque. 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 criticized and described 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, outstretching my hand with difficulty, rather than disturb my slumbering valet, I placed it so as to throw its ray more fully upon the book.

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 bedposts. 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. In a very few moments I again looked fixedly at the paintings. Could it have been that my fancy, shaken from its half slumber, had mistaken the head for that of a living person ?

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. The arms, the bosom and even the ends of the radiant hair, melted imperceptibly into the vague yet deep shadow which formed the background of the whole. 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. 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 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 : all light and smiles, and frolicsome as the young fawn : loving and cheering all things : hating only the Art which was her rival : dreading only the pallet and brushes and other 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. 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.

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 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. 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 ! "