

The Story of the Oval Portrait

by Edgar Allan Poe *from The Oval Portrait*

Edgar Allan Poe's 1842 short story The Oval Portrait presents a story within a story. The narrator has been hurt. He and his servant find shelter in an abandoned mansion for the night. The narrator is resting in one of the bedrooms which is filled with paintings. One of the paintings is the portrait of a beautiful young woman who seems almost to be alive. After studying the portrait for a good while, the narrator reads about it in a book he has found about the paintings.

“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. 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. 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. 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!”

Questions

1. Why do you think the painter did not notice his wife's declining health?
2. What do you think "the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sat beside him" means?
3. What do you think the word *entranced* means based on the context "the painter stood entranced before the work"?
4. What is an example of a metaphor or simile in the passage?

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. austere
2. frolicsome
3. reveries
4. turret
5. fervid
6. wrought
7. ardor
8. countenance
9. tremulous
10. aghast

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) "He, passionate, studious, **austere**"

- a. foreign b. boisterous; talkative c. withdrawn d. stern or restrained

2) "all light and smiles, and **frolicsome** as the young fawn"

- a. timid or shy b. gentle; calm c. young, baby-like d. playful; frisky

3) "he was a passionate, and wild, and moody man, who became lost in **reveries**"

- a. daydreams or thoughts b. music c. details; particulars d. madness; insanity

4) "light which fell so ghastly in that lone **turret**"

- a. room or chamber b. artist's gallery c. tower d. tunnel or cave

5) "the painter (who had high renown) took a **fervid** and burning pleasure in his task"

- a. casual; indifferent b. enthusiastic; intense c. joyful or happy d. evil

6) "**wrought** day and night to depict her who so loved him"

- a. avoided or dodged b. planned; intended to c. worked; labored d. wept or cried

7) "the painter had grown wild with the **ardor** of his work"

- a. fire or devotion b. frustration c. monotony; dullness d. difficulty; effort

8) "even to regard the **countenance** of his wife"

- a. plea or appeal b. appearance; facial features c. well-being; health d. wants or needs

9) "he grew **tremulous** and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice"

- a. strong; powerful b. indifferent or uncaring c. quiet or still d. trembling; shaky

10) "he grew tremulous and very pallid, and **aghast**, and crying with a loud voice"

- a. ghoulis;h; demonic b. breathless; gasping c. exhausted or tired d. horrified or shocked