

**THE PORTRAIT AS AN OBJECT OF IMAGE IN THE SHORT STORY  
“THE OVAL PORTRAIT” BY E.A. POE**

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*The article is devoted to the phenomenon of portrait, its manifestation in literary works of romanticism and its functions and peculiarities in the short story “The Oval Portrait” by E. A. Poe*

The word portrait itself refers to the Old French word «*pourtrait*» that means “to depict in an accurate way”. It also refers to the Latin verb «*protrahere*» i.e “to show”, “to portray”, “to take out”, “to picture”. In painting, from which the term originates, the portrait is depiction of a definite person or a group of people, which reflects and reproduces individuality, reveals their character and inner world. According to M. Andronnikova, “the portrait is not just a picture of a person’s face and figure, but reflection of the whole world through individuality, changed by art” [1, p. 397–398].

The same opinion Y. Lotman defends in his book “Articles on semiotics of art culture and art”. He writes that the portrait is not mechanical displaying of a person, it even anticipates photography. The portrait is regardless of time and space, it is able to save eternal youth. It always hesitates between artistic duality and mystical reflection of reality. The portrait perfectly suits for embodiment of the very human nature. It usually has many senses and interpretations. The portrait represents a dual mirror – it reflects life in art and vice versa. At the same time not only reflection can switch, but also types of reality. Thus, it is possible to maintain that the aura of mysticism, peculiar for the genre of portrait has its grounds [5, p. 349–371].

In different periods of history the interest in the portrait has been constantly growing and its functions have been changing. Since the second half of the eighteenth century, when gothic fiction arises, the image of the portrait, that influences man’s fate, becomes more wide-spread. In romanticism and pre-romanticism, when all fantastic and unusual things become objects for depiction, such careful attention, directed towards this powerful symbol, is understandable. Portraits are often depicted grotesquely. There is this motive in British gothic works by Ch. Maturin (“Melmoth the Wanderer”), A. Radcliffe (“The Mysteries of Udolpho”), in short stories by E. W. Hoffmann, in the short story “The Unknown Masterpiece” by H. de Balzac, in short stories by American romantics, e.g. W. Irving, N. Hawthorne, E. A. Poe, etc. [2, p. 173; 3, p. 13].

In the short story “The Oval Portrait” by E. A. Poe, one of the most significant authors of American romanticism, the portrait is the main means of rendering the author’s central idea. To better understand the short story it is necessary to refer to Poe’s critical articles (the article “The Poetic Principle” in particular), in which E. A. Poe states his conception of the Beautiful. “An immortal instinct deep within the spirit of man is thus plainly a sense of the beautiful. We have still a thirst unquenchable, to allay which he has not shown us the crystal springs. This thirst belongs to the immortality of Man. It is at once a consequence and an indication of his perennial existence. It is the desire of the moth for the star. It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us, but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above. Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements perhaps appertain to eternity alone. And thus when by Poetry, or when by Music, the most entrancing of the poetic moods, we find ourselves melted into tears, we weep then, not as the Abbate Gravina supposes, through excess of pleasure, but through a certain petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp *now* wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys of which through the poem, or through the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses. The struggle to apprehend the supernal Loveliness – this struggle, on the part of souls fittingly constituted – has given to the world all that which it (the world) has ever been enabled at once to understand and *to feel* as poetic” [6, p. 30–31]. Consequently, art helps us to reach out to something divine. It is the delight that the narrator feels when he watches the picture: “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” [7, p. 188].

Here blending of art and life occurs, that is typical for the portrait. The colourful ecphrasis, rich in vivid epithets, proves terrifying vivacity and freshness of the picture of the young woman: “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 *vi-gnette* 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". This portrait is embodiment of the Beautiful, which is treasured by E. A. Poe. The last line of the prescription of the picture truly justifies this thought: "As a thing of art *nothing could be more admirable than the painting itself*" [7, p. 188].

The sad story of the portrait, following this introduction, is in the spirit of E. A. Poe. As the author writes in his "Philosophy of Composition" that the most tragical thing in the world is a young woman's death: "Now, never losing sight of the object supremeliess, or perfection, at all points, I asked myself' Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy? "Death" – was the obvious reply. "And when," I said "is the most melancholy of topics most poetical?" From what I have already explained at some length, the answer, here, also, is obvious – "When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world..." The artist is so absorbed in creating the masterpiece, that he doesn't notice her wife dying: "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". The final episode of the short story declares that art is more powerful than death. Art is higher than life, because art is life itself. But unlike life on earth, that is short and fades away so fast, art is eternal. The young woman's portrait saves her youth forever. Simple beauty comes and goes. The woman's earthly beauty turned into sheer divine beauty [6, c. 12; 7, c. 189].

It should be mentioned that in the first edition the short story was titled "Life in Death"; in the second edition it was named "The Oval Portrait". In the final version of the short story E. A. Poe removed the artist's exclamation "Is it death!" in the last passage. This fact also proves aforementioned statements about the author's standpoint [3, c. 14].

In E. A. Poe's critical articles the writer anticipates the "art for art" conception and ideas of aesthetism. It is possible to find some coincidence between E. A. Poe's "The Oval Portrait" and O. Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Grey", where the portrait also fulfils its essential mystical function.

Thus, the portrait plays a significant part in the literature of the nineteenth century and serves both for uncovering the plot of the story and for conveying the author's main idea. E. A. Poe used this gothic element in the short story "The Oval Portrait", which main theme is struggle between art and life, so common for romantics. E. A. Poe implies that art is almighty, it is capable to fight death off and it is more majestic than life. Frightening completion of the story turns out not so sad, because Absolute Beauty wins in the end.

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