

Intermediate



B2 (Vantage)

R A I N B O W S

The Oval Portrait and Other Stories

Edgar Allan Poe



edisco



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Edgar Allan Poe

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Adaptation, dossiers and activities
by Annabel Pope



edisco

The Oval Portrait and Other Stories

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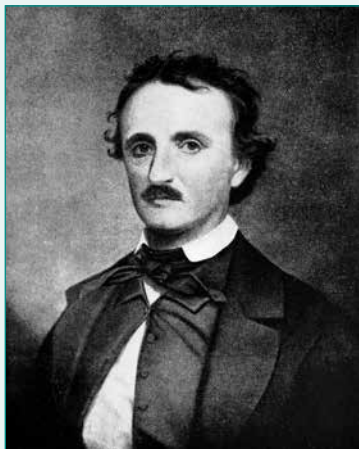
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The Author

Edgar Allan Poe



Edgar Allan Poe was born on 19th January 1809 in Boston, U.S.A., the son of travelling actors, David Poe Jr. and Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins. He had a brother, Henry, and a sister, Rosalie. His father abandoned the family when the children were very young; when Edgar was only three, his mother died of tuberculosis, becoming the first in a long list of Poe's loved ones who were to come to this tragic end. 'Allan' was only added to his

name after the orphaned children were separated and Poe was sent to live with a wealthy tobacco merchant and his wife, John and Francis Allan, in Richmond, Virginia. He grew up as a young gentleman, and spent five years in England and Europe with his new family.

However, as he grew up, it became clear that he was not interested in going into his foster father's business and tensions built up between them, because Allan did not approve of Edgar's love of poetry and writing. Consequently, he provided little money and Poe got into heavy debt from gambling² while at university.

In 1827, Edgar left home to seek adventure and a life in poetry, making Allan very angry. He began well by getting his first book of poetry, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, published in the same year, when he was just eighteen.

He went on to write a vast number of poems, essays, short stories, textbooks, reviews, a novel and became America's first great literary critic, as well as becoming a legend in his own right. He also wrote and edited articles for magazines and dreamed of owning his own. Poe began his literary career by winning a short story contest in the

1. *foster father*: a man who brings up a child as a father, in place of the natural or adoptive father.

2. *gambling*: playing games (e.g. cards) for money.

‘Saturday Visitor’ in Baltimore, and slowly rose to fame as one of the best literary critics in the country. All this, unfortunately, never brought him financial success, and he fought poverty all his life.

He looked for adventure by joining the army. While he was away, his foster-mother, Francis, died of TB, so he never saw her again. He then left the army to go to the military academy at West Point, perhaps hoping to please John Allan, but Edgar was sent away from the Academy. When Allan died in 1834, he left nothing at all to his foster son. He was totally disappointed in the boy he had brought up.

In 1831, Poe went to live with his aunt, Maria Clemm and her seven- year-old daughter, Virginia, in Baltimore. With time, his affection turned into love for Virginia as she grew into adolescence. They were married when she was not quite fourteen and Edgar was 27, but they appeared to deeply love each other. It was a happy household³, but money was always very short so they moved several times until finally they settled in a cottage outside New York. Virginia, however, tragically followed the other women whom Poe had loved. In 1842, she contracted TB and in 1847, she died at the age of only 24, leaving him totally devastated.

Poe never recovered from this although he continued to write, especially his fearless reviews of other writers’ work which soon made him many enemies in the literary world. He found life very difficult after a string of tragedies and he admitted to having had periods of drink and drugs, but there is no proof of any serious addiction.

During his literary career, he met and was admired by such names as Charles Baudelaire, the French poet, Charles Dickens, the English novelist, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the English poetess. He also interviewed Nathaniel Hawthorne, whom he considered to be the greatest American writer of tales and short stories.

His early death was like one of his own mystery stories and remains unsolved to this day. His old enemy, the critic Rufus Wilmot Griswold, wasted no time in writing a libelous⁴ obituary⁵, followed by a similar biography, turning him into the legendary figure he is still known as today.

3. *household*: house and family who live in it as one unit.

4. *libelous*: containing a false statement that is damaging to a person’s reputation.

5. *obituary*: a report, especially in a newspaper, which gives the news of someone’s death and details about their life.

The perfect mystery

As well as his chilling¹ tales, Edgar Allan Poe left us a real-life mystery – his death. What happened? What do we know?

At the end of September 1849, two years after the death of his beloved Virginia, Poe was gradually recovering from the devastation of her loss. He went to Richmond, where he had become engaged to his old fiancée, Elmira Shelton, then a widow. He left her home to travel to Philadelphia to edit a volume of poetry by Mrs. Marguerite St. Leon Loud. There is a letter to show that she was expecting him.

For some unknown reason, he stopped off in Baltimore, where he went missing for five days. This was unusual behavior for him as he always kept in touch with his aunt, Maria Clemm. She knew nothing about his death until she read about it in the newspapers.

There is no record whatsoever of what he did in that time and he was seen by no one. On October 3rd, the editor of a magazine Poe had worked for, Joseph Snodgrass, received this note from a man who had found Poe semi-conscious in a poor area of town.

To Dr. J.E. Snodgrass

Baltimore City, Oct. 3, 1849

Dear Sir,

There is a gentleman, rather the worse for wear³, at Ryan's 4th ward polls, who goes under the cognomen of Edgar A. Poe, and who appears in great distress, & he says he is acquainted with you, he is in need of immediate assistance.

Yours in haste,

W. Walker

Dr. Snodgrass discovered him, half-delirious, in the room of a public house which at the time was being used as a polling station³ for municipal elections. He immediately sent Poe to Washington university hospital where he died on October 7th.

There was never any official death certificate issued and the cause of death was simply cited as “congestion of the brain”. There was no autopsy and two days later he was buried in an unmarked⁴ grave

1. *chilling*: frightening.

2. *the worse for wear*: tired or in poor condition due to a lot of work or use.

3. *polling station*: a place where people vote in an election.

4. *unmarked*: having no sign or marks showing what something is.

in Baltimore's Westminster Burying Grounds, where years later a monument was erected to him. There were only seven people at his funeral. His solitary character and unique intelligence did not make him very likeable and he had few friends.

His death quickly became a mystery for several reasons; Dr Snodgrass found Poe dressed in old, cheap clothes, quite unlike his normal way of dressing. He only regained consciousness very briefly but was unable to talk clearly. He then became delirious.

Oddly, Dr. Moran, who attended him, changed his story several times, but said that at one point, Poe suddenly called out, "Reynolds"; no link to that name has been found. The same doctor also wrote that he showed no signs of alcohol abuse.

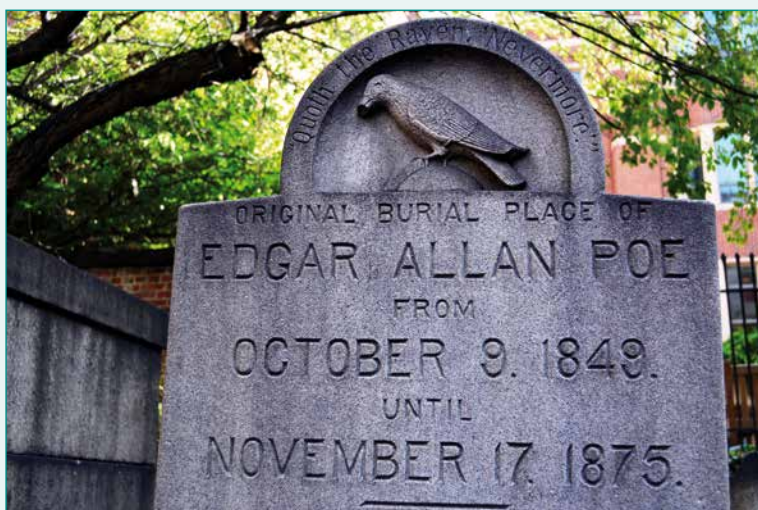
In the early hours of October 7th, he supposedly quietly breathed the words, "Lord, help my poor soul..." and died. He was 40 years old.

Had he been drinking? Had he taken an overdose of drugs? Had he been beaten up? Was he a victim of 'cooping'? On election days victims were sometimes drugged, their clothes changed to hide their identity and forced to vote in different places. They were then left for dead. No evidence has ever been found of what actually happened.

Rufus Griswold, Poe's old rival, lost no time in writing his infamous obituary, which he began with the following words:

"Edgar Allen Poe is dead. He died in Baltimore on Sunday, October 7th. The announcement will startle many, but few will be grieved by it."

Poe, a complicated man often misunderstood, left the world with a perfect mystery, worthy of his perfect tales.





BEFORE READING

- 1 Which of the following emotions do you anticipate experiencing while you are reading *The Oval Portrait*? Tick the relevant boxes and write the corresponding adjectives next to the nouns.

fear	<input type="checkbox"/>	happiness	<input type="checkbox"/>
joy	<input type="checkbox"/>	desperation	<input type="checkbox"/>
compassion	<input type="checkbox"/>	sadness	<input type="checkbox"/>
terror	<input type="checkbox"/>	pity	<input type="checkbox"/>
enthusiasm	<input type="checkbox"/>	surprise	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 2 Portraits have the power to connect us with other humans through the face. Whose face do you expect the portrait of this story to be of? Underline the one you expect from the suggestions given below.

Poe himself • his wife • a well-known person in Poe's time • a child • a beautiful woman • a saint or martyr • an unknown man or woman

- 3 What kind of place do you imagine this oval portrait to be in? Put a tick (✓) in the box by the answer you think is most likely.

- ☐ The bedroom of an abandoned mansion
- ☐ The library in an ancient castle
- ☐ An art gallery in a famous city
- ☐ In a remote derelict house on the moors
- ☐ In the captain's cabin of a transatlantic ship
- ☐ In the suitcase of a commercial traveler living in a rented room



"The great, gloomy chateau high on the Apennines..."

The Oval Portrait and...

The Oval Portrait

BEFORE READING

Story 1

*“Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development,
invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears.”*

(Philosophy of Composition)

The great, gloomy chateau high on the Apennines looked down at us disapprovingly, as my valet, Pedro, forced open the old door, desperate to find shelter for the night for me. I urgently needed to rest, I was so weak and sick from my wounds.

He helped me, with considerable difficulty, through the abandoned rooms until we finally discovered a suitable, smallish apartment in a remote tower, furnished not only with rich, decaying old tapestries¹ and armory², but also a multitude of paintings which seemed to observe us from every niche³ in the walls, of which there were several, due to the rather odd⁴ architecture of the place.

These immediately attracted my attention in my half-delirious state, so I asked Pedro to close the heavy shutters as night was falling fast and to light a candelabrum⁵ near the bed, so that I could contemplate the pictures while I was resting. He drew back the thick, black curtains which hung around the bed for me. I found a small book on the pillow which proved to be the history of all the paintings in the room.

I settled down⁶ to read and pass this strange night as I knew sleep would not come easily. Pedro, on the other hand, went out like a light⁷. I read and rested quietly until midnight, but then, not wanting to wake him, I changed the position of the candles to see the book more clearly. As I did so, the flames illuminated a picture

1. *tapestry*: a piece of cloth with pictures made by embroidering and used as a wall hanging.

2. *armory*: weapons and military equipment.

3. *niche*: a hollow recess in a wall, often used for statues.

4. *odd*: strange, unusual.

5. *candelabrum*: an ornate candleholder with arms.

6. *settled down*: made himself comfortable.

7. *went out like a light*: fell asleep very suddenly.

which had previously been hidden in the dark shadows. My eyes focused upon it for a second and I closed them at once. I do not know why I did this and I asked myself at the time why I had done so. It gave me a moment to think of what I had seen in the picture and to assure myself that I *had* actually seen it.

I opened my eyes and looked upon the picture once again, this time prepared for a long, more studious gaze⁸. The face of the young woman shocked me out of my sleepy dreams and I was suddenly wide awake.

It was a beautiful work of art and portrayed a stunning⁹ young woman. Her head and shoulders seemed to emerge from and yet at the same time blend into the shadows of the painting, which was a little in the style of Sully, the portrait painter. Her picture was framed with an oval gold filigree¹⁰, Moorish-style frame. Had I imagined that overwhelming¹¹ and instinctive sensation of her being alive? Possibly, I had been already half asleep and so I had thought for a second that she was real. I contemplated her for a long time, perhaps as long as an hour, until suddenly I found I could not look at her any longer. The absolute lifelike quality which had first fascinated me, now suddenly confused, frightened and even sickened me, and I moved the candle, almost in reverence to her and she fell into the shadows once more.

Relieved¹² that I could see her no more, I eagerly searched the book for the description of the portrait and began to read avidly¹³ when I found it. These were the singular and shadowy words which I found.

“She was a radiant young girl whose exceptional beauty was quite out of the ordinary. Happy and full of the joys of life, like a young fawn¹⁴, her dark fate was sealed when she fell in love with and married the artist, a passionate, serious and austere man, totally dedicated to his art. Her only enemy in the world was his Art, whose brushes and pallet¹⁵ took her lover’s time from her, so

8. *gaze*: a long, observant look.

9. *stunning*: extremely attractive.

10. *filigree*: ornamental work of fine gold or silver wire.

11. *overwhelming*: difficult to fight against.

12. *relieved*: no longer anxious.

13. *avidly*: with great interest.

14. *fawn*: a young deer in its first year.

15. *pallet*: the thin board used by an artist for mixing his paints.



Anonymous woman's miniature portrait
(author unknown, early 1900s, Cambi Auction House)

when he asked her to allow him to fulfill his desire to paint her portrait and capture her beauty for ever on canvas, her heart sank and she felt strangely cold. She was, however, both obedient and humble, only wanting to please him, so she agreed reluctantly.

Therefore, she sat for him for many long weeks in a high dark tower, with only one upper window, through which a single shaft¹⁶ of light lit up her face so that he could paint her in the perfect light for his Art.

He was wild and lost to the world as he painted, his only thought was to complete a perfect likeness of his beautiful young wife to be captured for eternity.

Immersed in the depths of his art, he did not see her begin to fade as the hours, days and weeks went by. He did not see the color slowly leave her cheeks as he painted them brightly on his canvas. She smiled on, never complaining, even as her once joyful spirit and happiness sank silently within her, for¹⁷ she could see that he gained such intense pleasure and satisfaction from his work; and still *he* did not see.

He worked on blindly to produce a masterpiece for this young woman who loved him so deeply. Some said that it was his great love for her which produced such a lifelike and wonderful portrait and saw it as a marvel of Art and proof of his talent.

All the time she sat, quietly smiling, impassive in the cold tower, her growing weakness unseen by anyone, for as the painting neared completion, no one was allowed into the room. It was the artist's kingdom and his inspiration was sacred. He wanted to see nothing but the face that he was bringing alive on his canvas, so that he no longer saw his beautiful bride in reality.

At last the day finally came, after many weeks had gone by, when only two strokes of the brush were needed to complete this passionate painting, to honor the love of his life and his Art.

His brush moved skillfully and quickly. A last touch of color to the cheeks, a final touch to the eye... his lady's spirit flickered¹⁸ like the flame of a candle for a second... it was done! He stood

16. *shaft*: a ray.

17. *for*: (here) because.

18. *flickered*: went on and off with quick movements.

The Oval Portrait

back to admire his work at last; but as he gazed lovingly upon the extraordinary beauty which he had transmitted to the portrait, something awoke him from the trance which had taken him over for the past weeks. He grew pale as death as, shaking uncontrollably, he cried in horror, "This is life itself!" and turned suddenly to look at his beloved bride. She was dead!



WORKING ON THE TEXT

- 1 From your reading of the text, say if the following statements are true or false. Tick the relevant box.

	T	F
a. The door to the chateau was locked.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Pedro was badly injured.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Paintings were hung all over the walls in the apartment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. It was the middle of the night when they got there.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. The room had dark curtains at the window.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. The picture was illuminated when the candles were lit.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g. The narrator observed it for a long time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h. The artist did not see beyond his wife's smile.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. He realized she was dead as he put the last two strokes of his brush on the painting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 2 Complete these sentences with information from the text.

- a. Pedro broke open the door because
- b. Before the light was moved, the picture was
- c. When the narrator's eyes focused on the picture, he
- d. He was first attracted by the picture but then
- e. The young girl unwillingly allowed her husband to
- f. He wanted her beauty to be
- g. Some people thought the painting was
- h. His last brushstrokes were a

- 3 Find at least five words or phrases in the text which help to create a 'Gothic' atmosphere in the story. There is one example given.

.... *gloomy*

WORKING ON VOCABULARY

- 4 These anagrams are all adjectives from the story. Write them in the space provided.

esrtaeu	oylomg
fkleilie	rsalungi
spiemsiea	etrmeo
lhebun	ditboene

WORKING ON GRAMMAR

- 5 **FCE** Use of English. Fill in the blanks with the missing word. The first is done for you.

"She was a strikingly beautiful young woman full of ⁽¹⁾ ...**the**... joys of life like ⁽²⁾..... young fawn, ⁽³⁾..... dismal fate was sealed when she fell in love ⁽⁴⁾..... and married the artist, a passionate, serious and austere man, totally dedicated ⁽⁵⁾..... his art. She had no enemies in the world ⁽⁶⁾..... his Art, whose brushes and pallet took her lover ⁽⁷⁾..... her, but being obedient and humble, ⁽⁸⁾..... agreed reluctantly to fulfill his desire to paint ⁽⁹⁾..... portrait and capture her beauty for ever ⁽¹⁰⁾..... canvas.

So she sat for him in a high dark tower, with ⁽¹¹⁾..... one upper window, through which a single shaft of light lit ⁽¹²⁾..... her face so that he could paint her in a perfect light for his Art. He ⁽¹³⁾..... wild and lost to the world ⁽¹⁴⁾..... he painted, set only upon completing a perfect likeness of his beautiful wife to be captured ⁽¹⁵⁾..... eternity.

WORKING ON SKILLS

Listening



Listen to the narrator's thoughts as he closes his eyes after first seeing the portrait and fill in the blanks.

"Am I dreaming or ⁽¹⁾..... from the fever? Was it a vision from ⁽²⁾..... I have just seen the most exquisite, ⁽³⁾..... woman. Is she here, in this cold, ⁽⁴⁾..... room staring at me through what appears to be the ⁽⁵⁾..... of a portrait? Who is she? Is she an angel or maybe a ⁽⁶⁾.....? What does she want? I want to talk to her, to be near her; her beauty is ⁽⁷⁾..... Why did I shut my eyes? Will she still be there when I open them? I want to remember her ⁽⁸⁾....., just as I saw her the first time. I feel almost afraid to open my eyes, in case she is no longer there and was merely a ⁽⁹⁾..... of my imagination, but her expression was real, her ⁽¹⁰⁾..... were like the finest pink ⁽¹¹⁾..... in June. Why have I suddenly grown cold and a ⁽¹²⁾..... has run down my spine? I am ⁽¹³⁾..... but I must somehow find the ⁽¹⁴⁾..... to look ⁽¹⁵⁾..... her again."

Writing

- 7 Poe said that the opening sentence of a good short story must be striking and make an immediate impact on the reader. Write the first paragraph of a story about a mysterious portrait, setting the scene and capturing the attention of your reader.

Speaking

- 8 The National Portrait Gallery in London has thousands of visitors every year. Do you agree that painted faces still hold a fascination and mystery for us which goes beyond the realism of photographic portraits? Discuss this with your friends.



"... the flames illuminated a picture which had previously been hidden in the dark shadows."

PORTRAIT PAINTING

Strangely enough, in our modern world of analog selfies and Instagram, more people than ever are actually painting portraits, many of them returning to traditional techniques to portray contemporary faces.

In *The Oval Portrait*, Poe says that the portrait on the wall was ‘in the style of Sully’. Thomas Sully was one of the most successful portrait painters in America in the 19th century. He emigrated from England with his family when he was 10 and learned to paint with his brother-in-law, a French miniaturist¹ painter. He was especially well-known for his rather exaggerated, elegant and idealized portraits of fashionable women. His technique was flawless², refined and decorative and his sitters were often in rather self-conscious positions, which meant that his portraits were totally aesthetic, beauty in Art, giving no insight³ into the character of the person portrayed. This is why perhaps Poe chose to give the reader the idea of such a portrait: extraordinary beauty captured on canvas, focusing only on the Art form, cancelling out the woman herself. It is an instrument to put across his ideas on Art.

Portraits have been around since the ancient Egyptians. Their history has continued since then, with the court painters such as Diego Velasquez or Hans Holbein the Younger and their portraits of kings and queens, to the Renaissance artists such as Jan Vermeer or Georges de La Tour, who began to paint ordinary people leading quiet lives.

In those days, artists were limited to a few very skilled individuals, but by the 19th century,



Thomas Sully



J. Vermeer; *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, c. 1665

1. *miniaturist*: a person who paints very small portraits.
2. *flawless*: perfect, with no fault.
3. *insight*: clear perception and understanding.

after the Industrial Revolution and with the arrival of the Age of Reason, canvas and paint could be easily obtained, so portraiture flourished, with names such as Thomas Lawrence, William Hogarth, Thomas Gainsborough, Francisco Goya and Thomas Sully himself becoming known throughout society.

With the arrival of social realism, Gustave Courbet and Honoré Daumier began to paint the poor and use portraits as political statements. Impressionism brought experimental portrait painting in the work of Vincent Van Gogh or Paul Gauguin for example, followed by the post impressionist exploration of the mind behind the face as in Henri Matisse or Edvard Munch and Pablo Picasso.



G. Courbet, *The Desperate Man*, (self-portrait), 1843-1845

The popularity of portraits suddenly fell for a long time, until Andy Warhol brought the art back to life in the 60's, and now it is up and coming and attracting an increasing number of both artists themselves and Art lovers. The BP Portrait Award is a prestigious⁴, international portrait painting competition held annually by the National Portrait gallery in London with great success.

The painted face and the idea of preserving someone's image beyond their lifetime, still holds a fascination for us. Portraits continue to hold an aura of mystery and the enduring⁵ power of faces taken from life and transformed into Art, makes *The Oval Portrait* a compelling⁶ tale.



V. Van Gogh, *The Gardener*, 1889



A. Warhol, *Ingrid Bergman*, 1983

- 4. *prestigious*: important, influential.
- 5. *enduring*: lasting for a long time.
- 6. *compelling*: interesting and exciting and holds your attention.



The Oval Portrait and Other Stories

Five short-stories by Edgar Allan Poe: The Oval Portrait (the story of an artist who wants to make a painting of his young wife, but becomes so obsessed with it that he doesn't realize his wife is dying meanwhile), Berenice (a horror story in which the protagonist is unable to stop thinking about his cousin-wife's beautiful teeth), The Premature Burial (a sequence of different episodes where people are buried alive by mistake), The Cask of Amontillado (a tale of terror in which a man takes his cruel revenge during a Carnival in Italy), The Fall of the House of Usher (Usher's sister Madeline dies from a mysterious illness; she comes back from the grave and the visitor flees the house before it collapses.)

beginner

• A1 (Breakthrough)

elementary

• A2 (Waystage)

pre-intermediate

• B1 (Threshold)

✓ intermediate

• B2 (Vantage)

post-intermediate • C1 (Effectiveness)

Levels of accredited examination boards:

Cambridge English:	First (FCE)
Trinity:	Grade 7, 8 / ISE II
City & Guilds (Pitman):	Intermediate
ESB:	Intermediate 2, 3
Edexcel:	Intermediate



Teacher's Resources available on line:
Answer Key, Audioscripts, Summing-up Activities.