

Literature

Unit 1.2 The Oval Portrait (Short Stories)

Class 11 English Exercise

Edgar Allan Poe

Summary

The Oval Portrait is a short horror story by Edgar Allan Poe which deals with the theme of the relationship between art and life. The writer has presented this story with its dark setting and the mood of the narrator. This story begins with an injured narrator who takes shelter along with his servant in an abandoned mansion in the Apennines. They choose one of the rooms in the mansion. The narrator shows a keen interest in those strange paintings decorating the walls of a room.

At around midnight, he adjusts the candle in the room, closer to the books. The narrator immediately discovers a before unnoticed painting in an oval-shaped frame. It reveals the head and shoulders of a young girl. The narrator is quite attached to this painting because it seems very lively. Soon the narrator eagerly consults the book for an explanation of a picture. Then he discovered that the woman whose painting was made was the young bride of the artist who cared more about his work rather than anything else in the world including his wife too. On the other hand, the woman was the perfect wife in every respect except she was quite jealous of her husband's art. One day on demand of her artist husband, he starts painting of his wife. He was so much obsessed with capturing her beautifulness, that he rarely took his eyes off the canvas even to watch his wife. The wife remained humble and obedient and keep on giving the same pose for many weeks without a single word of complaint but her health becomes increasingly poor as the work continued. When the portrait is about to finish, the artist was excited and delighted with his perfect work. He then looks at his wife and found her dead.

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Central Theme

The central theme in “The Oval Portrait” presents the confusing relationship between art and life. This story has shown the destructive power or the addiction of art and love. Both art and love can lead anyone towards perfection whereas they can bring destructive results in anyone’s life too. Although the artist of this story has become successful through his artistic work, his wife became a victim. On the other hand, she lost her husband so extremely that she doesn’t reveal her pains and sufferings and lose her life. This story also suggests that a women’s beauty condensed her to death. The story has tried to reveal that excessive passion for something always gives bad results.

The Oval Portrait – Complete Exercise

Understanding the text

Answer the following questions.

a. Where did the narrator and his servant make forcible entrance?

Answer: The narrator and his servant made a forcible entrance in a desolate Chateau which was located in the Apennines of central Italy.

b. Which special picture did the narrator notice in the room?

Answer: The narrator noticed an oval-shaped picture of a young girl in the room.

c. Describe the portrait that the narrator saw in the room.

Answer: The portrait was in an oval-shaped frame. It revealed the head and shoulders of the young woman. The arms, the bosom, and even the ends of the radiant hair dissolved untraceably into the unclear yet deep shadow which formed the background of the whole.

d. What is the relationship between the portrait painter and its subject?

Answer: The relationship between the portrait painter and its subject is of Husband and wife.

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Reference to the context

a. What is the central theme of the story? Who is the woman depicted in the oval portrait?

Answer: The central theme of the story “The Oval Portrait” presents the confusing relationship between art and life. This story has shown the destructive power or the addiction of art and love. Both art and love can lead anyone towards perfection whereas they can bring destructive results in anyone’s life too. Although the artist of this story has become successful through his artistic work but his wife became a victim. She lost her husband so extremely that she doesn’t reveal her pains and sufferings and lose her life. This story also suggests that a women’s beauty collapsed her to death.

The woman depicted in the oval portrait is the wife of a passionate painter who has painted this oval portrait.

b. “The Oval Portrait” is a short horror story by Edgar Allan Poe involving the disturbing circumstances surrounding a portrait in a chateau. Elaborate.

Answer: This short story has presented a terrible and gloomy setting of a barren Chateau in one of the mountains range (Apennines) of central Italy. The Chateau in this story is completely deserted and very old fashioned. The Chateau itself drowned in darkness in a desolated place. The apartments inside Chateau were so unmanaged and dirty though it was richly decorated previously. The walls were full of tapestries and panting creating a gloomy atmosphere. The life-like portrait has been placed in one of the dark corners. The surrounding of the lifelike portrait is so disturbing due to the unmanaged condition everywhere. Thus it looked quite like a horror story.

c. “The Oval Portrait” suggests that the woman’s beauty condemns her to death. Discuss.

Answer: In the oval portrait, the writer has symbolized the danger of trying to capture and exert ownership over physical beauty. The framed portrait of the artist’s wife represents a kind of metaphorical imprisonment and focuses only on the young

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woman's outer beauty rather than her inner self. In this sense, a lady is present as an object since the story implies that the man (including her husband) viewed her as nothing but a beautiful sight to look at. Her actual real-life beauty and her personality were consequently lost forever in the process and only immortalized on the canvas.

d. Discuss the story as a frame narrative (a story within a story).

Answer: The frame narrative is a literary technique that reveals a story within a story told by the main or the supporting character. A character starts telling a story to other characters or he sits down to write a story, telling the details to the audience.

Here the story starts with an unnamed narrator and his entering in a Chateau with a different plot and setting. But once this place is lit with candles, a painting is revealed and the next story starts with the description of the oval portrait. In this way, the author switches to a new story within a story.

e. The story is told in a descriptive style, with plenty of imagery and symbolism. Which images and symbols do you find in the story?

Answer: The Oval Portrait contains distinct gothic elements penetrating the setting and the mood of the narrator. The dark and shadowy settings lead to confusion and leave a horror impression on the readers. It also contains the dark and the mysterious part full of a horror scene, fear, death, and gloom.

Symbols

1. Woman in the oval portrait = victim
2. Oval Portrait = immortality of art
3. Frame = general objectification
4. Painter = fanaticism
5. The dark gloominess of abandoned house = classic background of the gothic novel.

f. What does the expression "She was dead!" mean?

Answer: The expression "She was dead" means the shocking moment of the death of the painter's wife on the chair. The painter was quite obsessed with his painting that he forget about the surrounding and even his beautiful wife. Hence the obsession of artist towards painting took his wife life.

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Reference beyond the text

a. Do you think there is life in art?

Answer: “The Oval Portrait” is a frame story that centers on life and art. The outer story follows an unnamed narrator who spends a night in a chateau in the Apennines. While he was there, he admires the impressive paintings but was more obsessed with a portrait of a beautiful young woman which is enclosed in an oval frame. Then he explores the inner story where he found the tragic life of a beautiful girl whose husband was much obsessed with his art. He has disengaged himself from reality. For him, his canvas became more real than the reality itself which proves beneficial for his art but disastrous for his real life. So, in a literary sense, the artist creates life in the art and tries to find life within it but with a general view, art is just a creation that is created to display and has meaning related to different things.

b. As a thing of art nothing could be more admirable than the painting itself. Explain.

Answer: I totally agree with the above statement. Painting is really a very admirable form of art. The painters really work hard and spend much time to create quality paintings with meanings. A picture can paint a thousand words. The painting itself speaks in its literal manner. Here in this story, the oval portrait is one of the finest examples which has surprised the narrator. He feels completely puzzled to see that painting and start describing about it. True arts baffles all formulas and it's true that as a thing of art nothing could be more admirable than the painting itself.

c. A more intense look at the painting reveals the illusion. Have you noticed any such painting?

Answer: Yes, I have noticed such painting which reveals the illusion. A painting can't be judged at a single look. An artist spends days to make an art. Every objects in an art possess special meaning. The painting becomes more meaningful when it is watched by the viewer who is passionate about paintings. But, for those viewers like me who don't have an idea about paintings find illusion all the

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time. In my case, I watched a typical painting in a museum near my house for a long time but I didn't get meanings about it.

THE END

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