

Art as a Form of Immortality: A Study of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait"

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Abstract:

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait" offers a compelling exploration of the concept of immortality through art. So, the article discusses how art can serve as a means of achieving a form of eternal existence. It concentrates on the ability of art to transcend the limits of physical existence and obtain a form of immortality to its identity. An analysis of "The Oval Portrait" is presented in the light of the controversial relation between art and death. The article illuminates the ambiguities of art in its relationship with the contradictory concepts of life and death in the artwork. The creativity of art leads, at its completion, into a condition of life after death. This article summarizes Poe's feeling of yearning to maternal and romantic love in his own life. The analysis highlights the artist's skill in transforming the lady into a symbol of enduring beauty and a living spirit, and ultimately achieving immortality through art.

Keywords: Art, immortality, Edgar Allan Poe, The Oval Portrait.

الفن كصيغة من صيغ الخلود: دراسة لقصة "اللوحة البيضاوية"

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الملخص:

قصة إدكار ألان بو "اللوحة البيضاوية" هي طريقة مثالية لفهم موضوع الخلود من خلال الفن. ولهذا يناقش البحث كيفية عمل الفن كأداة للخلود. ويركز البحث على قدرة الفن على عبور حدود الوجود الفيزيائي والحصول على كينونة الخلود. ويقدم البحث تحليل لقصة "اللوحة البيضاوية" في ضوء العلاقة الجدلية بين الفن والموت. ويوضح البحث غموض الفن وعلاقته بمفهومين متناقضين هما الحياة والموت في العمل الفني. وفي حالة اكتمال العمل الفني فإنه يقود إلى حالة من الحياة بعد الموت. ويلخص هذا البحث مشاعر الحنين إلى حب الأمومة والحب الرومانسي لدى الكاتب بو في حياته الخاصة. ويعالج البحث أيضا مهارة الفنان في جعل الفتاة القصة رمز للجمال الدائم والروح الحية وأخيرا إيصالها إلى الخلود.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الادب , الخلود, ادكار الان بو, اللوحة البيضاوية .

Introduction:

“In Greek mythology the sculpture Pygmalion created a piece of art which was so perfect, that it came to life. While normal art tries to imitate nature, Pygmalion's perfect art was able to replace it”(Pressler, 2005, 3). The transformation from life to eternal art may create a masterpiece of beauty that imitates life.

In his book *"Art and Creative Consciousness"*, Graham Collier (Collier, 1972, 97) clarifies that time is normally measured by hours, calendars, and other scholarly mediums. Yet these measures do not tell anything to unite time with the senses of an individual. Only arts, especially the creative artworks are able to hold a moment of a particular perception. The most significant accomplishment of creativity in art is that an action would be immortalized forever. Some beautiful or painful moments are withdrawn from the intervals of time and given eternal existence in the painting. The artist is “elevated through recording the moments of beauty of nature. The artist can see what can't be seen by other humans”(Kak, 1998, 7). He is elevated to other spheres so he loses his contact with the surroundings. Hence, the pursuit of immortality is a prominent ideology in art and literature. “Art and literature can transcend time and universe to enlighten people in the world about their ability to think and make rational determination”(Peng, 2020, 87). One of the main themes in the “The Oval Portrait” is considering art as a device of achieving immortality.

“Art is the only way available to freeze the moment and stop the flow of time. An immortal work of art is a small piece of history stolen from the stream of nature. A sensitive artist grabs this moment, freeze it in order to revive it again and make a special life and time for this moment away from reality” (Al Radaideh, 2008,1).

Art as a form of immortality:

“The Oval Portrait” starts as a tale narrated by a wounded man named Mr. Radcliffe who and his valet, Pedro, are searching for refuge in the Appennines. They have found shelter in an abandoned turret in a remote chateau. They relax in a small richly furnished and highly decorated apartment where the narrator is fascinated by the modern paintings hung on the walls. By changing the position of the candelabrum, his attention is accidentally fallen upon an oval portrait of “a young girl just ripening into womanhood” (Poe, 1965, 245). As he is deeply meditating the beauty of the portrait, he recognizes that its charming effect lies in the “absolute

lifelikeness of expression”[246]. Seeking for a consultation to his astonishment with the portrait, he resorts to an art book he finds beside his pillow. This special book explains the background of all the paintings in the room. He reads through it and discovers the secret behind the lifelikeness of the portrait. The story is of a young bride of an artist who loves her as he loves his art. The artist has a great desire to immortalize his bride's beauty so he asks her to sit for weeks in order to portray her. He has been too obsessed with his artistic task that he forgets to look at his wife who grows more dispirited and weaker than ever. When the artwork comes to an end, the painter is appalled by his artwork shouting “This is indeed life itself!” then turns to his wife to find that “She was dead!” [249].

Some life forces, like light and spirit, give rise to the portrait throughout the story. The image of light is related to the bride and explicitly with the flame of the candle, “The spirit of the lady..... flickered up as the flame within the socket of the lamp”[249]. Poe emphasizes the metamorphosis of life from the model to the painting with metaphors of light. The portrait is discovered in “vivid light.” At the beginning, the lady is “all light and smiles.” Then the lady's spirit is extinguished as the light of the lamp, with the last brush:

“And when many weeks had passed, and 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 the tint was placed”[248].

When the artwork is finished, all the light, beauty and spirit of the lady is transformed into the portrait which finally amuses the narrator and brightens the darkness of his loneliness (Scheick, 1978, 8). The narrator, who has been so weary and tired, is astonished and startled and left awake by the woman's portrait. He has, for a moment, mistaken the portrait for a living person. The attractiveness of the girl's beauty is described as “rarest” and she is “full of glee: all light and smiles, and frolicsome as the young fawn”[247]. So, her oval portrait is full of life and sense to the extent that it is able to revive and invigorate the wounded and absent minded narrator who is about to sleep. When he gazes on the portrait, all his senses are awakened and ejected sleeping out. “The first flashing of the candles upon that canvas and seemed to dissipate the dreamy stupor which was stealing over senses, and startled me at once onto waking life”[246]. The portrait is so life-like that everybody looks at it thinks that it is as mixture of the artist's skill and his love for his wife. When the narrator contemplates the very beautiful artwork, he submerges in the moment of immortal beauty. He is tricked by his “dreamy stupor” and startled by the reality and vitality of the portrait when it is suddenly revealed from the dark.

Furthermore, the portrait gives the narrator a feeling of reclusion from the actual world around him. He describes it “As thing of Art nothing could be more admirable than the painting itself”[247]. He admits confidently that it is not only the matchless beauty of the woman but it is the painting's unconceivable “life-likeness” that has shocked him and pushed him to search for anything to satisfy his curiosity. Actually, the visual realism portrayed in artistic pattern is the thing that startled him, and provided him with a romantic touch of loss leads him to search for any guidance to the fact. Therefore, he resorts to read about the portrait in a book he has found on the pillow. Nielsen confirms that: “As the art-book describes the girl, she is of "rarest beauty", but as the first person narrator sees her in the painting, she is of "immortal beauty". The picture has at once killed her and guaranteed her an immortality”(Nielsen, 2014, 246).

The portrait, as well, energizes the painter to continue work, thereafter he “grows wild with the ardor of his work”[248]. The painter derives life out of his beloved and transforms it into the portrait. Thus the lady exists in the first story when her beauty becomes a source of admiration for the narrator and exists in the second story as a source of inspiration for the artist. She becomes a memorable and central character in the story, which contains two different representations of the woman: The first is visual, the portrait, the second is written in the art book that immortalizes her to become a symbol of sacrifice. The painter forgets his beloved's bad conditions, he “turned his eyes from canvas rarely, even to regard the countenance of his wife”[247]. He tries to merge the identity of his first wife, the model, with his second wife, the portrait. When he is about to achieve his aim, “the painter had grown wild with the ardor of his work”[248]. Since art and the model are merged together in the portrait, he finds that there is no need to look at the real wife.

The story implies that art can preserve beauty and memory. By preserving the quintessence of his bride's beauty, the artist is able to create an artwork that can outlast her life. As Mollinger highlights:

“The story is about art and artistic process presented in the story is a romantic cliché: life is destroyed by art which, at the same time, preserves life forever. The painter in his single-minded devotion to art, is a destroyer, but also a creator of something permanent” (Mollinger, R. N., Mollinger, S. ,1979, 152).

Factually, “The Oval Portrait” shows the conflict between the impermanence of life and the permanence of art. The artist of the story is driven by his love for his bride and by his limitless desire to capture her physical beauty that the narrator describes as “beautiful as the angel”[248]. This means that he has been able to portray and copy her beauty as well as her spirit in her portrait. Thereby, the narrator does not only see the details of her beauty but he also feels her spirit that is of an angel. The process followed by the artist revolves around holding a moment of nature, to be extracted from the flow of time. The artist hunts and freezes his moments with his bribe in order to vitalize them again, and create a specific life for these moments differ from reality. Corzo declares that:

“Any Immortal work of art is a small piece stolen from the stream of time, a piece of history, and a quick moment illustrated by the astonishing beauty, facing a sensitive artist, who took in the whole and then expressed in a unified and influential manner” (Corzo ,1999, 135).

The artist has the power of vision within his feeling, which enables him to relive the moments of eternity within the frame of masterful creative art. As Al-Radaideh calls it: “The reality of change” (Al-Radaideh, 2008, 2) is the main fact that compels the artist to depict the rapid transience of time. To obtain a moment of immortality through the sequence of time, the artist can evade the happening and fix the life, and gaze at the picture forever. Gombrich elaborates on the same idea saying: “The artist tried to portray the time sequence in a group of neighboring drawings, in order to show the moments of the event in sequential positions, this so-called "idea to suggest movement in the period of time"” (Gombrich,1964,1).

“Art, whether embodied in the narrator’s analytical or the artist’s creative imagination, is the vehicle for this process of transformation, insofar as one of art’s modes for Poe is "destructive transcendence"” (Moldenhauer,1968, 284). When the lady married the painter, she was full of activity and vitality, gradually, as the art book explains, “The tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sat beside him” [249]. The painter “is so committed to creating a lifelike portrait that he literally transfers his wife's life into the picture. Preferring an aesthetic version of his wife” (Kratky, 2007, 10). So that he “took a fervid and burning pleasure in his task, and wrought day and night to depict her who so loved him”[247]. He tries to demonstrate his artistic powers not focusing on the negative effects he might impose on his wife's health. His action indicates that art could be

life consuming and life provider as well. He uses his artistic power to create a double existence of his bride: The first, the real, is mortal, whereas the second, the portrait, is immortal. The two cannot instantaneously live for long without one defeating the other. Yet, the lady prefers to sacrifice her life for the sake of her husband happiness. She ignores the signals that show the weaknesses of her body. The bride has sacrificed her life to give birth to her portrait imitating the mother that gives birth to her child who is part of her body. A mother might also die in the process of giving birth to her child who is regarded a continuity to her humanistic traits and manners. The bride also tries her best to please her lover who thinks that nothing in the world would make him happier than immortalizing his bride's beauty. Although she hates art, "hating only the Art which was her rival" [247], she does not want to interrupt or bother her lover with her compliances. "But she was humble and obedient, and sat meekly many weeks in the dark"[247]. The painter would not recognize "that the light that fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health and the spirit of his bride....Yet she smiled on, uncomplainingly"[248]. She continues posing for her lover and trusting him, who is too absorbed in capturing the details of her sparkling eyes forgetting that he is portraying a human being not an object. She continues sitting and behaving as a model without complaining. She confidently perceives that her husband loves her and that his great love leads him to portray her in order to add to their love an infinite dimension. Thus, she contently adopts her husband's artistic views of the immortality of art. After finishing the work, he discovers that his wife has sacrificed her life to give birth to her portrait. Her love and sacrifice are immortalized through the oval portrait, "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"[246]. The lady seems to be satisfied with her sacrifice to be the model of an immortal portrait for there are no signs of fatigue or dissatisfaction appear on her face otherwise such signs might have been obvious in the details of the portrait because the artist has been precise in reflecting reality as it is. Caws affirms that "In the story, the model's artist – husband possesses her life by painting its essence on to canvas; the model – wife allows herself to become dispossessed of her life apparently without protest" (Caws,1983, 679).

As it is written in the art book that the narrator reads, the artwork is not just a project or cognition, it becomes a veritable woman who may rival with its model, the young woman to obtain the love of the artist. As Sylvie L. F. Richard comments: "Along with the personification of art, there occurs a de-personification of the woman" (Richard,1983, 309). Therefore, the copy turned to be reality, and that is the ultimate of the artist's hidden wishes to preserve himself, and the woman he adores and loves, against the dangers of time, but at the same time to captivate the transient beauty of life. Thus, the inanimate portrait attains life and spirit from the animate

model through the inductive attempts of the artist, who is liable for the woman's death. It is suitable here to mention Michael Rothberg's suggestion that "the paradox which the story embodies is that the perfect portrait destroys (the individuality of) its object by raising the possibility of infinite replication" (Rothberg, 1992, 3). The painter takes life from the animate object, the model, and transforms it to an inanimate object, the portrait. Yet, Twitchell recognizes another paradox that is "The paradox the artist doesn't recognize is that the vitality of his art drains the very life-strength of the people he loves" (Twitchell, 1977, 393). The artist's bride is conserved in a form of an eternal aesthetic artwork but ended as a living person. "Since the signifier takes on the characteristics of the signified there is no meaning left for the model" (Link, 1968, 204). It is impossible for one person to exist twice. The perfection of the artistic work must destroy the existence of the artist's bride.

"The painter translates his wife in a double sense: into visual icon and into a lifeless model. Like all translations, this process entails duplication and effacement, a retracing which both mirrors the original and abolishes it in the sense that every translation sacrifices the letter of the original text to reconstitute its spirit in another language" (Kennedy, 1987, 63).

The woman as natural material consumes an aesthetic danger to the existence of artistic work. The portrait is doubled so one of them should be moved away, since the natural body is mortal and weak, the portrait will stay to immortalize its original, the woman-model. "A form of creation which seeks to recede from the ephemerality and death of bodily" (Bronfen, 1992, 6). The irreconcilability between the artist's created image and nature's created body becomes fatal to the woman who forms an aesthetic risk for her natural beauty that is weak and will vanish one day. Freedman considers that:

"the principal subject of "The Oval Portrait" is the nature of art and its perplexed relationship with life it copies, alters, or transcends, continues to dominate the function of art, the transformation of the carnal woman of decay into the beautiful woman synonymous with the work of art is a form of murder" (Freedman, 1999, 7).

The painter transforms his wife's physical beauty, which is described in art as the mortal beauty, into a more elevated and eternal beauty that is of a spiritual beauty. Art, as the story implies, cannot outlive without the life it victimizes in order to spiritualize out of existence.

“The Oval Portrait” was first published under the title of “Life in Death” in Graham's Magazine in 1842. Poe's idea in his first edition is that of emanation of life through death. “In Poe's stories death is often a continuation of existence, be it as a ghost, vampire, or as in this case in his story, even a portrait. His original title for the story, "Life in Death" emphasizes this point” (Cluley, 2014, 3).

In his essay, “The Penguin Encyclopaedia of Horror and the Supernatural”, Arthur Krystal admits that “everything in Poe is concerned with death” and “no tale of his is complete, or completely, without it”(Krystal,1986,1829).The paradoxical relationships between art, life and death formalize the central theme of the story. The relation between the model and the portrait is the relation between life and death. The story can be regarded as an allegory of art, life and death coexists with an implied antagonism between real beauty and its artistic representation. Freud's claims that “the aim of all life is death” (Freud, 2001, 54). The woman in the story might be driven by the self-destructive compulsion to become inanimate. So she may be willing to be destroyed as part of her own desire to be immortal, rather than merely a submissive action to please her husband. She is kept alive in death. Or as in Blanchot's words: “The plenitude of her death is living with her”(Blanchot, 1995, 306). The life in death and the life of the spirit are two types of life significant in Poe's story.

The artistic creation leads into a new birth or, in other words, into a state of a birth of life in death. “The theme of reproduction, stressing the inevitability of decay with time and reasoning the children provide a defense against it” (Rosenberg, 2006, 2). Far from their marriage and bearing children who may inherit her wife's beauty, the artist immortalizes his dear wife through art. He displays the power of aesthetic arts to defy time and carry the beauty of his young bride down to future generation. Poe is aware of the ambiguous fact of art and the incoherence of death and life in the aesthetic work of the artist. For the artist's wife wastes away and dies in order that her spirit can emerge and outlast through the portrait. Thus, art becomes the antithesis of life and at the same time it is considered an immortalizing approach saves life from transience and decay.

In the “The Oval Portrait”, Poe tried to comment on his life, especially on the things that he missed for one reason or another. In particular, truthful love, motherly love, and lifelong love. He attempted to reflect the kind of life he himself lived. He thought of life as an infinite tragedy. His life was sad and full of pain and solitude resulting from the separation from the beloved ones. He was a little child when he lost his parents. In fact, Poe suffered from the losses of the beloved women in his life particularly the loss of his mother and his wife Virginia. He also suffered from “the death of surrogate mother Jane Stith Stonard in 1824, the termination of his romance with young Elmira Royster in 1826, the death of foster mother Frances Allan in 1829” (Bonaparte, 1988, 120). Therefore, it would be likely for him to translate his female characters in his stories. Actually, fate was very cruel with Poe. The artist's shock by the death of his wife reflected Poe's feeling to a certain extent: “Turned suddenly to regard his beloved: She was dead!”[249]

In fact, Poe's mother had an oval portrait which was an actual inspiration for him in his life and his art as well, especially the writing of “The Oval Portrait.” Poe's mother oval portrait derived its liveliness from the life of Poe's dead mother. The portrait was the only tangible connection to Poe the child with his mother. He remained psychologically interacted with his mother through that portrait and was unable to separate himself from it. That portrait worked for years as a compensation for Poe's psychic wounds resulted from the early loss of his mother. “So we can regard Poe's art as an attempt at a symbolic restitution” (Kopley, 2002, 194). Actually, Poe and the narrator and the artist are all identified. The oval portrait becomes a life-giving portrait. Poe psychological wounds are identified with the narrators physical wounds. Without the life-giving portrait the narrator would have lost part of his self. According to the biography, Poe had lost part of his self when he lost his mother.

“Poe's notion that death is necessary for art takes on new meaning. Artistic creation is, in a sense, murder”(Quinn, 1957, 264). Poe's mother and Poe's wife, Virginia, die whereas Poe continues to live and create literary works that memorize and immortalize his beloveds. The beautiful lady of the story dies whereas her portrait lives and gives life. It seems that there is a relationship between the separation from the beloveds on one side and artistic creativity on the other. Poe's story summarizes his own artistic problem which implies that art imitates reality and artists are destroyers and at the same time creators. So without the death of Poe's mother and wife, he would never have innovated his literary creations. Despite the

loss of these two loved women, Poe continued living to create his artistic productions to immortalize the memory of his beloved women as the artist in his story has done.

In Poe's fiction, “the women are not completely characterized, yet they are stuck in to their roles as ideal images”(Yildirim, 2011,18). The relationship between death and women broadens and deepens the male’s artistic creativity. Maria Bonaparte’s psychobiographical approach maintains the relation between the female dead body and the artist creativity, Bonaparte declares that a female death is the prerequisite of artist's creation. Thus, he transforms the woman's body into an object 'the canvas' which he inclines to use both for “his pleasure and profit”(Bonaparte,1988,124). Person highlights that “The Oval Portrait” “illustrates the cost to male and female alike of the male artist’s penchant for objectifying a woman’s character in art”(Person, 1988,34). Since the discrepancy between the female body and male creation is predictable throughout the story, the wife becomes the prototype of feminine vitality while her husband, obsessed with his creative process of art, steals all life and energy from her.

“The coupling of a beautiful dead woman and her image taken up by Poe in his metaphoric story about creation and image- making, "The Oval Portrait" (1842) in order to problematise the conventional idea of art as transformation of living matter into inanimate form. . . . Poe's story of the reciprocal relation of creation and destruction cites another convention, namely the fusion of woman and art” (Bronfen, 1992,7).

In fact, the woman of the story becomes his second bride and the double of the portrait. Thus, the risk that her body implies should be removed by the masculine painter. In his essay “The Philosophy of Composition”, Poe states that “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world”(Poe,1994,1540). This statement is beneficial for the analysis of the relation between death and female. The mourners in Poe’s fictional works are usually male. Proving such fact affirms the masculine as the survivor and characterizes the female in relation to death. Thus, horror and fear from the scene of death turns into satisfaction because the survivor himself is not dead. Poe considers dying woman an inspiration for the creation of an artwork. However, the dead body of artist's wife can

be transformed into an art object, since her death serves as an analogy to the creation of an artistic work.

Conclusion:

Poe's "The Oval Portrait" reveals ideas like rivalry representations. For instance, it explores the rivalry between the material presence of the body and its immaterial representation in art. Additionally, there is the incompatibility and rivalry between the image created by the artist and the beauty of the body created by nature. Moreover, the story expresses a paradox that stems out of the dead woman alternates between destruction and preservation. The portrait denotes the replaced woman and her aesthetic commemorations and resurrection of death. The power of art and the deep love of the artist to his bride are capable of substituting and representing life with a new everlasting life.

The actual reason behind the death of the wife is left ambiguous. It is unclear whether the unhealthy atmosphere in the turret chamber or the gradual talismanic inflow of life from the living model to the portrait is the real cause of her death. In fact, the real woman and the expressive portrait exchange their characteristics. The spirit of life is transmitted from the animate to the inanimate. So the artist succeeds in inserting personal traits to the portrait. Art is personified while the living woman is de-personified. The living character is left without life at the end of the process. Thus when she dies, the process of transformation between life and art is completed, and her painting preserves her "immortal beauty"[246] before she fades away with old age.

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