



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..."

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.

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.



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



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.