

Edgar Allan Poe:

From The Importance of the Single Effect in a Prose Tale

These paragraphs below are excerpted from a long literary review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's collection of short stories titled *Twice-Told Tales*, which originally appeared in *Graham's Magazine*, published in Philadelphia, in May, 1842.

Were we called upon however to designate that class of composition which, should best fulfill the demands of high genius, we should unhesitatingly speak of the prose tale. We allude to the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal. The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length. As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book. But simple cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. There are no external or extrinsic influences — resulting from weariness or interruption. Without a certain continuity of effort — without a certain duration or repetition of purpose — the soul is never deeply moved.

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or *single effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents — he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. Without a certain continuity of effort — without a certain duration or repetition of purpose — the soul is never deeply moved.

