

W. I. Lincoln Adams, "Hawthorne on the Daguerreotype," June 1890

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HAWTHORNE ON THE DAGUERREOTYPE

By W. I. Lincoln Adams, Editor Photographic Times, N.Y.

The present movement in America to honor the memory of Daguerre, by erecting in Washington a fitting monument, is reviving an interest in all that appertains to the process which he discovered.

I wonder if all the readers of *The International Annual* have noticed the interesting remarks on the subject, which America's great romance writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, has made, in his characteristic way, in the sixth chapter of that fascinating book, "The House of the Seven Gables."

The young daguerreotypist, Holgrave, is working in the garden of the old Pycheon mansion; and Phoebe, the gentle New England maiden, has met him there, in caring for her favorite fowls and plants.

Holgrave declares his profession to Phoebe, to be that of a daguerreotypist, to which she replies:

"I don't much like pictures of that sort. They are so hard and stern, besides drawing away from the eye, and trying to escape altogether. They are conscious of looking very unamiable, I suppose, and therefore hate to be seen."

"If you will permit me," said the artist, looking at Phoebe, "I should like to try whether the daguerreotype can bring out disagreeable traits on a perfectly amiable face. But there certainly is truth in what you have said. Most of my likenesses do look unamiable; but the very sufficient reason, I fancy, is because the originals are so. There is a wonderful insight in heaven's broad and simple sunshine. While we give it credit for depicting only the merest surface, it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even could he detect it. There is, at least, no flattery in my humble line of art. Now, here is a likeness which I have taken over and over again, and still with no better result. Yet the original wears to common eyes a very different expression. It would gratify me to have your judgment on this character."

"To be sure," she said, "you have found some way of copying the portrait without its black velvet cap and gray beard, and have given him a modern coat and satin cravat instead of his cloak and band."

"You would have seen other differences had you looked a little longer," said Holgrave. "I can assure you that this is a modern face, and one which you will very probably meet. Now, the remarkable point is, that the original wears to the world's eye—and, for aught I know, to his most intimate friends—an exceedingly pleasant

countenance, indicative of benevolence, openness of heart, sunny good humor, and other traces of worthy qualities of that cast. The sun, as you see, tells quite another story, and will not be coaxed out of it after half a dozen patient attempts on my part. Here we have the man sly, subtle, hard, imperious, and, withal, cold as ice. Look at that eye. Would you like to be at its mercy? At the mouth. Could it ever smile? And yet, if you could only see the benign smile of the original!"

Thus it is, that the daguerreotype, not only, but also our modern silver photograph, reveals the inner character of a man. It is as if the sun could penetrate beneath the surface and depict the spirit there which is not always discernible by the human eye. Many photographers have undoubtedly observed this fact in their portraits, but who, save the great romancer, has describe it so vividly?

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

Among the many engaging discussions of Hawthorne's use of the daguerreotype are Alan Trachtenberg, "Seeing and Believing: Hawthorne's Reflections on the Daguerreotype in The House of the Seven Gables," *American Literary History* 9:3 (Autumn, 1997): 460–481; Susan S. Williams, "'The Aspiring Purpose of an Ambitious Demagogue': Portraiture and The House of the Seven Gables," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 49:2 (September 1994): 221–244; Alfred H. Marks, "Hawthorne's daguerreotypist: Scientist, Artist, Reformer," in Nathaniel Hawthorne [Seymour L. Gross, ed.], *The House of the Seven Gables. An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1967): 330–347.

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