



A flood of sunshine

The following text deals with the slow but constant changes that have taken place inside Hester from the day of her public shame on the scaffold in the market place.

Nathaniel Hawthorne
The Scarlet Letter
(1850)

Chapter 8

Arthur Dimmesdale gazed into Hester's face with a look in which hope and joy shone out, indeed, but with fear betwixt them, and a kind of horror at her boldness¹, who had spoken what he vaguely **hinted at**, but dared not² speak.

But Hester Prynne, with a mind of native courage and activity, and for so long a period not merely estranged, but outlawed³, from society, had habituated herself to such latitude of speculation as was altogether foreign to the clergyman. She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness⁴, as vast, as intricate and shadowy, as the **untamed** forest, amid the gloom⁵ of which they were now holding a colloquy that was to decide their fate. Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed⁶ as freely as the wild Indian in his woods. For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established, criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside⁷, or the church. The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not **tread**. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers, – stern⁸ and wild ones, – and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss⁹.

[...]

'Do I feel joy again?' cried he, wondering at himself. 'Methought¹⁰ the germ of it was dead in me! O Hester, thou art my better angel! I seem to have flung¹¹ myself – sick, sin-stained, and sorrow-blackened – down upon these forest-leaves, and to have risen up all made anew¹², and with new powers to glorify Him that hath been merciful! This is already the better life! Why did we not find it sooner?'

'Let us not look back¹³', answered Hester Prynne. 'The past is gone! Wherefore should we **linger** upon it now? See! With this symbol, I undo it all, and make it as if it had never been!'

So speaking, she undid the clasp¹⁴ that fastened the scarlet letter, and, taking it from her bosom, threw it to a distance among the **withered** leaves. The mystic token alighted on the hither verge¹⁵ of the stream. With a hand's breadth¹⁶ farther flight it would have fallen into the water, and have given the little brook¹⁷ another woe to carry onward, besides the unintelligible tale which it still kept murmuring about. But there lay the embroidered letter, glittering like a lost jewel, which some ill-fated wanderer¹⁸ might pick up, and thenceforth¹⁹ be **haunted** by strange phantoms of guilt, sinkings²⁰ of the heart, and unaccountable misfortune.

The stigma gone, Hester **heaved** a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. O exquisite relief! She had not known the weight, until she felt the freedom! By another impulse, she took off the formal cap that confined her hair; and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance, and imparting the charm of softness to her features. There played around her mouth, and **beamed** out of her eyes, a radiant and tender smile, that seemed **gushing** from the very heart of womanhood. A crimson flush was glowing on her cheek, that had been long so pale. Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past, and **clustered** themselves, with her maiden hope, and a happiness before unknown, within the magic circle of this hour. And, as if the gloom of the earth and sky had been but the effluence of these two mortal hearts, it vanished with their sorrow. All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest, gladdening each green leaf, transmuting the yellow fallen ones to gold, and gleaming adown²¹ the gray trunks of the solemn trees. The objects that had made a

- 1 **boldness.** Ardimento.
- 2 **dared not.** Non osò
- 3 **outlawed.** Bandita.
- 4 **moral wilderness.** Deserto morale.
- 5 **gloom.** Oscurità.
- 6 **roamed.** Vagava.
- 7 **the clerical ... fireside.** I paramenti dei sacerdoti, la toga dei giudici, la gogna, il patibolo, il focolare.
- 8 **stern.** Duri, rigidi.
- 9 **amiss.** Cose sbagliate.
- 10 **Methought.** *I thought.*
- 11 **flung.** Scagliato.
- 12 **made anew.** Rinnovato.
- 13 **Let us not look back.** Non pensiamo al passato.
- 14 **clasp.** Gancio.
- 15 **The mystic ... verge.** Il simbolo mistico si posò sul più vicino argine.
- 16 **a hand's breadth.** Un palmo.
- 17 **brook.** Ruscello.
- 18 **ill-fated wanderer.** Malaugurato viandante.
- 19 **thenceforth.** Poi.
- 20 **sinkings.** Mancamenti.
- 21 **gleaming adown.** Risplendendo lungo.



50 shadow hitherto²², embodied the brightness now. The course of the little brook might be traced by its merry gleam afar into the wood's heart of mystery, which had become a mystery of joy.

Such was the sympathy of Nature – that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth – with the bliss of these two
55 spirits! Love, whether newly born, or aroused from a deathlike slumber, must always create a sunshine, filling the heart so full of radiance, that it overflows upon the outward world. Had the forest still kept its gloom, it would have been bright in Hester's eyes, and bright in Arthur Dimmesdale's!

22 hitherto. Finora.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 remain | 6 flowing out |
| 2 shone | 7 faded, dry |
| 3 wild, uncontaminated | 8 took with effort |
| 4 gathered | 9 step into |
| 5 implied, suggested | 10 obsessed, disturbed |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the text again and note down

- where Arthur and Hester are;
- how Arthur looked at Hester;
- what Hester suggests doing;
- Hester's redeeming acts;
- what the weather was like;
- the feeling the two characters share.

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

3 FIND the lines where the narrator becomes obtrusive.

4 FOCUS on lines 1-14 and do the following activities.

- 1 Fill in the table about the difference between Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne.

Arthur Dimmesdale	Hester Prynne

- 2 Say what Hester is compared to and try to explain why.
3 List the symbols of Puritan life.
4 Explain what has made Hester free.



5 DISCUSS the following issues concerning the text:

- the symbols of Hester's femininity;
- the response of nature and its reason;
- the concept of love.

➤ **COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT**

6 WRITE a 10/12-line paragraph in which you compare Hester Prynne to the heroines depicted by the Brontë sisters (→ 5.15).