Sally Mann's *Candy Cigarette* (1989) is an image that has haunted me since I first saw it at nineteen. Its power has never waned, evoking the same uneasy emotions each time I revisit it. The photograph is saturated with juxtapositions and ironies. The young girl, holding a cigarette with her right arm crossed casually over her side while dressed in a soft, playful outfit, creates an unsettling blend of innocence and eeriness. The stark contrast between her youthful vulnerability and the adult-like act of smoking stirs both curiosity and discomfort. Her unwavering gaze into the camera, paired with the younger child to her right, whose back is turned, intensifies my instinct to protect the younger one from seeing the cigarette. It feels as though the image is questioning societal standards about innocence and the inevitable loss of it in childhood. Alternatively, Mann might be telling the story of a defiant young woman stepping away from the seemingly pure path behind her.

Mann's photograph features her daughter, Jessie, holding a candy cigarette while her siblings play in the background. The stark, haunting nature of the image captures a moment of introspection in Jessie, as her pose and expression seem far older than her years. Through this, Mann masterfully evokes the tension between childhood innocence and the desire to grow up too quickly. The candy cigarette, an innocent substitute for the real thing, amplifies the underlying theme of premature adulthood. This pushes viewers to confront the complexities of growing up in a society that often pressures children to adopt adult roles before they are ready.

Candy Cigarette stands as one of the most iconic photographs of the 20th century, resonating deeply with the historical context of the 1980s—a time when the dangers of smoking and its portrayal in media were increasingly scrutinized. This photograph speaks to the growing awareness of tobacco's harm while engaging with the broader history of how childhood is represented in American culture. This glaring portrait of a child holding a cigarette offers a critique on adult behaviors that are normalized and even glamorized for young people through advertising and popular culture. The image of the child appears both vulnerable and defiant in her facial expression and posture.

Technically, the photograph's black and white composition is both simple and striking. The child is centered, with a blurred background that suggests isolation, intensifying the emotional impact of the image. The close-up framing pulls focus to her expression and the candy cigarette, giving the scene a confrontational energy. The soft, natural lighting highlights both the innocence of the subject and the artificiality of the cigarette, amplifying the distinction between them. The fact that Jessie's siblings are blurred in the background serves to intensify her isolated, introspective presence, as if

she is suspended between two worlds: the carefree play of childhood and the premature weight of adult responsibilities.

Culturally, *Candy Cigarette* offers a sharp critique of how childhood is portrayed in American society. The candy cigarette becomes a symbol of the adult world intruding on youth, raising questions about how childhood innocence is shaped by adult habits and societal expectations. The image reflects America's obsession with "coolness," often tied to smoking, and how such behaviors are marketed to young people despite the undeniable harms of tobacco. The strain between innocence and the reality of early exposure to adult vices is evident throughout the photograph. By using her own child as the subject, Mann critiques not only the forced maturation of children but also the voyeuristic tendencies of the audience who consume these images for their shock value.

What works in this image is its provocative commentary on the intersection of innocence and adult behavior. By using a child as the subject, Mann creates a powerful visual pull that forces viewers to confront the normalization of adult activities for children. The casual, rebellious look of Mann's subject, combined with the grace and authority of the way the child is holding the cigarette is remarkable. However, for some, the image may feel disturbing or controversial. The portrayal of youth in such an adult context might seem like a violation of innocence, rather than a commentary on its loss. Mann's decision to make her children the focal point of such mature themes sparked controversy and debate over the appropriateness of using children as subjects in her art. Yet, it undeniably contributed to her reputation as a photographer who challenges conventional representations of childhood.