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Children and the uncomfortable truth in the Scarlet Letter

If you seek clear, unvarnished, brutal truth with no regard for niceties? No better source exists than a child. This can be both a breath of fresh air and a harsh glimpse at a truth about oneself that is painful to face. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*, a work of Historical fiction, the idea of this is illustrated throughout the book. Hester Prynne is condemned to wear the letter A as a constant reminder of her adulterous indiscretion, which also produced a second reminder in her daughter Pearl. The presence of the letter in their lives causes both mother and daughter to be outcasts. Throughout the novel, there is much speculation around Hester's lover, who is found out later to be Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, though he escapes the public condemnation of the town for their beloved reverend could never commit such a sin. The children of the town are reflections of the beliefs taught to them by their parents, presented through the unfiltered honest and perceptive voice of a child.

First, the children in *The Scarlet Letter* are represented as being more perceptive and honest than the adults in this novel. Throughout, Pearl is shown growing up, and the reader is allowed to witness as her understanding of the situation grows. "She took her mother's hand in both her own, and gazed into her eyes with an earnestness that was seldom seen in her wild and capricious character" (164). This is when Pearl takes her mother's hand, and is trying to get

Hester to tell her of what she has mostly figured out about the meaning of the scarlet letter upon her mother. "...The first object of which Pearl seemed to become aware was - shall we say it? - the scarlet letter on Hester's bosom..." (64). This shows Pearl's curiosity and some understanding of her mother's difference with the marking upon her chest, and reminding her of the sin she had committed whether Hester truly wishes to face that harsh reality or not.

Secondly, the Puritan children's curiosity and understanding of Hester and Pearl. "As the two wayfarers come within the precincts of the town, the children of the Puritans looked up from their play, - or what passed for play - with those sombre little urchins,..." (205). The Puritan children see Pearl as an outsider and someone they should avoid, a view undoubtedly passed to them through the adults in their lives, then vocalized with the merciless truth children possess. "The truth was that the little Puritans, being of the most intolerable brood that ever lived, has got a vague idea of something outlandish, unearthly, or at variance with ordinary fashions, in the mother and child" (86). In this the Puritan children see Hester and Pearl as just odd individuals that they do not have a true understanding of they why they are outcasted and seen as alien to them.

Finally, Pearl's very existence is a daily reminder to both Hester and the townspeople of her sin. As such she serves as both a blessing and a curse to Hester. Pearl is Hester's one true companion in her state of seclusion, and she undoubtedly kept her from a life of complete loneliness and isolation. "Never since her release from prison, had Hester met the public gaze without her. In all her walks about the town, Pearl, too, was there..." (86). This constant

closeness is also a curse in that it allows Hester no respite from her past."It appalled her, nevertheless, to discern here, again, a shadowy reflection of the evil that existed in herself." Pearl is a constant, unflinching mirror on Hester's mistakes and darker nature.

Some aspects of human nature hold true whether in Puritan or modern society. Children are children regardless of time and location. They serve as an ultimate source of innocence and truth, even when that truth is unforgiving and difficult to face. *The Scarlet Letter* shows this time and again. From the cruel judgement of the Puritan children, to Pearl's very existence marking her mother as a sinner much more deeply than the A ever could, children are the perceptive sources of an uncomfortable truth.

Works Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. Boston: Bantam Books, 1986. Print.