Moments before the final scene of *The Scarlet Letter* there is a brief encounter between Pearl and the gaudily dressed master of the “questionable vessel” (319) that is to carry Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Pearl back to “the Old World, with its crowds and cities” (303). Seeking to “lay hands upon” Pearl but unable to “snatch a kiss,” the shipmaster, we are told, “took from his hat the gold chain that was twisted about it, and threw it to the child. Pearl immediately twined it around her neck and waist with such happy skill that, once seen there, it became a part of her, and it was difficult to imagine her without it” (329).

When Pearl next appears, there is no reference to the chain; the significance of the episode must lie in its particular elements. To some extent, the language suggests the theme of control. Uncatchable as she is, Pearl instead incorporates a portion of her pursuer into herself. When she encounters the shipmaster, Pearl has been running about with a mind to find things that “excite her ever-active and wandering curiosity,” taking whatever she finds, whether “man or thing” (329), as her own property. Thus it is understandable that one critic has found, in Pearl’s “happy skill” with the chain, evidence to support her reading of how Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel “explicates his art’s dependence on a material economy tied to slavery, and reveals the romancer’s role in mystifying that relation” (Goddu 65).

Mid-nineteenth-century readers, however, would not have run most readily to such a reading of the golden chain, nor would they have necessarily, as Goddu does, immediately associated the intimated piratical activity of the shipmaster with the slave trade. A more immediate and widely popular association suggests a more conventional, accessible reading that should be considered in any historicist interpretation, or any other reflection on the possible sense of this suggestive encounter.
In the opening lines of her 1903 novel, *The Golden Chain*, Gwendolyn Overton refers to the golden chain of love “which the optimistic old song assures us Time cannot break” (Overton 3). It is hard to say just what optimistic old song she means. The Reverend Joel Swartz’s song for the 1885 graduates of the Hagerstown Seminary for Young Ladies, “The Broken Chain,” seems to allude to a long familiar image—one that went back well before the 1882 song that urges its audience to “cheer fainting hearts with kind deeds of love, / And bind them with Love’s Golden Chain”—since the same image appeared in Edward Rice and J. Cheever Goodwin’s “Golden Chain” duet from their 1877 opera, *Evangeline.* 2 For then, too, it was already a familiar image. Closer to the composition of *The Scarlet Letter*, the 1852 gift book *Oasis* contains a poem on “Friendship, Love, and Truth” in which Love is described as “a tie, a golden chain, / That binds with stronger hand / Than iron shackles of the cell, / or all the arts of man” (*Oasis* 48). Perhaps the editor was a member of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows: friendship, love, and truth were the cardinal Odd Fellow virtues, virtues that “form[ed] the golden chain which unites their individual membership into a beautiful organization” (Addison 1). But Hawthorne would have been just as likely to run across the golden chain in an earlier miscellany called *The Portfolio*: “I bring thee, love, a golden chain, / I bring thee too a flowery wreath; / The gold shall never wear a stain, / The flowrets long shall sweetly breathe!” (Dennie 121).

In other words, the image was a staple of popular poetry and song throughout the century and before. It was adapted from an older religious image that persisted throughout the century as well. When Puritan divine William Dyer titled his 1687 treatise on love *A Believer’s Golden Chain*, he could have been drawing his image from *Paradise Lost*, where Milton describes how “this pendant world” hangs from the “Empyreal Heav’n” “in a golden chain” (2.1047–53). The poet himself, however, is said to have gotten his image from *The Iliad*’s book 8, where Zeus describes his power as a “cord of gold” by which he could drag any of the other immortals up to Mount Olympus, bringing earth and sea along with them (8.19).

The image of the golden chain, then, is as old as Western literature itself, and, following Milton, it became one of the most well-worn religious and sentimental figures of the nineteenth century. Thus in 1864, William Bradbury could call his hymnal the *Golden Chain of Sabbath School Melodies* without thereby invoking political controversies, even during a war that for many was symbolized by the breaking of chains. Likewise, in his 1860 poem “The Shadow and the Light,” when John Greenleaf Whittier described how “the tender eye of Love” watches “The slow transmuting of the chain / Whose links are iron below, to gold above,” the well-known abolitionist’s iron links invoked the iron chains of slavery remotely if
at all (Whittier 437). The image was more conventional than topical, too banal to suggest a current political application.

In “Another View of Hester” Hawthorne writes that “the links that united her to the rest of human kind—links of flowers, or silk, or gold, or whatever the material—had all been broken” to be replaced by “the iron link of mutual crime” (255). Iron here has at least two semiotic associations: the “iron spikes” of the opening of the novel (158) and the ancient image of degradation from the purity of gold. Indeed, prior to Pearl’s encounter with the shipmaster, the reader is offered a number of different chains, all of them signifying some sort of imperfect human relation. The chain of iron first appears early on, in a passage explaining why Hester has chosen to remain in Boston: “The chain that bound her here was of iron links, and galling to her inmost soul, but could never be broken” (186). When Arthur, Hester, and Pearl hold hands for the first time up on the scaffold, and Hawthorne writes that “the three formed an electric chain” (250), he may be comparing the minister’s false confession to a newfangled mechanical bond of dubious or fraudulent strength. The pattern offers fetters of different materials signifying alternative models of human connection that ascend, like Goldilocks, to the one that is just right. The golden chain of love tethers earth to heaven: that the final chain appears in the middle of the climax of the novel suggests that the public reunion Pearl is about to be granted will have ultimately redemptive power.

By this simple logic, of course, it should be her father, Dimmesdale, who tenders the chain. In substituting the captain from the Spanish Main, Hawthorne may have been on some level invoking his own absent father in the restoration of Pearl to the human community; more pertinently, though, the shipmaster serves as a kind of liminal figure, one capable of a “reckless life” at sea and “probity and piety on land” (319). When Pearl takes up the chain and, with “happy skill,” makes it “a part of her,” she makes just such a transition—transforming the emblem of the wild life that threatened her into a symbol of redemptive security.

Notes

1 Compare the description of the shipmaster, for example, with Sir Walter Scott’s description of a similar figure in his novel The Pirate. Like the “showy and gallant” shipmaster (Hawthorne 310), Clement Cleveland is exceptionally “gallantly attired” (Scott 2: 210). He wears “a blue coat lined with crimson silk, and laced with gold very richly, crimson damask waistcoat and breeches, a velvet cap, richly embroidered, with a white feather, white silk stockings, and red-heeled shoes.” He “ha[s] a gold chain several times folded round his neck,” and, like the shipmaster, sports a “scarf of crimson riband,” and an elegant sword (Scott 2: 210).

2 All three songs can be found in “Music for the Nation.”

3 I owe the connection of this passage to the pirate’s golden chain to Rachel Watkins, a student in a course in Transcendentalism.


Copyright of Explicator is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.