

## The Locket

### Background

In a 1988 *Irish University Review* interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, Montague says, 'My work is riddled with human pain' and this poem is no exception. Yet, in the same interview, he claims that 'the ultimate function of the poet is to praise'. So this poem can be seen as both a memory of the poet's troubled relationship with his mother and, at the same time, recognition of the love she felt for him but was never able to acknowledge during her lifetime.



Montague has said that while a man can identify with the death of a father – they are both men – 'the death of the woman who gave you birth is a very deep experience'. When Montague and his second wife had children, he felt that he finally understood just how important the mother is to the children and vice versa. He wondered how his mother had made the difficult decision to give him away and not reclaim him when she returned

to Ireland and saw how happy and cared for he was.

### Summary and analysis:

#### Stanza One:

The opening lines of the poem could be seen as a combination of a lament and a nursery rhyme. This has the effect of bringing together the little boy who longed for a mother's love and the older man who must now mourn her passing. This lament contains little praise until the end, however. Montague honestly and openly explores the difficult relationship between mother and son and describes it as a 'fertile source of guilt and pain'.

The fourth line of the poem is in italics, suggesting that it is a quotation from his mother – probably one which he often heard – about the pain she suffered giving birth to him. His

was a breech delivery (feet first rather than the usual head first) and he wryly describes it as his 'cue to come on' and his 'first claim to fame'. The ironic use of the language of the stage: 'cue to come on' and 'claim to fame' reminds us that while a child is usually centre-stage in its mother's world, the poet was anything but. Neither did he choose to be such a source of distress, despite language which implies that it was his choice to 'come on' at that moment. It is easy to imagine why the poet would feel guilt each time this story was retold, and the pain could be seen as both the mother's physical pain and his sorrow on realising that his birth was so far from a source of joy.

### **Stanza Two:**

There is bitterness in the second stanza as the poet says that he committed the 'double blunder' of being born a boy when his mother 'longed for a girl', and being a breech birth. The repetition of the word 'wrong' in lines four and five reinforces the idea that the baby was not only unwelcome but was blamed for something that could not possibly have been his fault. Juxtaposed with 'infant curls of brown', this image of a resentful and disappointed mother seems most unnatural and unfair. How could a new-born baby make any sort of 'blunder', let alone a 'double blunder'? This is a deeply sad observation and the final line, which tells us that the child was not 'readily forgiven' for the accident of his birth, is heart breaking.



### **Stanza Three:**

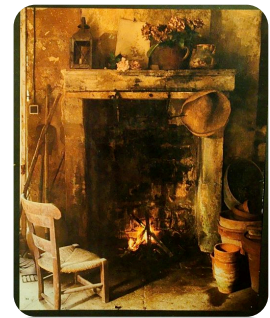
The third stanza begins with a resigned 'So'. The poet seems to accept the inevitability of his parents' disintegrating marriage and his mother's rejection of him. The poem becomes even more painfully personal here as Montague's mother, who has up to now been referred to as 'she', becomes 'you'. By addressing his mother directly, the poet seems to be finally talking openly to her about their relationship. The mother's lack of maternal feeling is linked to the family's lack of money; one of her 'favourite sayings' is 'when poverty comes through the door / love flies up the chimney'. Like the constant retelling of the story of the poet's birth, the 'favourite saying' shows just how bitter and painful life was for the family at the time. They had little to celebrate and focused instead on sorrow and disappointment. Montague's father may have tried to distract them and

lighten the mood with music, but to no avail: 'my fathers songs / couldn't sweeten the lack of money'. While the poet appears to be accusing his mother of failing him, he also seems to understand the difficulties his parents were facing. The love which 'flies up the window' is not just the love of a mother for a child but also the love between husband and wife. In the face of such hardship, there is no room for sentiment. The birth of a child is usually something which cements the parents' love for one another, but if they are under immense pressure it merely serves to exacerbate their unhappiness. After all, a new baby could be seen as yet another mouth to feed.

#### **Stanza Four:**

If the third stanza's opening 'So' implied a sense of resignation and inevitability, the word 'Then' at the start of the fourth stanza reinforces this idea. It is almost as if the events unfolded in such a way as to leave the participants with no choice whatsoever. This is certainly the case for the young boy who was given away. There is something horribly stark and accusatory in the phrase 'you gave me away'. The verb 'gave' implies that her action was deliberate: he was not taken from her. The simplicity of the line adds to its impact: there is no avoiding the harsh reality. In a few simple words we understand the poet's hurt at this abandonment, yet the previous stanzas show us that at some level he knows why his mother was driven to do what she did. This is a complicated situation and it is no wonder that the poet is still trying to come to terms with it. Were he to see the situation purely from his own point of view, it would be easier, but he is a thoughtful and reflective man who is capable of seeing the event from his mother's perspective while still feeling hurt and confused.

When Montague's mother returned to Ireland, she did not reclaim him from the spinster aunts who had taken him in and were raising him in a loving, caring manner. Montague recalls having to be reintroduced to her when she arrived at the house as he had not seen her since he was four. In the fourth stanza, he claims that his mother 'might never have known' him if he had not made the effort to visit her. He compares his position to that of a young man courting a young woman, winning her affection by coaxing her to sit by the fire with him and talking of her younger days.



#### **Stanza Five:**

Montague's sympathy for his mother is shown in the fifth stanza when he tells us of the 'wild, young days' she had that 'didn't last long'. All too soon, she was to become

trapped in poverty and an unhappy marriage. She had been 'lovely Molly', a local beauty in her 'small town', but now her life is in sharp contrast to those carefree days of long ago. The adjectives 'mournful and chill' highlight the sadness of the poet's mother's life and also the coldness created by her rejection of him as a baby. It seems clear that her life is a disappointment to her and she is filled with regret, clinging to those memories as her only source of joy. The simile in which the poet compares his mother's life to 'constant rain' is particularly apt and perfectly captures the misery of her situation. She has retreated into her own world and is in a 'cocoon of pain'.

#### **Stanza Six:**

Montague's mother is given a voice again in this stanza. She tells her son not to visit again as she is becoming 'too fond' of him and is unwilling to risk the pain of loss once more. Her voice is 'rough' and her logic 'harsh', but Montague recognises that this 'forlorn woman' has chosen to live a solitary life and avoid any future pain by so doing. That way, she cannot be hurt if her son leaves. This second rejection must be terribly difficult for the poet, yet he shows his sympathy in his description of her as 'forlorn'.

#### **Stanza Seven:**

The final stanza offers us some relief from the sorrow and bleakness that have dominated the poem up to this point. On his mother's death, the poet discovers that she has always worn a locket containing a baby picture of him. He is astonished: 'I never knew', and regards the discovery as a 'mysterious blessing'. While it is deeply sad that Montague's mother could never express love for him when she was alive, he now realises that her rejections were not a sign that she did not love him at all. There is forgiveness and healing in these final lines and the poem ends on a positive, touching note.

#### **Themes:**

The poet's difficult relationship with his mother

The devastating effect that poverty and hardship can have on individuals and families

#### **Tone:**

The poet sympathises with his mother's situation but there is also deep regret and pain when he speaks of her rejection of him. However, the ending of the poem is quite uplifting as he discovers that despite her mother's words and deeds, she did care about him and always wore a locket containing a picture of him.