The Bargain

In this poem, Lochhead describes a romantic relationship that seems to have reached a crossroads.

This poem is typical of Lochhead. It very much combines her Scottish sense of pragmatism with her craftsmanship as a wordsmith to create a meditation on a relationship that has reached a crossroads.

The speaker in the poem describes a day out with her lover at the famous Barrows market in the east end of Glasgow. This experience is used as a wider metaphor to explore and reflect upon her relationship.

The title of the poem refers not just to the bargains the couple seek out at the market, but to the bargaining that occurs within any relationship.

**Form and structure**

The poem has a fairly straightforward, linear structure and deals with a single recollection of a day at the market.

A sense of intimacy is created through the use of the second person as the speaker addresses her lover directly.

The mood is reflective and slightly wistful - the speaker feels that the relationship has stalled and is desperate for an encouraging sign from her partner that it can be salvaged.

The poem is divided into ten irregular stanzas which each deals with a different recollection or thought.

The complete lack of structure and the use of free verse create a fluid, organic piece of writing. This imitates how difficult it is to control or organise the way memories reveal themselves to us.

There are specific moments when Lochhead does use rhythm and meter for effect, for example, when she recalls the seller of the radios, which helps to create a vivid impression of the characters that inhabit the market.

This is enhanced by the occasional change in voice from the speaker to another person - for instance the stallholder, who says **“it’s been the doldrums the day”**.

Instead of paraphrasing, she lets us hear the exchange directly. Again this adds to the authenticity of the experience.

**Stanzas one to three**

The opening lines of the poem immediately establish the evocative setting of a cold, bleak January Saturday in Glasgow as the speaker and her partner make their way to the famous Barrows flea market.



A shop at the Barras

The poem is written as an address to her partner, as though she is encouraging him to recall the memory.

The atmosphere is tense as police horses **“twitch and fret”**. Having forgotten the early kick-off time of a football match means that the couple are pushing against the wave of supporters.

These **“ugly losers/getting ready to let fly”** add to the unpredictable and tense mood. The **“two rivers”** refers both literally to the River Clyde and the river of football fans making their way through the Gallowgate from Celtic Park.

In the second stanza, a hint of the deeper subject of the poem is introduced in the lines **“January, and we’re/looking back/looking forward/don’t know which way”**.

The brevity and isolation of these lines contrasts with the atmospheric previous stanza.

The decision not to punctuate the line and give it grammatical sense, but to run on to the subject of the next stanza highlights the speaker’s uncertainty about the state of her relationship.

The New Year is always a time when we reflect about the past and anticipate the year to come. It seems the speaker has cause to question the future of her relationship.

The reflective mood of the second stanza in interrupted in the third. The speaker is pulled out of her reverie by the sales patter of a stallholder selling **“beautiful Bakelite/Bush radios”**.

Lochhead captures the voice of the seller through the use of alliteration and the layout. The deliberate gaps in the line **“doesn’t miss a beat sing along it’s easy”**, changes the meter of the poem as the stallholder speaks in time to the rhythm of the music.

Specificity of details like this adds to the texture and authenticity of Lochhead’s work to create really lasting and memorable images.

**Stanzas four to five**

Stanza four opens with a question directed at her lover - **“Yes today we’re in love aren’t we?”** The deliberate use of “today” in the line entirely affects the meaning. It implies that there are days when the couple are not in love.

The question mark adds to the tone of doubt and reveals a little of the insecurity the speaker feels. Suddenly though she again abandons her introspection to show us more details about the city that really reveal the speaker’s affection for this place.

The imagery is evocative, she describes the city as **“splintering”**, with a **“brazen black Victorian heart”**.

There is no attempt to romanticise this place. She loves it warts and all. If anything knowing its faults and history makes it even more appealing. **“So what”**, she says, **“if every other tenement/wears its hearth on its gable end?”**

This idea then allows her once more to reflect on her relationship. She puns on the phrase 'to wear your heart on your sleeve', implying that she loves without reservation and sometimes leaves herself vulnerable to being hurt.

Again her insecurity creeps in and she is desperate for some reassurance - **“All I want/is my glad eye to catch/a glint in your flinty Northern face again”**. The word 'flinty' could have negative connotations of coldness or unresponsiveness, but it could also suggest strength and wisdom - a rock that can support, that is ageless.

We wander with the couple through **“Paddy’s Market”**, not lingering because **“the arches/stank too much today/ the usual wetdog reek rising”**. This is a poem which employs all our senses. In these lines Lochhead perfectly captures sour smell emitting from the **“piles of old damp clothes”**.

In stanza five we hear for the first time the voice of her lover. He notes there is **“Somebody absolutely steamboats…on sweet wine”**

The focus of the poem moves to this character who is depicted squatting **“in a puddle with nothing to sell/but three bent forks a torn/calendar (last year’s)/and a broken plastic sandal”**.

The observational detail makes this section slightly humorous. But there is also a sense of pity evoked for the poverty of this man’s existence. The couple turn away, not having **“the stomach for it today”**.

This line is ambiguous - does she mean that they aren’t in the mood for the market or that they are despondent about their future?

This verse ends in the lines **“No connoisseur can afford to be too scrupulous/about keeping his hands clean”**.

Again this has a double meaning. It suggests that just as a real bargain hunter needs to be prepared to root around for something precious to reveal itself, so too a relationship can only be sustained through effort and hard work.

**Stanzas six to eight**

The idea introduced in the previous stanza of having to search for something 'rare' and 'beautiful' among the **“rags and drunks”** is recapitulated in stanza six. Again it could imply that worthwhile, special moments can be found among the ordinary, banal moments in life if we just take the time to seek them out.

However, we are reminded of Lochhead’s very Scottish sense of pragmatism in the next stanza, which opens with the line, **“At the Barrows everything has its price”**.

The stanza continues by giving examples of the skill of the stallholders at coaxing out the best deal - **“no haggling…this boy knows his radios”**.

Lochhead indulges in some lighthearted wordplay in the line, describing the man selling lengths of curtain **“in fibreglass”** who **“is flabbergasted at the bargain”**.

This again creates an upbeat mood. In spite of her worries, the speaker is enjoying the atmosphere and characters that bring the market to life.

By the end of this stanza however, her concerns have resurfaced and she reflects that **“All the couples we know fall apart/or have kids”**.

It is clear here that this relationship has reached a crossroads of sorts. There seem to be only two paths available to them - break up or start a family. This comment is elaborated on in the following verse. The speaker notes with a sense of bitterness that **“we’ve never shouldered much. We’ll stick to small ikons for our home”**.

She suggests that there is perhaps something artificial about their relationship - that maybe, without the responsibility or burden of raising a family, their bond is somehow less legitimate, less valid.

Instead of filling their home with children, they fill it with objects they have collected - **“a dartboard a peacock feather/a stucco photoframe”**.

In the next stanza we return to the market and the couple are at 'Danny’s Do-Nuts'.

The tension between them is cleverly alluded to in the pun describing the sugar that made them **“grit/our teeth”**.

The double meaning in the following lines really reveals the central concern of the poem as the speaker says **“I keep/losing you and finding you”**.

The simplicity and directness of this statement reinforces the growing doubt the speaker feels about her future.

**Stanzas nine to eleven**

In this section the poet naturally moves towards her conclusion in tandem with the closing of the market.

It is **“packing up time”** and darkness is beginning to fall. The speaker and her partner show each other the bargains they have picked up as they wait in the cold for a bus.

The real value of these objects though is dubious. The box she has bought is **“maybe rosewood”** and has a **“broken catch”** while he has purchased a waistcoat that she notes **“needs a stitch/it just won’t get”**.



Holding hands

The optimism that would have once accompanied these purchases is replaced with cold hard reality and certainty that neither the box nor the waistcoat will ever be mended.

This bleak note is continued in the final line. It reinforces the quandary the couple are confronted with about the future of their relationship.

Their worries are so evident that language is unnecessary and **“there doesn’t seem to be a lot to say”**. The speaker asserts that **“I wish we could either mend things/or learn to throw them away”**.

The masculine rhyme in the last lines adds to the air of finality. While both seem to be aware that their relationship has reached a pivotal moment, they seem unwilling or unable to find the energy to reinvigorate it.

We do not know what the future holds for this couple but there are enough clues throughout to suggest that they are not quite ready to give up. Unlike the bargains picked up at the market that are broken or in a state of disrepair, there is a way that their relationship could still be mended.

**Themes and links to other poems**

This poem deals with a relationship that seems to have reached a crossroads. Lochhead uses a depiction of a day at a flea market to reveal the problems in the relationship.

The poem also illustrates Lochhead’s obvious love and affection for Glasgow as she brings its landmarks and characters to life.

This poem would make a good comparison piece for View of Scotland/Love Poem as it too deals with a romantic relationship against the backdrop of the city at a specific time of year.