Nettles

SUMMARY

The speaker recalls the time their three-year-old son stumbled into a bed of nettles, a kind stinging plant. "Bed" felt like an odd thing to call those green, pointy weapons, that malicious army by the shed: it wasn't a place one could comfortably lie down. Wailing and crying, the boy came running to his parents for aid, and the speaker noticed pale burning bubbles on his vulnerable skin. The boy's parents comforted him until the pain began to ebb. Finally, the boy smiled through his tears. At this point, the speaker grabbed a pruning knife, sharpened it, headed outdoors, and cut angrily until not one nettle in that menacing group was still standing. Then, the speaker set the cut stalks on fire, as if in a funeral ceremony. But two weeks of sunshine and showers created a new army of nettles by the shed: the speaker's son would frequently get hurt in the future.

THEMES

THE INEVITABLE PAIN OF LIFE

"Nettles" explores a parent's desire to protect their child from harm. The speaker recalls their three-year-old son stumbling into a "bed" of "nettles": stinging plants that leave the boy covered in painful "blisters." After tending the boy's wounds, the speaker goes on a rampage, hacking down the nettles with a sharpened knife and burning the slashed stalks. But the speaker's solution doesn't last: it only takes a couple of weeks for the nettles to grow back, and the speaker knows it's only a matter of time before their son is hurt again. The poem thus illustrates the impossibility of protecting children forever. Part of being a parent, the poem implies, is coming to terms with the fact that your children will inevitably experience pain in their lives.

The speaker's son is just three years old when he falls into the "nettle bed"—still vulnerable, yet old enough to wander "behind the shed." Right away, then, the poem suggests that there are dangers lurking just out of sight at any moment and that the speaker won't always be able to predict the ways their child might get hurt. By calling the nettles "green spears" and a "regiment," the speaker also portrays the plants as an enemy army, implying that anything that might harm the boy is automatically the speaker's rival. To the speaker, protecting their child is akin to going to war: a deeply serious matter of life and death. Yet the speaker's fierce battle against the nettles ultimately seems futile—and, perhaps, a little over the top. The speaker sharpens a "billhook" (or pruning knife), "slashe[s] in fury with it" until all the nettles lie vanquished on the ground, then burns the remains of "the fallen dead." But though the speaker won this particular battle, there were others still to come: it only took "two weeks" for the "sun and rain" to "call[] up tall recruits behind the shed." The speaker may have eliminated one source of pain, but another soon fills its place. The speaker realizes that they can't control everything and their son will "often feel sharp wounds again."

The nettles' persistence suggests that pain is a natural part of life, and that no amount of love and devotion to one's children can stop them from getting hurt. In the end, the nettles symbolize all the painful trials and tribulations life will throw the boy's way. As he grows up and wanders farther from the speaker's protection, he's bound to stumble (metaphorically) into any number of prickly, stinging situations.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

My son aged ...
... place for rest.

"Nettles" begins with a straightforward description of a fairly ordinary incident. The speaker recalls how their three-year-old son "fell in the nettle bed." Nettles are stinging weeds, and a "bed" of them is a patch where they happen to grow.

After this matter-of-fact statement, the speaker muses on the word "bed," which they consider "a curious name for those green spears." After all, it's not particularly "rest[ful]" for anyone who wanders into it! Comparing the nettles to "spears" makes sense since they're tall and pointy. But the speaker expands on this metaphor by calling the nettles a "regiment" (military unit) "of spite." It's as if the speaker imagines these nettles as an enemy army. The comparison makes this incident feel a lot more charged; clearly, there's more going on here than a kid getting scratched up by some plants.

The fact that this incident took place "behind the shed" hints at its broader implications. The boy got hurt while wandering out of the speaker's sight; he may be only three, but he's already old enough to land in a thorny situation the speaker couldn't have predicted. Undoubtedly, then, the speaker is thinking ahead to all the ways the world might endanger their child. The speaker describes the nettle patch as "no place for rest," but they might as well be describing the whole world!

The poem is made up of a single stanza (or four quatrains, if you

divide it up based on its ABAB CDCD EFEF GHGH rhyme scheme). It's written in iambic pentameter, meaning that its lines generally contain five *iambs* (feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable: da-DUM). This commonplace meter gives the poem its steady, familiar rhythm. Together, the meter and rhyme scheme give the poem a form similar to that of an English sonnet—only with three extra lines. This resemblance may be intentional, as "Nettles," like traditional sonnets, deals with love and pain. (For more on the poem's form, see the Form, Meter, and Rhyme Scheme sections of this guide.)

Besides rhyme and meter, these lines use some other notable sonic devices, including repetition, alliteration, and assonance. For example, the word "bed" at the end of line 1 repeats at the start of line 2; this anadiplosis forces the reader to slow down and consider the word's implications. Heavy /eh/ assonance in line 1 ("fell in the nettle bed") draws attention to the incident that has prompted the poem. Meanwhile, the harsh /s/, /sp/, and /r/ alliteration of lines 1-4 ("son," "seemed," "spears," "spite," "regiment," "rest")) conveys the speaker's distaste for the plants that harmed their child.

LINES 4-8

With sobs and ...
... a watery grin,

After falling into the nettles, the speaker's son ran to his parents "With sobs and tears," looking for "comfort." That's when the speaker "saw / White blisters beaded on [the child's] tender skin." The forceful /b/ alliteration in "blisters beaded"—which picks up on "boy" in the previous line—highlights the ugly imagery, suggesting how horrifying these welts were to the speaker.

The speaker then "soothed" the boy until "his pain was not so raw" and he managed a "watery grin." In other words, though the boy was still in *some* pain, he bravely smiled through his tears, his spirits restored by his parents.

Notice the strong enjambment across lines 4-6:

> [...] With sobs and tears
> The boy came seeking comfort and I saw
> White blisters beaded on his tender skin.

These enjambments increase the poem's forward momentum, evoking the speaker's rush of panic when they heard their child's cries and saw his wounds. The way the lines are broken helps illustrate how the speaker experienced the event: first they heard the boy's "sobs and tears," then they "saw" the cause of his distress.

LINES 9-13

And then I ...
... the fallen dead,

After comforting their boy, the speaker "took their billhook" (pruning knife) and "honed" (sharpened) "the blade." Notice the speaker's use of /b/ alliteration ("billhook," "blade") and /h/ consonance ("billhook," "honed"), as well as the internal rhyme between "took" and "billhook." These repeated sounds heighten the line's intensity; the reader can almost feel the surge of adrenaline as the speaker rushes "outside" to "slash[]" the nettles "in fury." These lines also contain anaphora: the repeated "And" at the beginnings of lines 9 and 10. This repetition adds both rhythm and momentum:

> And then I took my billhook, honed the blade
> And went outside and slashed in fury with it [...]

Repetition isn't the only source of momentum here. There's a long series of enjambments across lines 9-13, so that from the moment the speaker picks up their knife to the moment they burn the nettles, the language never slows down. The speaker has gone on a bit of a rampage, killing these nettles as if they were enemy soldiers in a "fierce parade."

In general, the war metaphors add to the drama of the scene, suggesting that there's more at stake here than whether the boy will fall into the nettles again. What the speaker is really fighting is the realization that they can't protect their child. As the boy gets older and roams farther from his parents, he's bound to encounter other dangerous situations. Ultimately, he'll have to fend for himself. The nettles, then, symbolize all of life's pain and pitfalls.

Still, the speaker "burn[s]" the nettles in a spirit of triumph, as if they were the "fallen dead" in a war. The speaker even describes the blaze as a "funeral pyre," alluding to the way slain warriors were cremated after ancient battles. For now, the speaker feels as if they've conquered the source of their son's pain, and they feel a sense of accomplishment as the weeds go up in flames.

LINES 14-16

But in two ...
... sharp wounds again.

Alas, it quickly becomes clear that the speaker's efforts were in vain. It only takes "two weeks" for "the busy sun and rain" to replenish the fallen nettles. The speaker describes these weeds, metaphorically, as "tall recruits" (new soldiers) that have just been "called up" (drafted). In other words, the speaker has won a battle against the nettles, but not the war. There are fresh troops on the horizon. And the poem implies that this will always be so: in the end, no parent can shield their child from all the dangers of the world.

Notice the repetition of the phrase "behind the shed," which also occurs at the end of line 3. This phrase stresses the way the boy's injuries happen outside the speaker's view. He will get hurt "again" not because the speaker won't try to protect him,

but because parents can't predict or control every situation their children will encounter. The nettles aren't just a literal source of pain but a symbol of all the things that will hurt the boy throughout his life.

Thus, the speaker finally acknowledges that their boy "would often feel sharp wounds again." Try as they might, they can't shelter him forever. The nettles' persistence suggests that life is inherently full of danger; as soon as one hazard is removed, another will replace it. Ultimately, the poem implies that pain is an inevitable part of life—and that accepting this harsh reality is part of parenthood.

SYMBOLS

NETTLES

The titular nettles symbolize life's unavoidable pain, including the pain the speaker's boy will inevitably experience as he ages. Though the child is only three, he's already old enough to wander out "behind the shed" where these stinging nettles grow. Accordingly, the nettles represent all the dangers the speaker can't predict and therefore can't protect their son from. Though they cut the nettles down and even burn the remains to stop them from spreading, new nettles pop up after only a couple of weeks.

So when the speaker says that their boy "would often feel sharp wounds again," they're not just referring to the prickly nettles. They're suggesting that the older the boy gets and the farther he roams, the less his parents will be able to protect him. Though no parent wants to see their child hurt, the speaker knows that pain is part of every life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My son aged three fell in the nettle bed."
- **Lines 9-12:** "And then I took my billhook, honed the blade / And went outside and slashed in fury with it / Till not a nettle in that fierce parade / Stood upright any more"
- **Lines 14-16:** "But in two weeks the busy sun and rain / Had called up tall recruits behind the shed: / My son would often feel sharp wounds again."

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem uses a few different kinds of repetition to create rhythm and emphasis.

In the first two lines, for example, the poet uses anadiplosis:

> My son aged three fell in the nettle bed.
> 'Bed' seemed a curious name for those green spears,

This repetition highlights a word the speaker finds rather inappropriate to the thing it's describing: there's nothing "rest[ful]" about these spiky, malicious plants.

The speaker also repeats the phrase "behind the shed" in lines 3 and 15, each time followed by a colon and an accompanying, matter-of-fact statement ("It was no place for rest," "My son would often feel sharp wounds again"). Here, the repetition suggests the significance of the nettles' location: because they grow "behind" a large object, they lie outside the speaker's view. By extension, the speaker can't protect their son from things they can't see or predict.

There's also some brief anaphora in lines 9-10:

> And then I took my billhook, honed the blade
> And went outside and slashed in fury with it

Anaphora creates rhythm and momentum, which heightens the emotional intensity of these lines. As the speaker takes a series of rapid actions linked by "And," the reader can *feel* the speaker's anger at these harmful plants.

The speaker also repeats the word "nettle" in lines 1 and 11, as well as in the title itself. The more the speaker emphasizes these nettles, the more they come to symbolize all the lurking dangers in the wider world—all the things that will cause the boy to "feel sharp wounds again."

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "nettle," "bed"
- **Line 2:** "Bed"
- **Line 3:** "behind the shed," ":"
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 11:** "nettle"
- **Line 15:** "behind the shed," ":"

METAPHOR

The poem uses several metaphors, all of which involve war. This pattern begins in lines 2-3, as the speaker compares the nettles to "green spears" and a "regiment of spite behind the shed." (A "regiment" is a unit of soldiers.) These comparisons ratchet up the poem's intensity, suggesting that what might seem like a minor incident—a boy getting stung by some prickly plants—has a more profound significance. They also suggest that anything that harms the boy is automatically the speaker's enemy.

In lines 11-13, the speaker expands on the war metaphor, calling the nettles a "fierce parade" that they cut down and "burned" on a "funeral pyre." In other words, the plants were

like a parade of soldiers killed in their prime and given a ceremonial funeral. Calling them "the fallen dead" makes this moment feel somber as well as triumphant—as if the speaker has actually killed for their son, rather than just cut down some plants. The metaphors make the poem feel almost epic, lending emotional depth to this otherwise commonplace event.

Finally, in lines 14-15, the speaker says that after a couple of weeks, "the busy sun and rain / Had called up tall recruits behind the shed." In other words, the "busy" weather (like a military preparing for war) brought forth a new crop of nettles (like a crop of newly enlisted soldiers). These metaphors drive home the idea that while parents can win specific battles—shielding their children from this hazard or that—they are doomed to lose the war, because the world will always bring new sources of danger and pain.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "those green spears, / That regiment of spite behind the shed:"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Till not a nettle in that fierce parade / Stood upright any more. "
- **Lines 12-13:** "And then I lit / A funeral pyre to burn the fallen dead"
- **Lines 14-15:** "But in two weeks the busy sun and rain / Had called up tall recruits behind the shed"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds musicality, emphasis, and intensity to the poem. In lines 2-5, for example, there's a smattering of /s/, /sp/, and /r/ alliteration:

> 'Bed' seemed a curious name for those green spears,
> That regiment of spite behind the shed:
> It was no place for rest. With sobs and tears
> The boy came seeking comfort and I saw

The prominence of /s/ and /sp/ sounds evokes the nastiness of the nettles. It's as if the speaker is so angry at the plants for harming their little boy that they're hissing or spitting these words. Rough /r/ alliteration adds to the sense that there's nothing nice or "rest[ful]" about these plants.

Next, there's some prominent /s/ and /b/ alliteration in lines 6-7:

> White blisters beaded on his tender skin.
> We soothed him till his pain was not so raw.

The strong, back-to-back /b/ sounds call attention to the imagery of the boy's damaged skin, while the smooth sibilance of "skin" and "soothed" echoes the gentle sound of the parents trying to comfort their son.

Line 9 brings more /b/ alliteration, as the speaker says that they "took [their] billhook, honed the blade," and cut down all the nettles. Here, the /b/ sounds come off as explosive; after all, the speaker is charging these nettles as furiously as they would an enemy army.

Finally, alliteration highlights the dramatic metaphor in line 13:

> A funeral pyre to burn the fallen dead,

The repeated /f/ sounds intensify this line, which describes the moment when the speaker feels they've triumphed over the enemy. This temporary victory makes the speaker's ultimate realization—that they can't protect their son from pain—all the more disappointing.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "seemed," "spears"
- **Line 3:** "regiment," "spite"
- **Line 4:** "rest," "sobs"
- **Line 5:** "seeking," "saw"
- **Line 6:** "blisters," "beaded," "skin"
- **Line 7:** "soothed"
- **Line 9:** "billhook," "blade"
- **Line 13:** "funeral," "fallen"

IMAGERY

In addition to war metaphors, the poem uses vivid imagery to evoke the boy's pain and the speaker's response to it. In lines 4-6, for example, the speaker recalls:

> [...] With sobs and tears
> The boy came seeking comfort and I saw
> White blisters beaded on his tender skin.

Before the speaker even knows what's happened, he's moved by the sound of the boy's crying as he runs to his parents in search of solace. It's not until the speaker spies the "blisters" on the boy's sensitive "skin" that they understand what's harmed him. The disturbing specificity of the visual details here—"White," "beaded"—captures the horror of the moment.

In line 8, the speaker recounts how, after much "sooth[ing]," the boy finally "offered [...] a watery grin." This image suggests that the boy is smiling through his tears; he's still in pain, but regaining his morale after a terrifying incident. Once the boy has shown that he'll be okay, the speaker sharpens their "billhook" (pruning knife) and storms into the yard, "slash[ing] in fury" at the nettles that hurt their son. The verb "slashed" implies that the speaker was wild with anger. There's something almost over-the-top about this response, suggesting that it isn't *just* the nettles the speaker wants to destroy, but rather *anything* that might hurt their son. Yet the poem's final tactile

(touch) image—"My son would often feel sharp wounds again"—drives home the futility of this mission.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "With sobs and tears / The boy came seeking comfort and I saw / White blisters beaded on his tender skin."
- **Line 8:** "At last he offered us a watery grin,"
- **Lines 9-10:** "And then I took my billhook, honed the blade / And went outside and slashed in fury with it"
- **Line 16:** "My son would often feel sharp wounds again."

VOCABULARY

Nettle bed (Line 1) - A patch of nettles, which are a kind of spiny, stinging weed.

Regiment (Line 3) - A unit of soldiers (here used metaphorically).

Spite (Line 3) - Bitterness or malice. (Here used figuratively, to suggest that these personified nettles sting people maliciously.)

Watery grin (Line 8) - This phrase suggests that the boy is smiling through his tears.

Billhook (Line 9) - A pruning knife.

Funeral pyre (Lines 12-13) - A wooden platform used for cremating bodies. Here used metaphorically to indicate that the speaker is burning the nettle stalks.

Recruits (Line 15) - New soldiers. (Here used metaphorically to describe the freshly sprouted nettles.)

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Nettles" contains a single stanza made up of 16 lines of iambic pentameter. This meter creates a steady, familiar rhythm (more about that in the Meter section of this guide). Though there are no stanza breaks, the poem can also be divided into four quatrains (four-line stanzas) based on its rhyme scheme (ABAB CDCD EFEF GHGH). In this way, the poem closely resembles a sonnet; the only difference is that this poem contains a fourth quatrain, whereas an English sonnet has three quatrains and ends on a rhyming couplet.

Still, the last three lines of this poem function much like the final couplet in an English sonnet, which often marks a reversal in the speaker's argument. In this case, the speaker has been describing their fierce efforts to prevent the nettles from hurting their son again. Yet the poem ends with a new crop of nettles springing up and the speaker acknowledging that the boy will inevitably feel pain in the future. This almost sonnet-like structure lends a certain familiarity to the poem's trajectory. Readers who know the sonnet tradition well may sense how the poem will end, both because of the form and because, on some level, they already know kids can't be sheltered forever.

METER

"Nettles" is written in iambic pentameter, meaning that its lines generally consist of five *iambs*: feet that follow an unstressed-stressed pattern (da-DUM). This is the most common meter in English-language poetry, so it gives the poem a familiar, steady rhythm. Here's how the pattern plays out in the first two lines:

> My son | aged three | fell in | the net- | tle bed.
> 'Bed' seemed | a cur- | ious name | for those | green spears,

Overall, the rhythm is recognizably iambic, though there's a trochee (a foot made up of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable: DA-dum) in lines 1 and 2, and a spondee (two stressed syllables in a row) at the end of line 2. This variability allows the poem to stress certain words and images—like "Bed," a word the speaker calls into question—while generally keeping the rhythm intact.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a simple ABAB CDCD EFEF GHGH rhyme scheme. This scheme makes for a formally consistent poem and places extra emphasis on words at the ends of lines, causing them to stand out in the reader's mind. (Several of these words, including "tears," "raw," and "again," relate to the poem's core theme: the recurrence and inevitability of suffering.)

All of the poem's end rhymes are exact ("bed"/"shed," "spears"/"tears," etc.), making the poem all the more musical and consistent. (American readers will hear "rain" and "again" as a slant rhyme, but since the poet is British and "again" is pronounced "uh-GAYN" in British English, this, too, counts as an exact rhyme.) The poem's musicality helps draw out its emotional intensity, underscoring the speaker's strong feelings about parenthood and pain.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is, first and foremost, a parent. The poem doesn't specify the speaker's gender, age, or any other personal information. It focuses solely on the speaker's experience of seeing their child hurt, and of grappling with the fact that he'll undoubtedly suffer pain again.

Though the poem doesn't need to be read autobiographically, Scannell likely drew on his own experience as a parent when writing this poem. What's more, his use of war

metaphors—comparing the nettles to "spears," "a regiment," "a fierce parade," and "tall recruits"—reflect his experiences as a soldier in World War II.

SETTING

The poem begins outside the speaker's home, as their three-year-old son falls into a patch of stinging "nettles" growing "behind the shed." This out-of-the-way location is important: it shows that, while the boy is still quite young, he's already able to leave his parents' sight and get hurt.

When the boy comes crying to his parents, the speaker comforts him, then furiously grabs his pruning knife and marches "outside" to confront the "fierce parade" of nettles. The speaker describes the nettles with war metaphors ("green spears," "regiment of spite," etc.), suggesting that the minute these weeds hurt the boy, they became a sworn enemy. The speaker's protective instinct prompted them to cut down and "burn" the nettles, as if on a "funeral pyre" (a wooden structure used to cremate the dead, especially in wartime).

But the speaker's efforts can only accomplish so much. "Two weeks" of "sun and rain" raise up a new patch of nettles behind the shed, proving that the speaker can't protect their son forever. In the broadest sense, then, the poem's setting is the dangerous world that surrounds us all.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

English poet Vernon Scannell (1922-2007) published "Nettles" in his 1980 *New & Collected Poems: 1950-1980*. A prolific writer, Scannell wrote and published over 30 poetry collections as well as multiple novels and memoirs. Many of his works were informed by his time serving in World War II, as well as his time as a professional boxer. Though "Nettles" refers to neither experience directly, it does contain numerous war metaphors that undoubtedly draw on his experiences as a soldier.

Although he began writing well after modernism had upended literary traditions and ushered in an age of more experimental verse, Scannell continued to use conventions such as meter and rhyme schemes, both of which appear in "Nettles." His poems are known for being precise and accessible to a general audience.

Scannell is particularly remembered for his war poetry; his 1965 book *Walking Wounded* is considered one of the best poetry collections to come out of World War II. He is often grouped with other English poets whose work was shaped by the war and its aftermath, including Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, and Geoffrey Hill.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Nettles" doesn't refer directly to any historical events. Though it uses multiple war metaphors, it applies them to something ordinary—prickly weeds—in order to illustrate the unavoidability of pain.

That said, Scannell's service in World War II had an enormous impact on all his subsequent writing. At age 14, he escaped his abusive father to work in an accounting firm; at 18, he enlisted in the war soon after it broke out, not really understanding what he was signing up for. Finding himself ill-suited to military life, he deserted twice, was injured, got arrested, and spent time in both a military prison and a mental institution for abandoning his duties as a soldier. The looming sense of danger that permeates "Nettles"—including its specific references to "regiment[s]," "recruits," and so on—likely reflects his own feelings of fear and vulnerability during and after the war.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of "Nettles." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Wttwy0recg)
- An Obituary of the Poet — A Guardian article about Scannell's varied life and career. (https://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/nov/19/guardianobituaries.poetry)
- More About Nettles — Facts about the plant at the center of the poem. (https://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/105371.html)
- A Biography of the Poet — An overview of Scannell's life and accomplishments, courtesy of the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/vernon-scannell)
- A Scannell Exhibit — A digital exhibition on the poet, via Leeds University. (https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections/research-spotlight/28)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER VERNON SCANNELL POEMS

- Hide and Seek

HOW TO CITE

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