

Nettles by Vernon Scannell

My son aged three fell in the nettle bed.
'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
White blisters beaded on his tender skin.
We soothed him till his pain was not so raw.
At last he offered us a watery grin,
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. And then I lit
A funeral pyre to burn the fallen dead,
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.



Analysis:

The poem is a simple narrative which tells of an accident the poet's son had one day. The impression given is that the nettles are like enemy soldiers attacking the little boy. The poet seems to feel that the nettles deliberately hurt his son and that it is his job to take revenge and ensure that they cannot hurt the three-year-old child again.

The nettles are personified in a number of striking and unusual images which highlight the danger they pose to the small boy. In the opening lines, the poet uses a vivid metaphor comparing the nettles to "green spears". This is our first indication that he sees the nettles as a hostile force that must be fought. He finds it ironic that the nettles grow in a bed, as this would seem to have connotations of comfort and safety, but as the poet says, this bed is "no place for rest". Rather, he goes on to suggest, it is a battlefield and the nettles are the enemy.

The description of the son's injuries shows how much the father sympathises with the little boy. The alliterative 'blisters beaded' suggests the bumpy swellings left by the nettles on the boy's 'tender skin'. Unlike the spiteful, fierce nettles, the boy is 'tender'. The loving parents soothe the

boy as best they can and are finally rewarded with a 'watery grin'.

The poet refers to the nettles as "That regiment of spite". In the poet's mind, the nettles are not just soldiers, but are motivated by malice and driven by an urge to cause pain. This seems to give the poet a focus for his anger and frustration at seeing his son hurt. If he can take it out on the nettles, so much the better.

The idea of the nettles being soldiers is continued when the poet tells us that he took his slash hook and cut down every nettle in that "fierce parade". His reaction to the nettles' 'attack' is just as violent as the nettles were when they stung the boy. The use of the word "fierce" reinforces the poet's view of the nettles as being dangerous and savage. The final lines of the poem use more military imagery when the poet refers to the nettles that he burns as "the fallen dead" who will soon be replaced by more "tall recruits".

The final line of the poem seems to indicate that the poet knows that he will not be able to protect his son forever, and that he will experience pain and suffering in his life, despite his father's protective love. The nettles are a metaphor for the threats that lurk in the outside world.

At three, the little boy is old enough to wander "behind the shed" and out of his parents' sight for a brief time. Even in this relatively safe environment, he is hurt and all his parents can do is try to soothe him until his pain is "not so raw". But his father knows that, even though he cut down these nettles so that they could not sting the boy, others will grow in their place. In only two weeks, he predicts, there will be more "tall recruits behind the shed". All of the poet's furious slashing and burning is pointless and he knows it. His son will eventually venture much further into the world than merely behind the shed, and his father will not be able to protect him from the inevitable suffering that awaits him as he goes through life. This time, the poet has taken his revenge and has managed to eliminate the danger to his son. But he knows that, although he may have won the battle, he will not win the war. His son will "often feel sharp wounds again."

Theme: A father's protective love for his child and his realization that he will not always be able to spare his son life's hurts.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Love
- ✓ Parents and children
- ✓ Wishes or thoughts
- ✓ Relationship