

ASM TUITION ACADEMY

NETTLES

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. Next task: 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.

Summary of "Nettles"

In "Nettles," the speaker describes an incident where his three-year-old son falls into a bed of nettles, causing painful blisters. The speaker, driven by a protective instinct, comforts his son before going outside to destroy the nettles in a furious rage. He uses a billhook to cut them down and sets a fire to burn the "fallen dead." However, despite his efforts, the poem concludes with the recognition that in two weeks, new nettles have grown in the same place, symbolizing that pain and challenges are inevitable in life. The speaker realizes that no matter how hard he tries to protect his son, he will inevitably experience more pain in the future.

Analysis of "Nettles"

1. **Parental Protection and Helplessness:**
 - The central theme of the poem is **parental protection** and the associated **helplessness** in shielding children from the inevitable pains of life. The speaker is initially filled with fury at the nettles that hurt his son, leading him to cut them down in a violent attempt to protect his child. However, the final lines of the poem highlight the futility of these efforts, as new nettles grow back, symbolizing that no matter how much parents try, they cannot fully shield their children from future suffering.
2. **Cycle of Pain:**

- The **cyclical nature of pain** is also a key theme. The poem implies that life's challenges and suffering will continually arise, just as the nettles grow back despite the speaker's efforts to eradicate them. This represents the **inevitability of pain**, especially for children growing up. The speaker recognizes that his son will face many more emotional or physical "wounds" in life, symbolized by the regrowth of the nettles.
3. **Aggression and Futility:**
- The speaker's violent reaction to the nettles, slashing them with a billhook and burning them, represents the **aggression and frustration** parents can feel when they see their child in pain. However, this action also highlights the **futility** of trying to protect someone from all harm, as the nettles regrow. This moment of realization reflects the deeper emotional conflict between wanting to protect and understanding that not all harm can be prevented.
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Poetic Devices in "Nettles"

1. **Extended Metaphor:**
 - The **nettles** serve as an extended metaphor for the **pains and challenges** that the speaker's son will face throughout his life. Just as the nettles continue to grow back despite being cut down and burned, pain and difficulties will continue to arise, no matter how fiercely the speaker tries to prevent them.
2. **Personification:**
 - The nettles are **personified** as a "regiment of spite," creating a militaristic image that emphasizes their harmful, invasive nature. This description portrays the nettles as enemies that the speaker must fight in order to protect his son. The reference to "tall recruits" further extends this personification, suggesting that new challenges will keep coming, much like soldiers replacing fallen comrades in battle.
3. **Imagery:**
 - Scannell uses vivid **imagery** to evoke both the physical pain of the nettles and the emotional intensity of the father's reaction. The "white blisters" on the child's skin evoke sympathy and create a sharp image of injury, while the speaker's "slashing in fury" with the billhook and the "funeral pyre" of burning nettles evoke his intense emotional response to his son's pain.
4. **Alliteration:**
 - Scannell employs **alliteration** to emphasize the intensity of the father's actions. In the line, "slashed in fury with it," the repetition of the 's' sound mimics the harsh, violent action of cutting down the nettles. Similarly, in the line, "stood upright any more," the 's' sound emphasizes the sense of satisfaction and finality in the speaker's initial triumph over the nettles.
5. **Symbolism:**
 - The **nettles** symbolize the **inevitable pains** of life that the son (and all children) will face. The speaker's attempts to destroy them represent the **desire to protect** loved ones from harm. However, the fact that the nettles grow back suggests that pain is unavoidable and continuous, a **cycle of suffering** that is part of life.
6. **Juxtaposition:**

- The poem contrasts the vulnerability of the child with the aggressive response of the parent. The **juxtaposition** between the "tender skin" of the child and the "regiment of spite" represented by the nettles emphasizes the child's innocence and the harmful forces he will inevitably face. Similarly, the father's nurturing side (soothing the child) is juxtaposed with his violent, vengeful actions toward the nettles.
7. **Enjambment:**
- **Enjambment** is used to carry the reader through the poem, mimicking the father's continuous, uncontrollable emotions as he reacts to his son's injury. For example, the lines "With sobs and tears / The boy came seeking comfort and I saw / White blisters beaded on his tender skin" flow into each other without a pause, reflecting the quick succession of events and emotions.
8. **Military Imagery:**
- The nettles are described in **military terms**, such as "regiment of spite," "fierce parade," and "recruits," suggesting that the speaker views the nettles (and by extension, pain) as an enemy to be fought. This militaristic language highlights the father's determination to protect his son but also reinforces the idea that pain is an inevitable, recurring force.
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Themes in "Nettles"

1. **Parental Love and Protection:**
- The speaker's intense reaction to his son's pain reflects the deep instinct of **parental protection**. The poem shows how parents often feel powerless when their children are hurt, and how that helplessness can translate into frustration and anger. However, the poem also suggests that no amount of protection can prevent a child from experiencing pain in life.
2. **Inevitability of Pain:**
- The regrowth of the nettles at the end of the poem symbolizes the **inevitability of pain** in life. Despite the speaker's efforts to destroy them, the nettles return, just as future pain will inevitably come into his son's life. The poem suggests that part of growing up is learning to cope with pain and that parents cannot shield their children from everything.
3. **Cycle of Life:**
- The poem hints at the **cyclical nature of life**, particularly the repetition of painful experiences. The nettles grow back despite the speaker's attempts to eradicate them, much like the difficulties that recur in life. The image of the "tall recruits" suggests that new challenges will always arise, even as old ones are dealt with.
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Conclusion

Vernon Scannell's "Nettles" is a poignant reflection on the protective instincts of a parent and the inevitability of life's pains and challenges. Through vivid imagery, personification, and an extended metaphor, the poem explores the themes of parental love, the futility of attempting to shield loved ones from suffering, and the inescapable cycle of pain. The use of

military language and aggressive imagery juxtaposed with tender moments of care creates a powerful contrast, illustrating the emotional complexity of parenthood.

Comparison with,

1-One flesh

2-A child to his sick grandfather

Themes

1. Parental/Generational Love and Protection:

- "Nettles" focuses on **parental protection** and the inevitable pain that a parent cannot shield their child from. The speaker in Scannell's poem feels both anger and helplessness as he watches his son suffer from falling into the nettles, recognizing that no matter how fiercely he tries to destroy the nettles (symbolic of life's pain), more pain will arise in the future.
- "A Child to His Sick Grandfather" also explores **generational care**, but in this case, it is the grandchild expressing love and concern for the weakening grandfather. The child's tone is one of tenderness and sadness as they try to comfort their ailing grandparent, highlighting the emotional connection between generations and the helplessness in the face of mortality.
- "One Flesh" by Elizabeth Jennings, on the other hand, examines the relationship between two aging parents. Here, the theme is less about protection and more about the distance and change in **intimacy** that occurs in old age. The speaker reflects on how her parents, once united in love, now live separately yet still connected by the shared experience of their past. The poem portrays a more subtle form of love that is marked by quiet companionship rather than passion.

2. Inevitability of Pain and Loss:

- In "Nettles," Scannell highlights the **inevitability of pain** as part of life, both physical and emotional. The father's furious efforts to destroy the nettles reflect his desire to protect his son from future harm, but the nettles' regrowth symbolizes that pain is unavoidable, no matter how hard parents try to shield their children.
 - "A Child to His Sick Grandfather" deals with the inevitability of **loss and mortality**. The child struggles to accept the decline of the grandfather, who once provided strength and protection, but is now fading. The theme of loss is central to the poem, as the child realizes the inevitability of death and the emotional toll it takes on the family.
 - "One Flesh" similarly addresses the idea of **inevitable change** in relationships. The parents' distance from each other reflects the passage of time and the emotional shifts that accompany aging. The poem suggests that while love remains, it may evolve into something quieter and less tangible, echoing the sense of loss not through death but through a loss of intimacy.
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Tone

1. **Protective vs. Reflective vs. Tender:**

- "Nettles" has a tone of **protectiveness** and underlying frustration. The speaker's initial concern for his son gives way to anger at the nettles, symbolizing the speaker's desire to fight against the forces that cause pain. However, by the end of the poem, the tone becomes more resigned as the speaker acknowledges the inevitability of future pain.
 - "A Child to His Sick Grandfather" has a **tender and melancholic tone**. The child's sadness and worry for the ailing grandfather are evident, as is the sense of sorrow as the child confronts the fragility of life. The tone is deeply personal, with a mixture of affection and grief as the child realizes that death is near.
 - "One Flesh" has a **reflective and contemplative tone**. The speaker observes the distant relationship between her parents, offering insights into the emotional and physical separation that has occurred over time. There is a quiet acceptance in the tone, with no sense of anger or sorrow, but rather a meditative recognition of how love changes with age.
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Structure and Form

1. **Traditional Forms vs. Free Verse:**

- "Nettles" is written in a traditional **quatrain form** with regular rhyme (ABAB) and meter. The structured form mirrors the disciplined, almost militaristic tone of the speaker's efforts to eradicate the nettles. However, the cyclical nature of pain is also reflected in the orderly structure, implying that life's difficulties will continue in a repetitive cycle.
 - "A Child to His Sick Grandfather" is also written in **regular quatrains**, with a consistent rhyme scheme (AABB), giving the poem a traditional and rhythmic quality. This regular structure contrasts with the theme of decline and decay, creating a poignant effect as the child's steady love and care are juxtaposed against the grandfather's physical deterioration.
 - "One Flesh" is written in **three stanzas of six lines each** (sestets) with a loosely structured rhyme scheme, creating a reflective, measured tone. The poem's lack of a strict meter or rhyme reflects the quiet, subdued emotional landscape of the ageing couple's relationship.
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Poetic Devices

1. **Metaphor:**

- In "Nettles," the nettles are an extended **metaphor** for the unavoidable pains in life. The father's furious attack on the nettles symbolizes his desire to protect his son from life's inevitable hardships, while the regrowth of the nettles represents the continuous cycle of suffering that the son will face.
- In "A Child to His Sick Grandfather," the **grandfather is metaphorically compared** to a fading warrior, once strong and powerful but now weakened

by age and illness. The child reflects on the grandfather's former vitality and laments his decline, using imagery of battle and strength to highlight the contrast between past and present.

- "**One Flesh**" uses more subtle **metaphorical language** to explore the relationship between the aging parents. The physical distance between them in bed represents the emotional and intimate distance that has grown over time, while the "cool silence" and "tossing of their covers" symbolize the complexity of their emotional state.

2. Imagery:

- "**Nettles**" uses vivid **military imagery** to describe the nettles as a "regiment of spite" and "tall recruits," highlighting the father's view of the nettles as enemies to be fought. This imagery reflects his determination to protect his son from harm.
- In "**A Child to His Sick Grandfather**," the imagery is focused on the physical decline of the grandfather, with descriptions such as "your fixed eyes" and "the hollow sound," which emphasize his frailty and the inevitability of death. The imagery contrasts his former strength with his current weakness, making the theme of loss more poignant.
- "**One Flesh**" employs **domestic imagery**, such as the "tossed-up covers" and "books beside each other," to emphasize the quiet, routine existence of the aging couple. The imagery suggests a deep but distant companionship, capturing the emotional and physical space that has developed between them over time.

3. Alliteration and Sound:

- In "**Nettles**," alliteration is used to emphasize the speaker's violent reaction, such as "slashed in fury" and "stood upright." These harsh sounds reinforce the father's anger and frustration in his futile attempt to protect his son.
- "**A Child to His Sick Grandfather**" uses softer, more melodic sounds to reflect the tender and sorrowful tone of the poem. The child's gentle voice contrasts with the harsh reality of the grandfather's illness.
- "**One Flesh**" uses **sound and silence** as a key device, particularly in the phrase "silence between them like a thread." The lack of sound is as important as the words, emphasizing the emotional distance and the passage of time in their relationship.

Perspective on Relationships

1. Parent-Child vs. Grandparent-Grandchild vs. Husband-Wife:

- "**Nettles**" explores the relationship between a **parent and child**, focusing on the parent's protective instincts and the realization that no matter how hard they try, they cannot prevent all pain from entering their child's life.
- "**A Child to His Sick Grandfather**" presents a **grandparent-grandchild** relationship, where the child expresses love, admiration, and sadness for the grandfather's decline. The child's perspective shows the helplessness felt when a loved one is nearing death.
- "**One Flesh**" examines the relationship between a **husband and wife** who have grown emotionally distant in their old age. The poem reflects on the

changes that occur in relationships over time, particularly the shift from passion to quiet companionship.

Conclusion

When comparing "**Nettles**," "**A Child to His Sick Grandfather**," and "**One Flesh**," we see different representations of familial relationships and the passage of time. "**Nettles**" emphasizes the protective instincts of a parent and the inevitability of pain in life, while "**A Child to His Sick Grandfather**" focuses on the tenderness and sadness of watching an elder decline. "**One Flesh**" offers a reflective look at a long-standing marriage, exploring the emotional distance that comes with age. All three poems examine love, protection, and the inevitability of loss or change, but from different generational and relational perspectives.

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