

Nettles

Overview:

In this potentially autobiographical poem, a father remembers when his three-year-old son fell into a bed of nettles, and recalls the powerful desire to avenge his son by cutting them down. The poem ends with the awareness that there are many dangers in life from which a father cannot protect his child.

Context:

- Scannell was most famous as a war poet. He was in the army but, disgusted by seeing soldiers looting on a battlefield, deserted. He was court-martialled and imprisoned; later, he was forced to re-join the army but deserted again, and for some time was in hiding.
- Scannell lost two of his six children – one of his sons died in infancy (in the 1970s – ‘Nettles’ was published in 1980), and another died (much later) in a motorcycle accident.

Structure:

- The poem is sixteen lines long in iambic pentameter with alternate pairs of rhymes (ABABCD CD *etc*).
- There is only one line which definitely cannot be read with ten syllables – line 10, where the speaker’s anger against the nettles seems to force its way out of the regular metre.
- At the end of the poem, the speaker recognises the futility of his actions. The poem starts with the nettles

Key Images:

- The nettles themselves, which at the start of the poem are literal nettles and by the end of the poem have become a symbol of life’s problems.
- Metaphors relating to the army/ warfare (“spears”; “regiment”; “fierce parade”; “tall recruits”).
- The contrast between the vulnerable child and the apparently spiteful nettles.

Potential Comparisons

Parent and child relationships: ‘My Father Would Not Show Us’



Compassion in relationships: ‘The Manhunt’; ‘A Child to his Sick Grandfather’

Devotion: ‘i wanna be yours’