**Nettles – Vernon Scannell**

Vernon Scannell (1922-2007)

He was in the army, before becoming a professional boxer and then an English teacher.

The poem ‘Nettles’ is an anecdote about parental love. The ending widens the meaning out to include the parent’s inability to always protect the child.

The lexis (language) of the poem is one of war and the military:

- spears
- regiment
- blade
- parade
- Tall recruits
- Fallen dead
- Military language
- Sharp wounds

Nettles are a common weed. They grow very tall and have spear shaped leaves with serrated edges. The surface of the leaf does not sting. It is the tiny hairs that protrude from the edges that are poisonous and sting if touched; it causes nettle-rash – small, painful blisters on the skin.

The action revolves around the event that happens to the three year old boy and the reactions of his father.

‘Bed’ is a commonly used gardening term, but when linked to its more usual definition, as Scannell points out, seem slightly odd. Bed in its usual context
suggests softness, warmth and comfort— the opposite of what the ‘bed’ of nettles is like.

The metaphor ‘green spears’ is the first military reference in the poem. They look reminiscent of the lines of spears being held by soldiers in ancient battle scenes. The nettles are dangerous in the same way as the spears. The flat surface will not harm but the edges are razor-sharp.

The second military metaphor used by Scannell builds on the first:

‘That regiment of spite’

This is the second reference to the number of nettles there are. Once growing, nettles are prolific and will keep multiplying unless they are destroyed. This alludes to the idea of old battles being fought by regiments one lined up after the other. The opposition would feel like they faced an endless line of soldiers. It is exactly the same with the nettles.

The use of the noun ‘spite’ suggests that the stinging of the nettles is deliberate— almost that they are trying to hurt people.

The fact that the nettles are behind the shed suggests that they’re hiding, waiting for an unsuspecting child to come along exploring, then they will attack.

When stung the child acts instinctively— seeking comfort from a parent. Scannell is all too aware that some part of this instinct lingers into later life and that a parent cannot always be there to comfort and protect the child.

The harsh alliteration of ‘blisters beaded’ reflects the pain and anguish felt by the child and the empathy of the father towards his feelings.

The use of the adjective ‘tender’ before the noun ‘skin’ emphasises the point that this a small child with sensitive skin who will feel the pain of the sting far more acutely than an adult would.

The personal pronoun ‘we’ has changed the parental involvement from just the father earlier in the poem to, presumably, the mother too, trying to calm the child down. It gives the impression that the child was really upset. The verb ‘soothed’ is particular to the action of calming someone who is in distress. It suggests the parental instinct kicking in.

The pain is described as ‘raw’, meaning fresh and sore. It can also be interpreted as being new and untreated when referring to a wound.

Half way through the poem the child begins to recover from his ordeal:
'At last he offered us a watery grin'

The adjective watery suggests a weak, yet still tearful smile – a non-verbal indication that he was making a recovery. Now that the child is beginning to get better we see the reaction of his father to what has happened.

The father’s reaction in spontaneous, dramatic and instinctive: fuelled by anger towards the thing that has hurt his son. It is also the instinctive response of a parent seeking revenge on the thing that has hurt his child.

There is alliteration in the lines:

'I took my hook and honed the blade'

This is a softer form of alliteration, but suggests violence and creates a sinister overtone to this part of the poem. The verb ‘honed’ is used in this context to suggest the sharpening of the scythe. Its more usual meaning is to perfect a skill. This shows the reader that the man wants the blade to be perfectly sharp, ready for his task.

Scannell uses the line:

'Slashed in fury,'

to describe the actions of the man attacking the nettles. It shows his anger. He is not methodically chopping down the nettle but ‘slashing’ at them in an out of control manner. The onomatopoeia of the verb slashed reflects the action the blade is taking and the sound it makes. This shows the reader that the man wants to inflict as much damage as possible on the nettles.

The military lexis of the poem continues with the lines:

'till not a nettle in that fierce parade

Stood upright anymore'

The suggestion here is that the nettles were aggressive, just like an army lined up ready for battle with all the men standing to attention.

The father’s impulse is destroy all the nettles, not just some of them. It infers that his anger does not dissipate after he has vented his fury, but continues until every last nettle has been destroyed.

Once the slaughter of the nettles has taken place, Scannell moves matter-of-factly into the disposal of the fallen – just as would happen on a real battle-field. The metaphor is extended into the next line:
‘I lit a funeral pyre to burn the fallen dead’

The lighting of the funeral pyre/garden bonfire suggests a certain reverence to the enemy once dead. In ancient times funeral pyres were lit as the quickest and simplest way of disposing of the dead.

The use of a colon after ‘next task:’ makes this section of the poem take on a brisk and business-like pace.

The final section of the poem is moved in to quickly. There is no verse change or pause created in the writing to suggest the passage of time. This reflects the idea that gardening, like warfare, and in fact, life is about constant growth, renewal and death – there aren’t any pauses in it.

In the final metaphor the two giants of the opposing army, the sun and the rain have produced yet more stinging nettles behind the shed, ready to hurt the next person who happens upon them. The military metaphor ‘tall recruits’ reminds us that there are always more nettles, just as there are always more willing recruits ready to volunteer to fight.

The final line is a summing up of the harsh realities of life and reminding the reader of the time-limited ability of a parent to protect their child from pain.