

# Edexcel English Literature GCSE

## Poetry Collection: Relationships

Nettles - *Vernon Scannell*

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## NETTLES

Vernon Scannell

### Brief Summary

The speaker is the parent of a young boy. The speaker recalls what happens when their son falls into a nettlebed. Seeking revenge, the speaker destroys the nettlebed. Naturally, the nettles grow back, exposing the parent's efforts as futile. Though the poem recounts a particular incident, it is an allegory for how a parent protects their child throughout life.

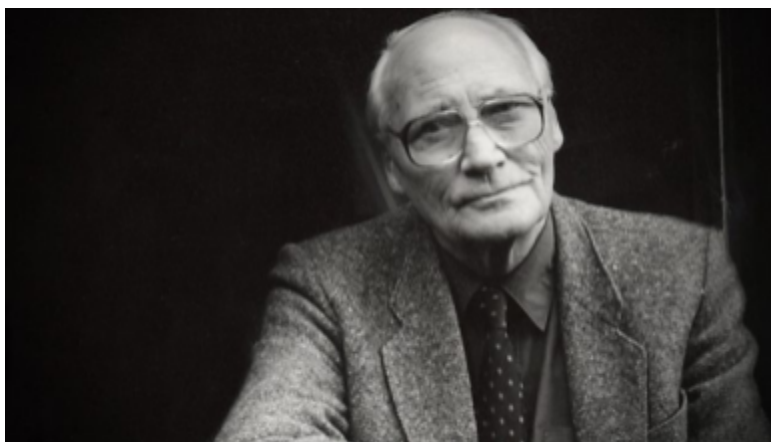
### Synopsis

- The speaker has a son who falls in a nettlebed
- The speaker reflects on why it is called a “*nettlebed*” when it causes so much pain, comparing the nettles to an army of armed soldiers
- The son comes crying to his parents, and the speaker is saddened to see their innocent boy scarred by the nettle stings, the parents soothe their son until he smiles again
- The speaker takes a gardening knife and destroys all the nettles, chopping them down and setting fire to them
- After two weeks, the nettles grow back, and the speaker knows his son will be hurt again

### Context

#### Vernon Scannell (1922 - 2007)

Vernon Scannell, was the son of a commercial photographer who had served in World War One. He was born in Lincolnshire in 1922, but his family moved frequently, so that Scannell had lived in Ireland and Eccles before his family settled in Buckinghamshire. His family was poor. Scannell attended the local council school before leaving school at 14 to work as an insurance clerk. Since he was a teenager, Scannell was passionate about boxing and poetry. For a time, Scannell was even a professional boxer.



<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07z7b73>



In 1940, shortly after the war was declared, Scannell enlisted in the army “as a lark”. He served in North Africa, where he saw his fellow soldiers loot fallen soldiers - both their own men and the enemy. Scannell was so disgusted at his peers’ actions that he walked away, and was later court-martialled and imprisoned for deserting. He spent six months in one of the harshest military prisons. He was released to take part in the D-Day landings. After being shot in both legs, Scannell was shipped back to England. After the war was over, he deserted again and spent two years on the run, taking jobs in theatre, boxing, and tutoring to make a living.

Now dedicated to poetry, Scannell taught himself by reading everything he could, and took classes at Leeds University, though he never enrolled. He was eventually arrested again and sent to a mental institution near Birmingham. Upon his release, he pursued a career in poetry, supporting himself with teaching jobs and boxing. His experiences with the army and war had significant impacts on his work. He was incredibly critical of war, and he voices these views in his poetry. The main themes in his work are love, violence, and mortality. He has won numerous prestigious awards for his poetry.

### EXAM TIP

You shouldn't include context unless you can link it to your analysis. If you're struggling, reread the exam question and think about what context could link to it. From there, find a quote that fits.

Scannell was the father of six children. However, tragically, two died: one as a young child, and one in a road accident when they were older.

## Nettles (Published 1980)

### War

Scannell's **perspective on war** can be seen in his poem. The use of the **semantic field of violence** and the military suggests war influenced the way Scannell viewed the world around him. As well as his experience in World War Two, the global conflicts happening closer to when the poem was written could have also influenced Scannell. The Cold War caused paranoia globally, while the protests against the Vietnam War brought anti-war philosophy to the mainstream.

### Formalist Poetry

**New Formalism** was a literary movement that emerged in the late twentieth century. Scannell was an example of a Formalist poet. The movement promoted a return to **traditional forms** of poetry, which **featured rhyme and meter**.

### The Role of the Father

Gender roles were still very conservative in the 1970s and 80s. The father of a family was the leader, so it was his responsibility to support his family financially, guide them, and keep them safe. Violence was glorified, and viewed as a necessary **trait of masculinity**. This can be linked to the way war was glorified by society, and how men were called cowards if they refused to fight.







## Nettles

*This draws attention to how fragile and vulnerable the child is.*

*This establishes the motif of war. The contrast between the natural “green” and violent “spears” shows how the speaker sees threats everywhere.*

*The plosives and sibilance demonstrates the speaker’s anger, showing how protective they are of their son.*

*This oxymoronic image shows that pain and joy can exist at the same time. The parents can bring their son joy even if they cannot undo the harm done to him.*

*The violence in this line shows how the speaker is overcome with anger as they fight for their son. They are willing to kill for their loved ones.*

**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**

*There is a reflective tone as the speaker questions his own words, suggesting he is analysing his own mistakes.*

*This imagery suggests the parent is at war with everything that could hurt their son.*

*The speaker sees the world as a constant threat, so they have no time to “rest”.*

*The contrast of “blisters” with “tender” shows the speaker feels their son’s pain like it’s their own.*

*Scannell shows the attentive, affectionate bond between a parent and their child.*

*The speaker prepares for war. The consonance emphasises the turning point in the poem.*

*A military parade is associated with propaganda and celebration. The speaker is blinded by passion and thinks the nettles are celebrating their defeat of the son.*





Using enjambment after the speaker's change of character suggests they have lost control. The quick pace evokes their urgency and fury.

The sun and rain are personified to show the speaker's helpless struggle against nature. They feel like the whole world is working against them.

This final declarative line creates a lasting sense of the speaker resigning himself to being unable to protect his son. It alludes to the "wounds" of life, not the nettles, making the poem read as an allegory for life.

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**

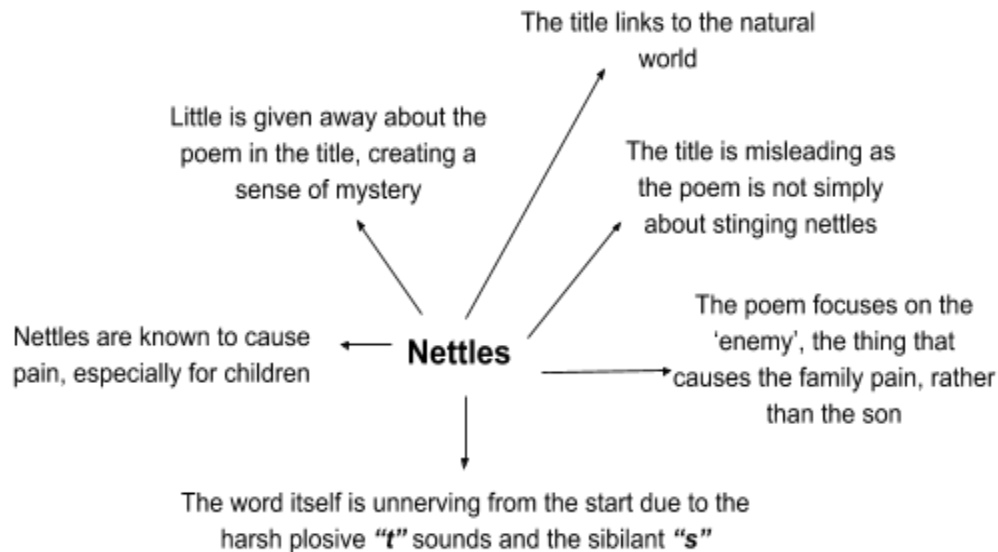
Had **called up tall recruits** behind the shed:

**My son would often feel sharp wounds again.**

This line suggests the speaker wishes to honour the fallen 'soldiers'. This could link to Scannell's guilt from serving in the war. At the same time, the speaker wants to remove every trace of the nettles.

This metaphor implies the cycle of war and violence is eternal. It could be evidence of Scannell's despair at soldiers being killed and the government quickly replacing them.

## The title "Nettles"



## Perspective

### Dramatic Monologue

The poem presents a **first person speaker** recalling the time when their son fell in a bed of nettles. As the speaker processes the events, they reveal aspects of themselves, such as their fierce **protective nature** and **loyalty** to their loved ones. Therefore, 'Nettles' is a **dramatic monologue**.

As Scannell was a father himself, it is logical to assume the poem is, at least partially, **autobiographical**. This would make the **speaker** Scannell himself - or, at least, a father. Scannell uses the poem as a way to process his own feelings about parenthood and to reflect on his experience as a father. He demonstrates his belief that a father should always fight for his child. No threat or accident is too small.

The **reflective and revelatory tone** of the poem - for example, the speaker's realisation that their son will be harmed again - suggests the speaker is a **first-time parent**. Scannell portrays the conflict of overwhelming emotions that a parent experiences everyday: panic, fear, pain, anger, undying love, hope. The form of a dramatic monologue allows Scannell to use one event as a **symbol for the whole of parenthood**. The way the speaker reacts to this incident reveals the **close bond** between a parent and their child.

### Allegory

Though the poem appears to be about a child falling into some nettles, it has a deeper meaning. Scannell shows the unending struggles a parent faces as they try to keep their child safe. He implies the worry a parent feels is as powerful and constant as their love. This **allegorical purpose** of the poem is supported by the lines **"It was no place for rest,"** and **"My son would often feel sharp wounds again."** These statements are more general than the rest of the poem, as if the speaker is **reflecting on life itself** rather than the nettlebed.



<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/bullitcoo k/nettles/>

In this case, the nettlebed is a **metaphor for life**. Alternatively, it is a **metaphor for growing up**, and the way a parent must cope with the realisation their child is becoming an adult. The nettles represent the **different ways life causes pain and difficulty**. They expose the son to the cruelty of the world, acting as a **symbol for the hardships that force people to mature** and develop. The nettles regrow quickly, showing how life always offers new challenges. The father fights the nettles despite knowing they will grow back. This suggests he knows he has to allow his son to grow up and learn to fight for himself, but cannot bring himself to stand by or stop fighting.

Scannell's choice to depict the son as a young boy could reflect how parents always view their children as youthful and delicate, even long after they have grown up and left home. The poem



presents a parent's struggle to accept they have to let their child be independent eventually. The story told in the poem has the son as a young boy, a time when the parent can go to his aid, but the closing line acknowledges there will come a time when the parent won't be able to be there for their son.

## The Opening

*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.*

The poem opens simply enough, with the speaker recalling the time their son fell in a bed of nettles. It is almost misleading, as the poem ends up being about much more than a **“nettle bed”**. The focus of the poem starts off small, and Scannell develops it as the poem continues. This suggests the speaker is prompted to make certain revelations by the memory, mimicking the way certain memories take on significant meaning as we grow older and wiser.

By opening with the words **“My son aged three”**, Scannell draws his reader's attention to the relationship between the speaker and the boy. He makes it clear this is a poem about family and parental bonds. The use of the **possessive pronoun “my”** shows the speaker is **proud** of his son, or may alternatively reveal the **speaker's protective instinct**. We are told the boy is **“aged three”** to increase our empathy for him. It is clear the boy is young, innocent, and vulnerable.



<http://www.freerangers.org.uk/our-blog/tag/Stinging+Nettles>

In the next line, the speaker starts to question the English language by saying that **“bed”** is a **“curious name”**. This criticism hints at their underlying bitterness, as well as suggesting they are questioning why things have to be the way they are. They are unhappy that the world is full of things that may harm their son. The **semantic field of war** begins early on in the poem, establishing it as a **story of conflict and defence**. The **imagery** conveys the parent's frustration at the world for hurting their son. Furthermore, the **comparison to war** suggests the speaker feels as if every day is a battle. The nettle bed is not an isolated incident, as is demonstrated as the poem continues.

**“It was no place for rest”** shows the speaker struggling with the knowledge that life would not be easy for their son. Scannell uses an unconventional form of wordplay, taking the noun **“nettle bed”** literally to show that nothing is as it seems. He draws attention to the **oxymoron: “nettles”**, a source of pain, and a **“bed”**, a symbol of comfort and peace. This establishes the





poem's opening tone as one of suspicion. The parent sees everything in the world as a threat because nothing is as it seems. The name "**nettle bed**" is misleading, and they worry if everything else in life is equally as deceitful.

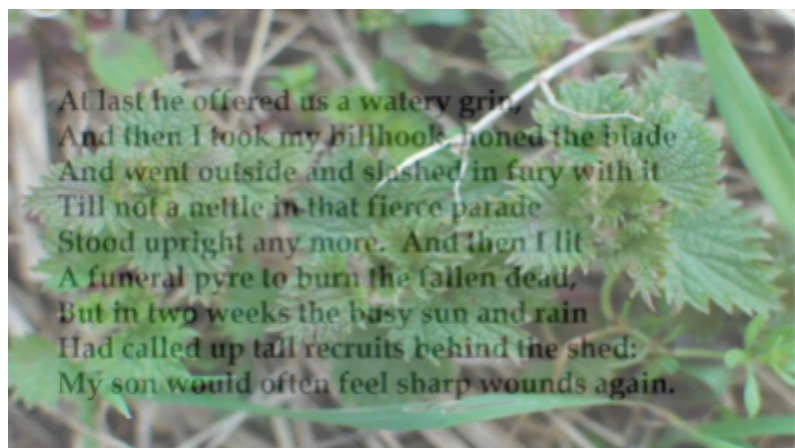
## The Ending

***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.***

The ending gives the poem a **cyclic feel**. The nettles, perceived as "**tall recruits**", return, and the **repetition** of "**behind the shed**" increases the feeling of being caught in an unending loop, as if the poem is about to start from the beginning. This cyclic structure portrays the constant **cruelty of life** and the conflict between life and death. However, if the poem begins again, the reader can assume the speaker will defend their son the same way they did the first time. Therefore, Scannell also highlights the **unconditional love** of a parent. No matter how many times they have to do it, no matter how futile or pointless it is, they will do everything they can to protect their child.

Scannell's use of **war imagery** adds an extra layer to this interpretation. It is not only that hardship and threat will return to plague the parent and child: the speaker sees themselves as a soldier in a war. The "**sun and rain**" "**call up tall recruits**", imply the parent has won the battle but not the war. This **motif** hints at the **cycle of conflict and violence** in the world. The final line focuses on how this war will impact the speaker's "**son**", thus showing Scannell's concern at how warfare will impact the lives of his children. He shows how weary he is of fighting.

The scope of the poem opens up in these final lines. We see beyond the nettles to the "**sun and rain**", suggesting the speaker is getting more defensive for their child, as well as more paranoid. They see threat everywhere, in both the light - the "**sun**" - and the dark - the "**rain**". The **personification** of the weather and the **adjective** "**busy**" suggests they make the nettles regrow on purpose. The speaker feels the world is turned against them - it's personal. This shows how a parental bond is overwhelming: you stop seeing the world as a whole, and start seeing your child as your whole world.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Wttwy0recg>



Ending the poem with the word “**again**” brings **tension**. The poem is unresolved. The line is **foreboding**, but leaves the reader to imagine which hardships will come next. This mimics the constant fear the parent must feel, not knowing if and when they will lose their child. At the same time, though, the final line shows a **level of acceptance**. Pain is inevitable, and the speaker is aware of this. They are preparing to let their child grow up and face this pain alone, knowing they won’t be able to protect them from life forever - just as they can’t stop the nettles growing back forever.

## Structure

The poem is written as **one stanza**, reflecting how it centres around one event. Despite this, Scannell allows for progression within its tight borders. The **speaker’s perspective grows**, so that by the end we are reading a very different poem than the one we read at the start. The open ending allows us to apply the poem to other scenarios, adding to the poem’s **allegorical purpose**.

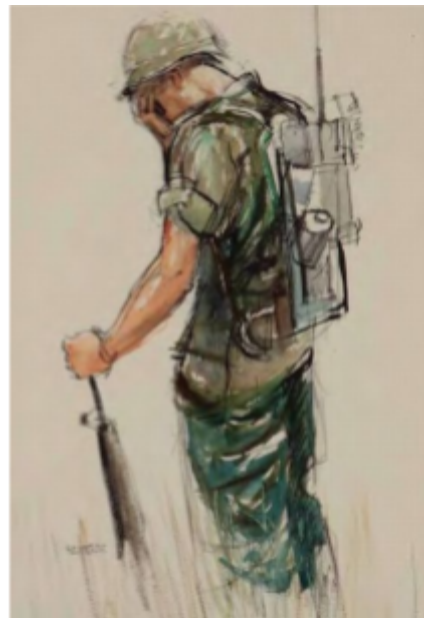
There are **two narratives** running through the poem, the obvious one being a parent comforting their child who has been stung by nettles. The more subtle narrative has darker undertones, as the speaker tackles with the themes of death, war, and pain. By compacting this all in one stanza, Scannell imitates closely the way life and memory work. An incident isn’t isolated: it triggers feelings within us that are bigger than the pain of being stung by a nettle. He demonstrates how human experience is analytical and multi-layered.

### Rhyme scheme

The poem has a uniform ABABCD... **rhyme scheme**, revealing Scannell’s Formalist influences. This **tight structure** could reflect the speaker’s need for constancy and order. Alternatively, it could show how the speaker is being **controlled by necessity** and **circumstance**. In this case, the speaker is having to react to the trouble posed by the nettles. Moreover, the regimented rhyme scheme could **link to the motif of warfare**. It reflects the speaker’s military mindset as they prepare to defend their son.

### Volta

The poem has a **volta**, or turning point. This happens around line 9, when the speaker turns their attention from their son to the nettles. Now they know their child is okay, they can focus their efforts on destruction, and passion takes over.



<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/221943087861150340/>



- This is reflected in Scannell’s use of **enjambment**, **consonance**, and the **repetition** of **“and then”**.
- These methods **contrast** with the tight structure of the rhyme scheme, showing a **loss of control**.

This reveals how strong the protective instinct of a parent is, and how devastating the prospect of losing their child is to them. The incident with the nettles, though small, feels as disastrous to the speaker as if the child had been attacked by soldiers. Scannell suggests seeing your child get hurt evokes the same feelings you would feel when faced with your child’s death.

## Language

### War and Violence

Stannell embeds a **motif of warfare** into his poem. The **imagery** is one of the main ways he presents his intentions, suggesting his experience with and views on war have influenced the way he views his relationship with his children.

At first, the nettles are **presented as weapons**, with the **metaphor “green spears”**.

- The colour **“green”** is usually associated with health and life because of its links with the natural world.
- Whereas the **noun “spears”** evokes pain and violence.
- This contrast makes the description **oxymoronic**, showing how the speaker is being irrational by viewing a plant as a weapon. The oxymoron could also convey the speaker’s feeling of betrayal, as they believe nature - something that should be pure and kind - has turned against their child.



<https://warpoetrymhayden.weebly.com/auditory-imagery.html>

However, Scannell quickly **personifies** the nettles so that they become soldiers, not just their weapons. The bed is called a **“regiment of spite”**, suggesting they exist to target the son. The **noun “spite” connotes pettiness or childishness**, implying the nettles have no justifiable reason to attack. This may hint at Scannell’s critical views of war, as he argues violence is a show of foolish hate rather than honour or duty.

### Motif of violence

Halfway through the poem, the **motif of violence and war** is applied to the speaker. When they **“honed the blade”** and **“slashed in fury with it / Till not a nettle in that fierce parade / Stood upright any more”**, they became a soldier themselves. They accept their part in the



conflict. This shows how easy it is for people to reciprocate violence, or how love and fear will drive people to extreme lengths.

- The fact the speaker “**slashed**” until no more nettles “**stood upright any more**” implies gratuitous violence: they destroy more than they have to.
- This violence is committed by the speaker, introducing unease to the reader.
- The language used implies the speaker regrets their actions, knowing they may have committed a war crime.
- Alternatively, it shows how a parent will do as much as they can to eradicate any threats to their children.

The lasting image from when the speaker “**lit / A funeral pyre to burn the fallen dead**” **symbolises the speaker’s guilt and grief**. The act of “**burn[ing]**” is graphic and connotes Hell, but the “**funeral pyre**” suggests respect. This could show how the speaker - or Scannell - still follows the traditions of the military. Alternatively, it could show how the speaker regrets what they have to do to keep their child safe. They may be conscious that they are overreacting.



<https://www.agrocares.com/en/news/magnesium/>

#### Regrowth

The poem closes with the frustrating discovery that “**tall recruits**” have grown to replace the “**fallen dead**”. In addition to its implications for the parent, this **metaphor** can be read as a **criticism of war**. Scannell is challenging the system where soldiers are replaced as if they are objects, leaving no time for grief or recovery. As a soldier himself, it makes sense that he - and his speaker - feel sympathy for the enemy.

#### Extended metaphor

As well as analysing individual metaphors, it is possible to examine Scannell’s motif of war as a whole. The **extended metaphor** that portrays the **nettles as soldiers in a war** shows how parents feel like they are in a constant battle to keep their children alive. The poem presents a war between the nettles and a parent. The nettles could be a symbol for the natural world, Scannell could be implying that parents spend their lives battling with the natural ending of life - death. The **personification** of nettles as dangerous warriors is **hyperbolic**, showing how parental love makes you irrational. The speaker sees threats in everything, and by personifying them, they imply the battle is personal. It is as if the nettles wish to harm the son on purpose.

Another significance of **presenting the natural world as the enemy** is that Scannell implies violence is, for whatever reason, a natural part of life. ‘*Nettles*’ depicts a character who is struggling to accept this fact. This struggle is because of the implications for their child, and because of the implications for their own moral conscience. They are driven to commit atrocious acts against their better judgement.



- This may be a **commentary** on Scannell's own life as he came to terms with his time in the army. The poem also shows extreme frustration at those who enable such violence - the nettles, the commanders, the authorities.

In war, soldiers fight for their country. Propaganda presents nationalism and love for your country as honourable, celebrated traits. However, in this poem, Scannell's speaker fights for their son, not their country. He suggests parental love is a purer, truer, more honourable motive than patriotism. At the same time, we see the speaker struggle to decide if love is a good enough excuse to commit acts of violence.

There is the subtle suggestion that love can bring out the worst in us as well as the best.

### Youth and Innocence

In contrast to the **semantic field of violence**, Scannell uses **imagery of purity** to describe the son. He presents the relationship between parent and child as one of comfort and safety. After getting stung, the boy **"came seeking comfort"**, portraying his parents as his safe haven. The parents **"soothed him till his pain was not so raw"**, showing how parents provide reassurance and relief to their children.



[https://issuu.com/freerangers/docs/free\\_rangers\\_magazine\\_issue\\_01](https://issuu.com/freerangers/docs/free_rangers_magazine_issue_01)

- The use of **"sooth"**, **"pain"**, and **"raw"** create an **imagery of healing**, where the parents act as doctors to the injured child. Scannell implies that love is more effective than any ointment or medicine.
- The **adjective "raw"** alludes to the boy's innocence and naivety, as it implies the pain is new and unfamiliar. Therefore, it links to the theme of growing up and independence in the poem. The parents help their child confront the harshness of experience.
- It is possible the speaker is justifying their actions to themselves by demonstrating their duty to care for their son.

The **dichotomy** (contrast) between the cruelty of the world and the innocence of the son's youth is symbolised in the line **"White blisters beaded on his tender skin."** The nettles are represented by the **"blisters"** they cause, connoting pain and suffering.

- **"Blisters"** are a common symptom of exercising too much or without the proper equipment, suggesting the boy is suffering because he wasn't prepared for the cruelty of the world.
- On the other hand, **"white"**, **"beaded"**, and **"tender"** create a **semantic field of purity and beauty**. Even when their son is in pain, the parent cannot help but treasure him for the joy he brings them. This reflects the unconditional love a parent feels towards their children.



- **“White”** and **“tender”** draw attention to his vulnerability, highlighting the speaker’s concern to care for their son.
- This semantic field of purity is the **antithesis** to the motif of war, suggesting love and innocence are the ‘antidote’ to cruelty and hardship.
- The speaker doesn’t want the boy to lose his soft, **“tender”** nature, but by the end of the poem has accepted that this is inevitable.

