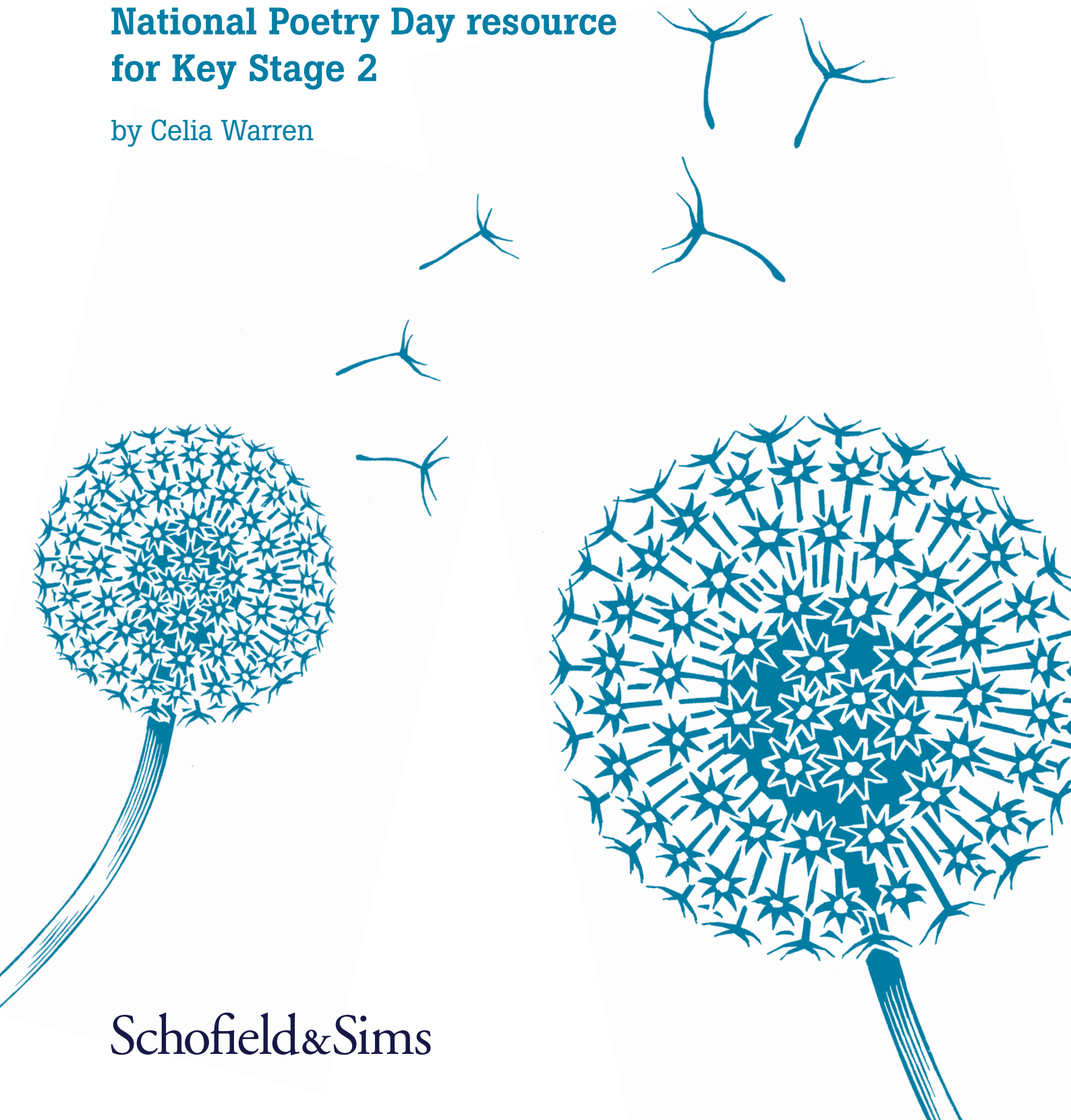


A Time to Remember

National Poetry Day resource
for Key Stage 2

by Celia Warren



Schofield & Sims

The Toll-gate House

The toll-gate's gone, but still stands lone,
In the dip of the hill, the house of stone,
And over the roof in the branching pine
The great owl sits in the white moonshine.

An old man lives, and lonely, there,
His windows yet on the cross-roads stare,
And on Michaelmas night in all the years
A galloping far and faint he hears. . . .

His casement open wide he flings
With "Who goes there," and a lantern swings. . . .

But never more in the dim moonbeam
Than a cloak and a plume and the silver gleam
Of passing spurs in the night can he see,
For the toll-gate's gone and the road is free.

John Drinkwater (1882–1937)



Introduction

This poem describes a place that has changed over the years. Once the gate-keeper's cottage, where fees were collected from travellers, it is now the home of a lonely old man. Every year at Michaelmas, he hears a ghostly rider gallop through the gate in an echo of the cottage's past.

Reading aloud

When reading the poem aloud, avoid over-emphasising the end of line rhymes. Change pitch at 'And on Michaelmas night ...', to emphasise the change of mood. Increase the tempo slightly between the two ellipses to reflect the old man's alarm as he calls out his challenge, pausing after the second ellipsis to emulate the silence that follows. Read the final line quite slowly, allowing the pupils to imagine the scene.

Discussion and understanding

- Make sure the pupils understand that the passing rider is a ghost, and that the old man's "Who goes there ...?" remains unanswered. The rider's appearance is fleeting and changes nothing, leaving both past and present unaltered. What might the rider remember about the toll-gate, if he stopped to talk? Did he ever pay the toll, or did he gallop straight through in life, as he does in death?
- Discuss the poem's timeline, from a historic toll station to more recent times. Ask the pupils to look for clues in the text to establish when the horseman might have lived (cloak, plume, spurs), and then do the same for the old man (casement, lantern), using reference books or online resources if necessary. Can they make the poem describe a contemporary scene by changing a few individual words?
- Reread the poem closely, encouraging the pupils to think about things that have and have not changed between the time of the rider and the old man. For example, the toll-gate has gone, but the window still faces the crossroads. The pupils could use different colours to underline phrases that fall into these two categories. Encourage them to think about the constancy of the moon and the owl (or its forbears), as well as the way the owl's symbolic wisdom hints at a greater knowledge than that of the two men.
- Discuss the mood and emotion of the poem. How does the mystery of the rider's background and his journey's purpose add to the atmosphere? Would the mood be different if the events happened in daylight? Or if the old man lived with his family? Note how the last line has echoes of the first.

Further activities

- Challenge the pupils to describe a place they remember from when they were younger, and how it had changed when they returned at a later date. A park that is huge to a three-year-old may seem much smaller to the returning 10-year-old; on returning to their nursery school, a seven-year-old will find it has new displays, teachers and pupils. How might their own 'ghost' appear in the changed setting? How would they behave?
- Divide the class into groups. Each group should discuss, plan and share a storyline to explain the rider's mission when alive: what was the purpose of his journey and why didn't he stop to pay his toll? Was someone ill or dying? Did he have a letter to deliver? Was he chasing or being chased? Was he a smuggler? A highway man? A murderer?
- Return to the poem another day and invite the pupils to find poems with similar themes to compare and contrast, such as Walter de la Mare's 'The Listeners' or Rudyard Kipling's 'The Way through the Woods'.

This Schofield & Sims poetry resource has been written by Celia Warren for National Poetry Day. To find out how you can make the most of National Poetry Day in your school, please visit www.nationalpoetryday.co.uk.

Celia is a poet and writer of educational materials for children. Her poems and stories have appeared in hundreds of anthologies, and she is a frequent contributor to BBC Television and Radio. She has written a number of books for Schofield & Sims, including the best-selling series *KS2 Comprehension* and *A Time to Speak* – an illustrated poetry anthology for children and young adults, complete with accompanying Teacher’s Guide.

