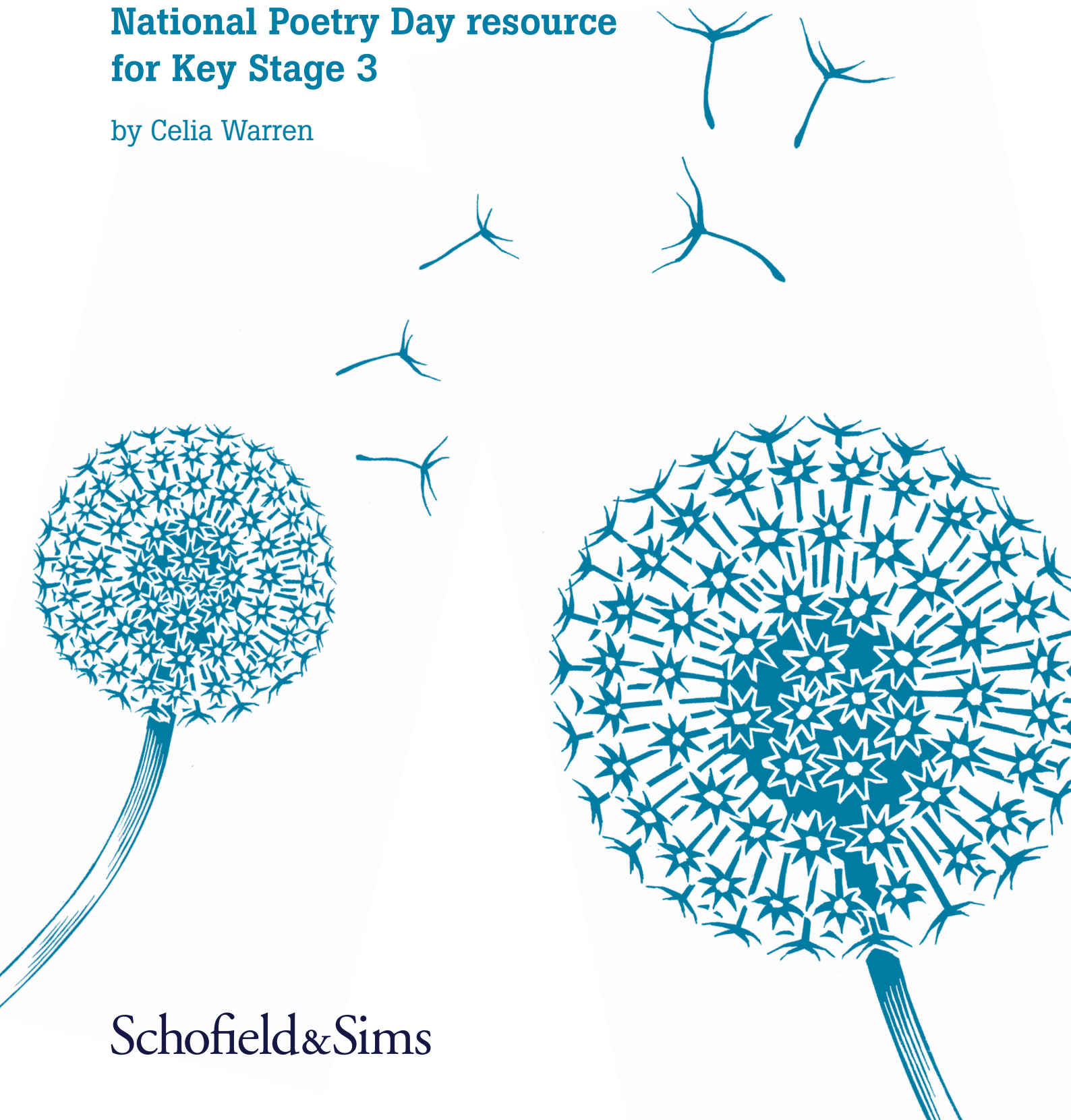


A Time to Remember

National Poetry Day resource
for Key Stage 3

by Celia Warren



Schofield & Sims

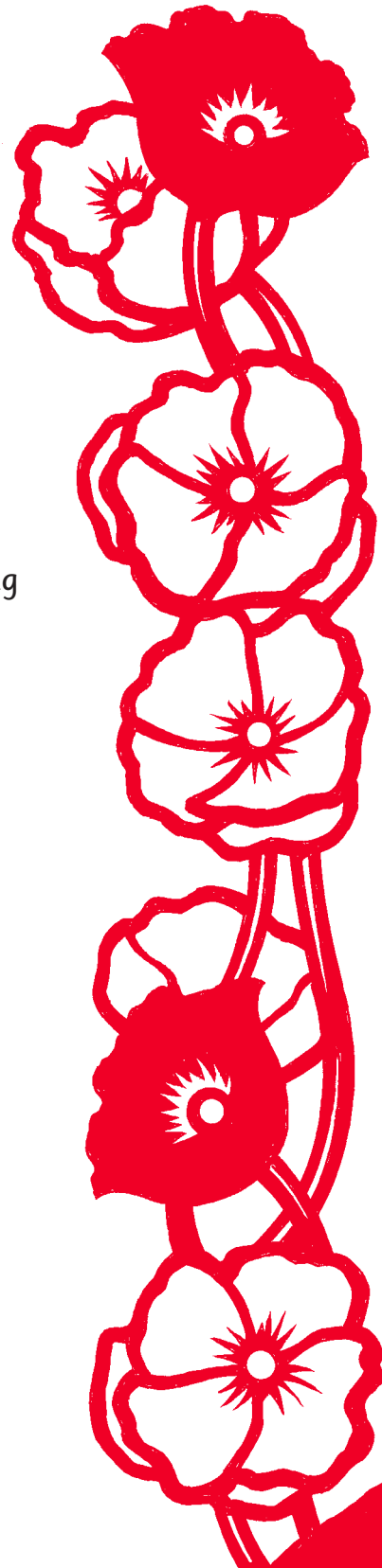
The Sentry

We'd found an old Boche dug-out, and he knew,
 And gave us hell, for shell on frantic shell
 Hammered on top, but never quite burst through.
 Rain, guttering down in waterfalls of slime
 Kept slush waist high, that rising hour by hour,
 Choked up the steps too thick with clay to climb.
 What murk of air remained stank old, and sour
 With fumes of whizz-bangs, and the smell of men
 Who'd lived there years, and left their curse in the den,
 If not their corpses. . . .

There we herded from the blast
 Of whizz-bangs, but one found our door at last.
 Buffeting eyes and breath, snuffing the candles.
 And thud! flump! thud! down the steep steps came thumping
 And splashing in the flood, deluging muck —
 The sentry's body; then his rifle, handles
 Of old Boche bombs, and mud in ruck on ruck.
 We dredged him up, for killed, until he whined
 "O sir, my eyes — I'm blind — I'm blind, I'm blind!"
 Coaxing, I held a flame against his lids
 And said if he could see the least blurred light
 He was not blind; in time he'd get all right.
 "I can't," he sobbed. Eyeballs, huge-bulged like squids
 Watch my dreams still; but I forgot him there
 In posting next for duty, and sending a scout
 To beg a stretcher somewhere, and floundering about
 To other posts under the shrieking air.

Those other wretches, how they bled and spewed,
 And one who would have drowned himself for good, —
 I try not to remember these things now.
 Let dread hark back for one word only: how
 Half-listening to that sentry's moans and jumps,
 And the wild chattering of his broken teeth,
 Renewed most horribly whenever crumps
 Pummelled the roof and slogged the air beneath —
 Through the dense din, I say, we heard him shout
 "I see your lights!" But ours had long died out.

Wilfred Owen (1893–1918)



Introduction

Sometimes our minds can hold memories that we might prefer to forget. This graphic, despairing picture of war in the trenches is one of many such poems by Wilfred Owen, inspired by his own dreadful experiences. The setting of the German dug-out shows that this horror showed no preference for either side.

Reading aloud

Read the poem aloud at a steady pace, using pauses ('If not their corpses ...') and quickening of tempo (the onomatopoeic 'thud! flump! thud!') to convey contrasting moments of brief reflection and sudden panic. Stress 'he knew' at the end of the opening line, so that it is clear that 'he' refers to 'the Boche'. Make sure you enunciate each syllable of graphic verbs such as 'hammered' and 'guttering', to exploit their power. Use a change of pitch to bring out the sense of panic in the repeated words 'I'm blind'. Pause at the exclamation mark in the final line, then slow down for the impact of the last six words.

Discussion and understanding

- Read the poem again, with the students following the text. Invite questions and explain as necessary. Students may benefit from having the following words explained.
 - Boche: a derogatory term for the Germans
 - crumps: exploding shells
 - dug-out: a shelter close to the trench line in which troops could rest
 - whizz-bangs: artillery shells whose 'whizzing' sound is heard almost as they explode
- Draw attention to Owen's way of using and combining words to create the fearful atmosphere.
 - use of adjectives: 'frantic shell', 'chattering teeth', 'shrieking air'
 - contrast of beauty and horror: 'waterfalls of slime'
 - short, sharp, graphic nouns: 'slush', 'slime', 'murk', 'curse'
 - verbs used in the past continuous form: 'guttering', 'buffeting', 'deluging', 'floundering'
- Discuss the noise of a bombing attack and its effect on people's senses. Point out the poet's use of iambic pentameter and the way this emphasises the unremitting nature of a shell attack. Identify the sounds, sights and smells in the poem that overpower the speaker, so he is only 'half-listening' to the sentry's moans.
- Examine the meaning of the very last line. Invite the students to consider the word 'light' in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Does the sentry really see a light? In what ways – literally and figuratively – had the other soldiers' lights gone out?
- Ask the students to consider the phrase 'but I forgot him there', immediately after 'Eyeballs, huge-bulged like squids / Watch my dreams still'. In dealing with the attack, the speaker could not commit time or emotion to one sufferer alone, yet the sentry's terrible, blinding injury will continue to haunt the speaker. In what way does he forget the sentry? And for how long?
- Explain to the students that, for the speaker, this is a memory that he would much rather forget. Ask them to think of other events or experiences that someone might prefer not to remember. Some students may wish to share a personal example of this.
- In this centenary year of the start of World War I, encourage students to read further poems by Wilfred Owen, such as 'Dulce et Decorum Est', which paints a particularly vivid picture of a gas attack in the trenches. They could also look at poems by Owen's contemporaries, including Siegfried Sassoon's 'The Rear Guard'. Discuss why it is important to remember past conflicts and sacrifices made for fellow human beings.
- Invite students to consider that the poems were most likely cathartic writing for the poets themselves. Can the reader, too, gain catharsis from their words? Point out how reading about one person's specific experience, even one brief moment, can touch us in a broader way, as it taps into our universal experience of what it is to be human.

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.

