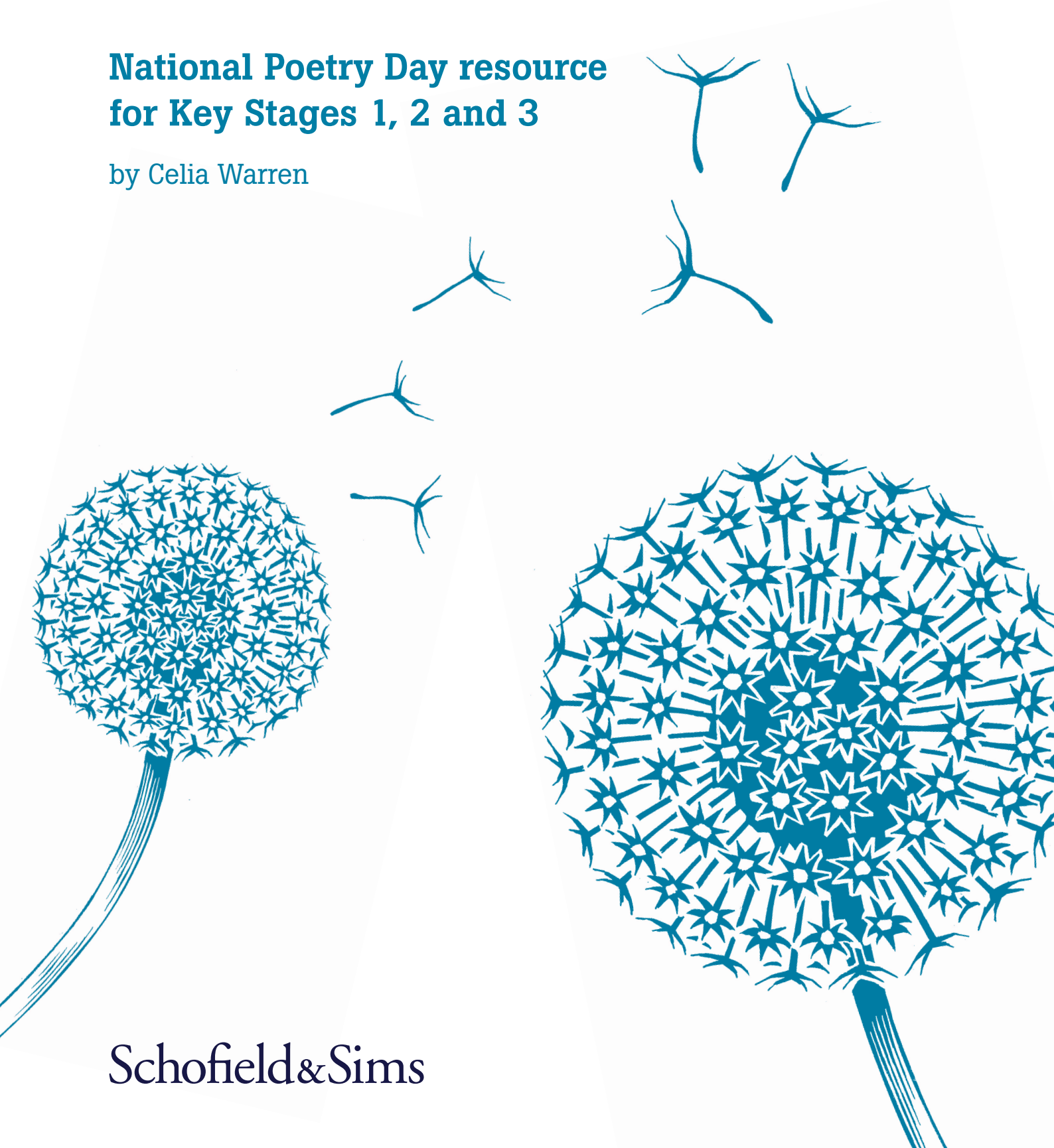


# A Time to Remember

National Poetry Day resource  
for Key Stages 1, 2 and 3

by Celia Warren



Schofield & Sims

## At the Seaside

When I was down beside the sea  
A wooden spade they gave to me  
To dig the sandy shore.  
My holes were empty like a cup,  
In every hole the sea came up  
Till it could come no more.

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894)



## Introduction

This memory of a day at the beach is one that many children and adults will recognise. Whether with a wooden spade or a plastic one, the timeless experience of digging a hole and watching it fill with water is fascinating and appealing at any age.

## Reading aloud

Make sure that the pace of your reading and your tone of voice convey the child's sense of wonder. Encourage the children to read the poem aloud with you and see if they can learn it by heart. Its compactness and simple rhyme scheme make it easy to remember.

## Understanding the poem

Discuss the poem with the children, prompting with questions.

- How old do you think the child is in the poem?
- Who are 'they'? Why is that not important enough for the poet to tell us?
- Did the child dig many 'cups' in the sand? How do we know?
- How does the last line show that every hole had been filled?

If the children have access to a sandpit, let them experiment with digging holes and pouring water into and around them, observing the result.

## Further activities

- Some children will have vivid memories of the seaside, while others may have similarly clear memories of another place. Ask them to recall an early memory in their lives – one that impressed them strongly at the time. It could be a place, an occasion or a person. Can they remember any smells, sounds or strong feelings associated with their memory?
- Invite the children to share their memories with a partner, prompting them to ask one another questions to encourage stronger recall. Display a list of question words on the board to support them: When? Who? Where? What? How? Why?
- Ask the children to create a bank of key words about their memory, drawing on all their senses, any emotions they felt, any sense of wonder or surprise, fear or delight. Make sure they include plenty of descriptive words, including adjectives and possibly some adverbs.
- Challenge each child to combine some of their words into phrases to build a detailed description of their memory. Help them to craft their phrases into a short poem that begins 'When ...' – it does not need to rhyme. Encourage more able children to include a simile, as the poet did here with 'like a cup'.
- Return to the original poem the following day and see if the class (or smaller groups of children) can recite the whole poem without the written words. Prompt them if necessary.

## 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'.

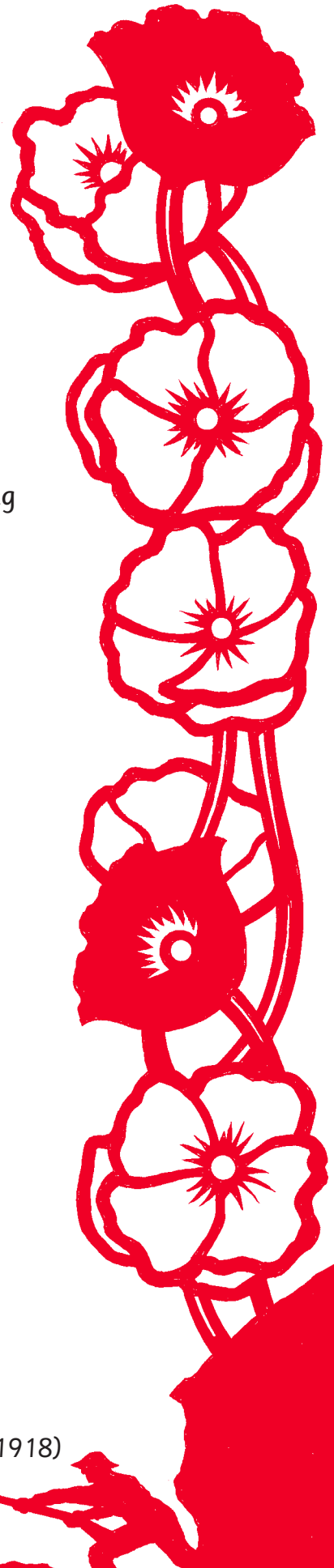
## The Sentry

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](http://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.

