



What is the mood of the first stanza? What symbolic meaning can be ascribed to the guttering of the cressets?

A. The mood of the stanza is chaotic; wild weather creates an atmosphere that is tempestuous, ominous, and foreboding. The guttering of the cressets symbolizes the imminent extinguishing of Caesar's life.



What sensory image is created in the second stanza? How does this stanza contribute to the mood of the poem?

A. The descriptions create vivid auditory images; the stanza contributes to the mood of urgent foreboding with its detailed evocation of the windy night, the hurried arrival of a horse, and the image of the guard's spear hitting the ground abruptly as he awakens.



Why is the rider out "so late" (line 10)?

A. The rider states that he rides late because he has urgent news that must be heard only by Caesar, as quickly as possible.



What does the guard wish to know? Why?

A. The guard asks the rider for some proof that the news is vital and that it warrants waking Caesar; the guard would not dare to wake him for a trivial matter. He also asks the rider "whence" he has come.



What can we infer about the rider?

A. The rider has come from the "dark of death," the realm of the dead. He is a ghost.

The Rider at the Gate

John Masefield

FOCUS: FORESHADOWING

What is the mood of the first stanza? What symbolic meaning can be ascribed to the guttering of the cressets?

What sensory image is created in the second stanza? How does this stanza contribute to the mood of the poem?

Why is the rider out "so late" (line 10)?

What does the guard wish to know? Why?

What can we infer about the rider?

A windy night was blowing on Rome.
The cressets* guttered* on Caesar's home.
The fish-boats, *moored* at the bridge, were breaking
The rush of the river to yellow foam.

The hinges whined to the shutters shaking, 5
When clip-clop-clep came a horse-hoofs raking
The stones of the road at Caesar's gate;
The spear-butts jarred at the guard's awaking.

2 "Who goes there?" said the guard at the gate.
"What is the news, that you ride so late?" 10
"News most *pressing*, that must be spoken
To Caesar alone, and that cannot wait."

3 "The Caesar sleeps; you must show a token
That the news *suffice* that he be awoken
What is the news, and whence* do you come? 15
For no light cause may his sleep be broken."

4 "Out of the dark of the sands I come,
From the dark of death, with news from Rome,
A word so *fell* that it must be uttered
Though it strike the soul of the Caesar dumb."* 20

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

cressets — torches.

guttered — became gradually weaker, flickered, and were nearly extinguished.

whence — from where.

dumb — here, mute; speechless.

- At this point, much of the poem takes the form of dialogue between the rider and the guard. Alert students to the swift shifts from speaker to speaker, as indicated by the use of quotation marks.
- Note that the guard refers to Julius Caesar as "The Caesar," indicating that *Caesar* is a title as well as a name, similar to *Czar* or *Kaiser*. Caesar was the dictator of ancient Rome and his name became synonymous with *ruler*.
- The rider answers the guard's questions in reverse order: he answers that he comes from the land of the dead, and he brings terrible news from Rome that will leave Caesar speechless. The ghost states that he has come from "the sands," alluding to the fact that Pompey was assassinated in Egypt.