

"Break of Day in the Trenches"

Date: 1916

Author: Isaac Rosenberg

From: *Poets of World War I - Part One*, Bloom's Major Poets.

A version of "Break of Day in the Trenches" was most probably completed by the end of July 1916. It first appeared in the December 1916 issue of the Chicago journal *Poetry*. In an August 6 letter to Edward Marsh, Rosenberg described it as "a poem I wrote in the trenches, which is surely as simple as ordinary talk." It remains to this day one of Rosenberg's best-known poems.

"Break of Day in the Trenches" begins quietly. On the one hand, the reader feels a sense of uncertainty and anxiety about what the coming of dawn will bring; on the other hand, the speaker's familiarity with it—"the same old druid Time as ever"—suggests the soldier's weary resignation to the brutalities and dangers he knows the day will bring. The scene is then brought into focus by the startled movement of a rat, a "live thing." In "Break of Day in the Trenches" Rosenberg juxtaposes the soldier to natural objects, highlighting both the similarities and differences between them.

After the appearance of the rat, the soldier pulls a poppy out of the trench earth and puts it behind his ear. Rosenberg compares the soldier with poppies, an emblem of the British war dead, following the popularity of John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields." ("If ye break faith with us who die / We shall not sleep, though poppies grow / In Flanders field.") Poppies were thought to feed off the blood that had soaked into the earth, which turned their petals red. A short-lived flower, the poppy's transience mirrors that of the soldier's; even the careless moment when the soldier nonchalantly sticks a poppy behind his ear suggests how vulnerable the soldier, like the poppy, is. The poppy's connection with the dead will again be alluded to in the striking image at the end of the poem—"Poppies whose roots are in man's veins."

In the next lines, the rat underscores the arbitrary separation between the two front lines by his ability to travel freely back and forth between them. The rat calls to mind the imagery used by John Donne in his poem "The Flea," which plays on a similar idea, only in his case, for the purposes of courtship. (Rosenberg, like many of the First World War poets was heavily influenced by Metaphysical poets). Critics have also noted how the rat captures what some have called Rosenberg's "dialectical habit of mind." Characterized by the soldier as "droll" and "sardonic," the rat is seen as rising above both the ideological barriers and the physical obstacles of human beings. His willingness to alight in the hand of either a German or English soldier reveals his "cosmopolitan sympathies," which stand starkly at odds with the virulent nationalism that has imprisoned the soldiers within the narrow confines of their trenches. There is something ironic, too, in the idea that the two enemies—German and English—will be temporarily linked by their common acceptance of this measly rat. Rosenberg also uses the rat as a foil to the soldiers—its base vitality has more of a chance of survival than do the trained and physically fit soldiers—"Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes"—proudly amassed to do battle for their countries. The speaker then tries to imagine what the war must seem like from the perspective of the rat: "What do you see in our eyes / At the shrieking iron and flame / Hurl'd through still heavens?" In this role, the rat can thus be seen as the objectification of the soldier's (or Rosenberg's) mood. Rosenberg uses this perspective to both heighten the reader's sense of distance from the subjective, emotional intensity of the battle and to underscore the objective horrific nature of warfare.

In the second half of the poem, Rosenberg concentrates on the tragic nature of human beings' mutilation of themselves and nature. The fields of France are thus described as "torn" as easily and thoughtlessly as one might tear a piece of paper. This image suggests at once the power of

modern weapons and the vulnerability of humanity and nature.

From here on the poem becomes more violent, as the ironic distance afforded by the brief moment of safety gives way to the reality of the violence and danger of the upcoming battle. The moment of truce and diversion offered by the appearance of the rat is over, and with it, the reprieve the soldier had gained from his own imminent death.

In the final lines of "Break of Day in the Trenches," Rosenberg returns to the poppy, the flower of the dead. He adds to this image the pregnant word "dust," which could refer either to the dust that whitens the poppy or the dust that covers the dead and to which all human beings must ultimately turn.



Citation Information

Text Citation: Bloom, Harold, ed. "'Break of Day in the Trenches'." *Poets of World War I - Part One*, Bloom's Major Poets. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2001. *Bloom's Literary Reference Online*. Facts On File, Inc. <http://0-www.fofweb.com.charlotte.delco.lib.pa.us/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&SID=&iPin=BMPWWIi39&SingleRecord=True> (accessed June 13, 2009).

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As its title suggests, Isaac Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches" is a poem in which time juxtaposes with setting to create a new poetic perception of life and death. It is a short free-verse poem of twenty-six lines, capturing the bemusement of an ordinary infantryman confronting the harshness of existence in the trenches during World War I. It is also a reverie on life and the persistence of life in the midst of war. Almost every line contains some reference to violent death, sometimes death on a grand scale. Yet even in the midst of mass warfare, Rosenberg notes, there is life of a sort. Dawn in the trenches is a frequent trope—for example, in Wilfred Owen's "Futility". Dawn is usually seen as positive, the start of a new day and a metaphor for renewed life. But in the trenches dawn and dusk were associated with "stand-to", when the troops were on alert for signs of attack; the most dangerous, tense times when soldiers could die. It is only the rat that seems to be invigorated with a chance of life; the humans are passive and defeated. Of course, daybreak is ironic, a reflection of a broken society that indulges in destructive conflict. Structure The poem comprises one long st