Break of Day in the Trenches

POEM TEXT

The darkness crumbles away.
It is the same old druid Time as ever,
Only a live thing leaps my hand,
A queer sardonic rat,
As I pull the parapet's poppy
To stick behind my ear.
Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.
Now you have touched this English hand
You will do the same to a German
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
To cross the sleeping green between.
It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,
Less chanced than you for life,
Bonds to the whims of murder,
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
The torn fields of France.
What do you see in our eyes
At the shrieking iron and flame
Hurled through still heavens?
What quaver—what heart aghast?
Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
Drop, and are ever dropping;
But mine in my ear is safe—
Just a little white with the dust.

SUMMARY

The darkness of night dissolves. As always, the arrival of dawn is ancient and mystical, like a Druid—except that a living creature jumps over my hand. It's a strange rat with a mocking look, appearing just as I pluck a poppy flower from the top of the trench to put behind my ear. You funny, sarcastic rat, the soldiers would shoot you if they knew how you treat all people equally. Now that you've touched my English hand, you'll probably go and touch a German one soon—if you feel like crossing the quiet countryside between the two warring sides. You seem to smirk as you pass young men with bold eyes, strong limbs, and athletic prowess, who have less chance of surviving this place than you do—who are targets of random killing, sprawled out in this hellish landscape, the wrecked countryside of France. How do our expressions look to you as the screaming fire and metal of our weapons fills the calm sky? Do you see fear and disgust? Poppies, which thrive on the blood of dead men, are dropping and dying. The one behind my ear is safe, but flecked with white dust.

THEMES

THE ABSURDITY OF WAR

"Break of Day in the Trenches" gives a grimly ironic account of dawn on a World War I battlefield. Through his observations of the sunrise, a rat, and a poppy, the speaker—a soldier in the trenches—reflects on a basic, tragic absurdity of war: nothing in nature can possibly comprehend why humans kill each other. Mechanized warfare, this poem suggests, is a uniquely and horribly human endeavor that's at odds with the order of the natural world.

War, to the speaker, makes a mockery of nature itself. While sunrise is normally associated with warmth, light, life, and new beginnings, the "break of day" for a World War I soldier only means another day of horrific trench warfare. Rather than seeing hope or renewal in the rising sun, the speaker merely observes that "the darkness crumbles away" in the "same old" way it ever does. The persistent, ugly sameness of war contrasts sharply with nature itself.

That point only becomes clearer when the speaker reflects on the arrival of a rat, a creature that doesn't (and can't) know or care about war. The speaker sees this rat as a "sardonic" (or cynical and mocking) outsider, indifferently observing the hellscape of the battlefield and, in the process, underscoring humanity's foolishness.

Having touched the speaker's British hand, the speaker says, this rat will scurry off and "do the same to a German." In so doing, the rat will undermine the absurd logic of war that makes one side hate the other: humanity has constructed all these convoluted reasons to kill one another, but the rat just goes about its ratty business, unable to tell the difference between deadly enemies. By crossing no man's land—the terrain between the two warring armies—at will, the rat demonstrates how meaningless, arbitrary, and exclusively *human* the idea of "sides" is in the first place. The "droll" rat, sneering at humanity's folly, thus calls into question whether humans are as *civilized* as they might think.

When the speaker then plucks a poppy from the trench as a kind of lucky charm, both the rat's indifference and the horrors of the battlefield seem to overpower the beauty and hopefulness associated with the flower. The closing poppy

image is ambiguous, at once reflecting nature's durability (as the rat does, in its way), the sheer scale of death on the battlefield (poppies thrived on the nutrient-rich soil, as if drawing their redness from the blood of corpses), and the fragility of life (the poppy, now plucked, is dying). This ambiguity adds to the power of the poem, which offers a complex meditation on war's absurdity without drawing straightforward conclusions.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-26

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

The darkness crumbles away.
It is the same old druid Time as ever,

The poem opens quietly, almost meditatively. The speaker, a British soldier, observes the hush of the dawn in the midst of a World War I battle. But while daybreak is typically associated with life, hope, and renewal, here the poem establishes a subtle but palpable sense of unease.

Significantly, there is no description of the sun *rising*. Instead, the speaker observes through metaphor how the "darkness crumbles away." "Crumbles" is the important word here, suggesting decay, degradation, and destruction—all words that could apply to World War I and the horrors of humanity's supposed civilization.

The first line's meter initially suggests an iambic (da-DUM) rhythm, but this, too, "crumbles":

The dark- | ness crum- | bles away.

The extra unstressed syllable in the last foot, combined with the end stop, stifles the poem's momentum before it's even begun. It also creates a tense silence, into which the star of the poem—the rat—will appear.

In line 2, dawn, something that happens every day, seems to connect the speaker with the ancient world. That is, it links the soldiers of WWI, living in their frightening wartime present, with the "druid[s]," religious leaders in ancient Celtic culture. But this line isn't really about Celtic druids in particular; rather, the speaker is reaching back to find common ground with the people of the past, much as the poem will later meditate on the common ground between warring armies. Time itself is personified as a "druid"—ancient, eternal, and, perhaps, containing priest-like wisdom—in contrast to the absurd, murderous, present-day war.

LINES 3-6

Only a live thing leaps my hand,
A queer sardonic rat,
As I pull the parapet's poppy
To stick behind my ear.

Before the speaker can go deeper into a meditation on dawn and time, a rat appears and interrupts his thoughts. Notice how the jumpy /l/ alliteration signals the rat's sudden arrival:

Only a live thing leaps my hand,
A queer sardonic rat,

The rat becomes an important symbol in the poem, offering the speaker a perspective through which to contemplate the sheer strangeness and absurdity of modern warfare:

1. For one thing, rats thrive in disease-ridden environments. They are associated with death and decay, and thus make sense as a symbol of warfare—something that causes a great deal of death and decay.
2. But the rat is also a *live* creature, an ambassador of nature's life force. It stands out as a symbol of survival as it makes its way past corpse after corpse.

The speaker personifies—or, technically, anthropomorphizes—the rat throughout the poem, describing it in line 4 as "queer" and "sardonic." In other words, there's something strange and mocking about the rat, as if it *knows* it's superior to the humans it runs past. Of course, this is only a feeling projected by the speaker himself!

The rat appears just as the speaker pulls a poppy from the soil on the "parapet" (the top of the trench in which the soldiers are embedded). This red flower is the poem's other main symbol, and it's specifically associated with World War I (in fact, it's still used in ceremonies to commemorate that war). The speaker seems to want to use it as a kind of lucky charm, though poppies thrived around WWI battlefields in part because the soil was so rich in nutrients from human remains.

The alliteration and consonance in this line—"pull the parapet's poppy"—is bright and cheerful, sounding almost like a children's tongue-twister. This effect aligns with the hope symbolism of the poppy, but it might also sound ironic in the context of a deadly war.

LINES 7-12

Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.
Now you have touched this English hand
You will do the same to a German
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
To cross the sleeping green between.

At the start of line 7, the speaker addresses the rat via apostrophe. As the soldiers engage in combat, the rat is just going about its ratty business—and that's kind of the point! Its indifference to the war seems to call the whole framework of war into question. The soldiers on either side have a supposed enemy, a cause to fight for, etc., but the rat, as an outsider, crosses unscathed from one side to the other. Almost like a jester in an old royal court, it seems to deflate everything that people treat as important. That's why it's "Droll"—it's a mocking, humorous intrusion on the seriousness of war.

Unlike the soldiers, the rat is free to come and go as it pleases. It has "cosmopolitan sympathies"—that is, an equal fondness for (or indifference toward) English and German soldiers. In fact, *English* and *German* as categories mean nothing to the rat. In crossing the battlefield, then, the rat underscores the common humanity between the two sides. The speaker jokes that the rat could be shot for these "sympathies," but the joke gestures toward something real: the way soldiers are trained to demonize their enemies. In linking the speaker's "English hand" with that of a German—the same hands that shoot at each other all day—the rat highlights both the absurdity of war and the possibility of peace. Notice how the enjambment in lines 9-12 also implies connection, linking one line to the next and joining the English and German hands—as images—in one long sentence.

The rat is free, whereas the speaker is constrained by his wartime duties. The rat can choose on a whim—"if it be [its] pleasure"—to cross the battlefield, whereas this choice, for the speaker, would mean near-certain death. The poem captures the rat's leisureliness through the relaxed, pleasant assonance in line 12:

> To cross the sleeping green between.

Evidently, the "green" is "sleeping" (an example of personification) only because the day's battle hasn't fully begun. Soon, it will turn into a waking nightmare—but the rat will still be able to move about at will.

LINES 13-14

It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,

In lines 13-14, the speaker continues to address the rat through apostrophe. As a non-human creature on the battlefield, the rat causes the speaker to reflect on the absurdity and waste of war.

The speaker anthropomorphizes the rat again, noticing that it seems to "grin" to itself as it goes by. This knowing smile aligns with the earlier description of the rat as "sardonic"; that is, the rat, a supposedly lowly creature, seemingly *looks down* on humankind for its insane, destructive behavior. Of course, this "grin" is a projection: it's really the speaker who "inwardly" senses how sinister and meaningless war is.

The rat continues its mini-odyssey along the trench, passing "Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes" (line 14)—in other words, young men in their physical prime. This brief focus on masculine beauty further highlights the sheer wastefulness of war. The line is packed with stressed syllables:

> Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,

These strong stresses reflect the strength of the men's bodies—which, nevertheless, is no match for the deadly technological innovations of the war. The mention of "athletes" gestures toward a kind of alternative universe in which these men partake in sports rather than killing each other. Or perhaps it casts war as a kind of deadly "sport," an absurdly destructive game.

LINES 15-18

Less chanced than you for life,
Bonds to the whims of murder,
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
The torn fields of France.

The speaker juxtaposes the rat with the soldiers, ironically noting that this puny rodent is more likely to survive the battle than the big, strong humans around it. In fact, the rat can thrive in this environment of death and decay—unlike the humans who created it.

The poem approaches its rhetorical height as it contrasts the rat's freedom with the soldiers' situation. Not only are these men "Less chanced than [the rat] for life" (less likely to survive), they are also:

> Bonds to the whims of murder,
> Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
> The torn fields of France.

Here are several metaphors in quick succession:

1. The men are "Bonds" (slaves) because they can't escape their fate. Death will come for many of them, and the survival of the rest will depend on sheer luck. (Rosenberg himself was called near the end of the war.) This line personifies "murder" as a kind of evil god, choosing which young men to pick off at "whim."
2. Many of the men lie "Sprawled" on the battlefield, their limbs arranged unnaturally by death, fear, or uncomfortable sleep. The "bowels of the earth" recalls Dante's *Inferno* in its suggestion of a hellish interior landscape, and may allude to the phrase "bowels of the harmless earth" in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*. (The line is spoken by the soldier Hotspur during a discussion of war.) The "bowels" of

the body produce waste—much as war produces a tragic waste of life. Notice how the /l/ consonance in "sprawled" and "bowels" gives the line a stretched, grotesque quality.

3. The "fields of France" (on the Western Front of WWI) are "torn" by the fighting. Artillery bombs have churned up the earth, turning a beautiful landscape into a nightmarish scene. The word "torn" also hints at the rift between the two sides of the war.

Of course, the rat neither understands nor cares about any of the above. It sticks to its own ratty mission to feed and reproduce, adapting to whatever's going on around it. In this way, it illustrates nature's tenacious will to survive—by contrast with humanity's drive toward self-destruction.

LINES 19-22

What do you see in our eyes
At the shrieking iron and flame
Hurled through still heavens?
What quaver—what heart aghast?

In lines 19-22, the speaker asks three rhetorical questions, still addressing the rat through apostrophe. They all essentially mean the same thing, wondering what the rat makes of humanity's bizarre behavior:

> What do you see in our eyes
> At the shrieking iron and flame
> Hurled through still heavens?
> What quaver—what heart aghast?

Through imagining what the war is like from the rat's perspective, the speaker captures the incomprehensibility of the situation. The war—the violence, the technology, the politics—starts to seem arbitrary, something that only human folly could have created.

The speaker wonders what the rat perceives in human eyes as the sky crashes and burns with "iron and flame" (here personified as "shrieking" in order to capture a sense of terror and sheer, brutal noise). The "still heavens" of the sky mirror the rat's indifference, as if all of the non-human world looks on in bemusement and the humanity's strange activity. There is also something god-like about this image that recalls the lightning-bolts of Zeus—as though humanity has created a technological power that it can no longer fully control.

The speaker then asks the rat if it notices the fear ("quaver") and disgust ("heart aghast") that must show in the eyes of some of the men fighting the battle. The jumpiness of the caesura makes this line (22) feel restless and tense, like the sleep-deprived mind of a soldier on the front line.

LINES 23-26

Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
Drop, and are ever dropping;
But mine in my ear is safe—
Just a little white with the dust.

In the last four lines, the speaker shifts his attention away from the rat and back to the poppy behind his ear. It's an ambiguous ending: some readers might buy into the poppy as a symbol of hope, while others might find that it rings (perhaps intentionally) hollow. The metaphor that reintroduces the poppy is hardly reassuring:

> Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
> Drop, and are ever dropping;

Though this may sound like a purely poetic image, it's based in reality. During World War I, bombing churned up the soil and brought poppy seeds to the surface, while the presence of human remains made the earth nutrient-rich. Thus, there's a literal truth to the idea that the poppies had "roots [...] in man's veins."

Like human beings, these poppies droop and die ("drop") eventually. In fact, they're always dying ("ever dropping") as part of the cycle of life. The speaker's own poppy, for example, will now die because he's plucked it. As much as they're a symbol of hope and survival, then, these poppies also represent the relentlessness of death.

The polyptoton of "drop" and "dropping" underscores how poppies die individually *and* are always dying collectively (because death comes for all life, and flowers live only a short time). The internal rhyme linking "Poppies" and "Drop"/"Dropping" further stresses how vibrant, beautiful flowers (like vibrant young soldiers) are never far from death. The caesura after "drop" makes the verse lurch as though it, too, is falling.

The speaker's poppy is "safe," tucked behind his ear. But the poem has demonstrated the absurdity and wastefulness of war, so this safety seems illusory—like the speaker's own. The flower is *technically* safe for now, but in the next moment, it (and the speaker) might be struck by a bomb or bullet.

The last line, which describes the poppy as a "little white with the dust," is also ambiguous. Consonance sprinkles the line with /t/ sounds, much as dust sprinkles the flower. Although the line could be a straightforward description of the poppy's appearance, "dust" could also have symbolic overtones. The Judeo-Christian tradition often associates "dust" with death—specifically, the body's decomposition and reabsorption into the earth (as in "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" from the Book of Common Prayer). That meaning certainly makes sense in this context, but it's not explicit. The whiteness sprinkled over the blood-red flower might also suggest the pallor of

corpses. There's no definitive interpretation here, and perhaps that's the point: the poem ends, appropriately enough, on a note of ominous uncertainty.

SYMBOLS

THE RAT

The rat is the star of the show in this poem. Its symbolism works on three main levels:

1. Rats are associated with death, decay, and waste. They thrive in environments that humans consider undesirable. The trenches along the Western Front (which stretched from Belgium through France) were gruesome places, often waterlogged and full of dead and decomposing bodies. This made them an ideal breeding ground for rats!
2. Even as it serves as a reminder of death, however, the rat also comes to symbolize nature's ability to survive—and even thrive—when humans are doing their worst.
3. As a kind of ambassador of life that's expressly *non-human*, the rat also illustrates the absurdity of warfare. Much as jesters in medieval courts deflated the pomp of kings and queens, the rat's indifferent, "sardonic," "grin[ning]" presence undermines the entire war project. It doesn't feel allegiance to one side or the other, and it's not trying to kill anyone with sophisticated weapons; it's just living its simple life, and in the process, it seems to ridicule the humans' self-destruction.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 7-15
- Lines 16-22

THE POPPY

The poppy flower is linked with World War I in the UK, where, to this day, many wear a commemorative (and usually plastic) poppy in November to mark the anniversary of the war's end.

Like the rat, the poppy's symbolism in the poem is complex. For one thing, poppies are flowers, beautiful objects from the natural world that typically represent beauty, growth, rebirth, and so forth. To the speaker, the poppy is almost a lucky charm, placed behind his ear in a gesture of hope and (perhaps naive) optimism.

Yet even as the poppy serves as both a sign of life—poppies grew abundantly on the battlefields of the Western Front—it's also a stark reminder of death, since, now that the speaker has plucked it, it will "Drop" and die. Thus, in addition to being a sign of nature's beauty and strength, the poppies are also a subtly grim reminder of the sheer scale of the war. Countless dead and decomposing bodies, combined with the soil-churning effects of artillery bombs, made the ground rich and fertile for poppies to grow in.

When the speaker turns back to the poppy at the end of the poem, his tone is unsettlingly ambivalent. The dust on the blood-red poppy (think of the phrase "dust to dust," as in the circle of life) becomes another haunting reminder of death. The flower, like the speaker, may not be "safe" for long.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "As I pull the parapet's poppy / To stick behind my ear."
- **Lines 23-26:** "Poppies whose roots are in man's veins / Drop, and are ever dropping; / But mine in my ear is safe— / Just a little white with the dust."

DUST

The placement of "dust" at the very end of the poem suggests some larger, symbolic significance.

Dust has been symbolically linked with death for thousands of years. In the biblical Book of Genesis, for example, God creates humanity out of dust, and when people die, they are returned to the earth, turned back *into* dust. The phrase "ashes to ashes, dust to dust," from the Book of Common Prayer, is a famous summary of the circle of life.

The little sprinkle of dust on the speaker's poppy, then, might represent the proximity of death: one false move, one well-placed bullet or bomb, and the speaker's life will be over.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 26:** "Just a little white with the dust."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration helps brings the poem's images to life at several powerful moments.

The first example, in line 1, is all about the element of surprise. It's dawn, and the speaker observes a moment of uneasy calm on the battlefield as the "darkness crumbles away." Suddenly, a rat appears and interrupts the speaker's train of thought: "a live thing leaps my hand" (line 3). This alliteration is lively and surprising, like the rat itself.

In the same sentence, the speaker "pull[s] the parapet's poppy" to tuck behind his ear, apparently as a good-luck charm. This alliteration (and consonance) is cheerful, almost childlike, as though borrowed from a nursery rhyme. Yet it also gently suggests violence through all those (ex)plosive sounds.

Alliteration appears again in line 18: "fields of France." Here, the /f/ sounds are soft and pleasant. Taken in isolation, the "fields of France" sound like an attractive place to be! But the ugly adjective "torn," with its hard /t/ sound, contrasts with the /f/s and suggests the violence occurring in those fields.

The speaker then asks the rat (via apostrophe) what it sees in the eyes of the soldiers as artillery and gunfire are "hurled through [the] heavens." The alliterative, breathy /h/ sounds suggest physical effort—the kind of huffing and puffing you make when you *hurl* something.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "live," "leaps"
- **Line 5:** "pull," "parapet's poppy"
- **Line 18:** "fields," "France"
- **Line 21:** "Hurled," "heavens"
- **Line 24:** "Drop," "dropping"

ALLUSION

The poem's allusions are subtle and indirect.

In line 17, for example, "the bowels of the earth" echoes Shakespeare's "the bowels of the land" in Act 5, Scene 2 of *Richard III* and "the bowels of the harmless earth" in Act 1, Scene 3 of *Henry IV, Part I* (both scenes involving war). Rosenberg uses this grisly, familiar metaphor to portray the "torn fields of France" as a wasteland—just as the bowels are the body's site of waste.

In the final line, "dust" has possible biblical connotations. In the Book of Genesis, "dust" is what God uses to form the human body; it's therefore linked to human physicality and mortality. (The funeral service in the Book of Common Prayer famously invokes this image: "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," etc.). Here, the "little" sprinkle of dust conveys the speaker's proximity to death.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "the bowels of the earth"
- **Line 26:** "dust"

APOSTROPHE

From line 7 to line 22, the speaker addresses the rat through apostrophe. Here as in, say, Hamlet's address to the skull of Yorick (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 5, Scene 1), apostrophe provides an opportunity for philosophizing. The rat interests the speaker because it represents non-human life and neither understands nor cares about the war. By imagining the war from the rat's perspective, the speaker portrays that war as a bizarre, frightening, tragic waste.

The rat, of course, can't respond—and that's part of the point! The rat's indifference to the war underscores the fact that war is something humanity constructs. The speaker notices how the rat can come and go across the battlefield as it pleases, subtly linking both sides of the conflict (and highlighting their shared humanity). When the speaker imagines how nonsensical the war must seem to the rat, he's really expressing his *own* inability to comprehend war. He's the one taking a "sardonic" view of the conflict, though he's also among those "quaver[ing]" at the danger it poses.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-22

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears sparingly in the poem, adding vividness and drama to particular images. It's noticeable in line 12, which describes how the rat can cross no man's land—the ground between the two warring sides—at its leisure:

> To cross the sleeping green between.

These long /ee/ vowels stretch the sound of the line, making it seem unhurried and leisurely. (The same vowel also appears in "be" in the previous line and "seems" in the next.) Of course, the rat's leisure is in stark contrast with the soldiers' constant awareness of danger. That's why the rat seems to wear an "inward grin" (line 13)—the playful assonance here making the rat appear smarmy and "sardonic."

In line 14, the speaker observes the rat passing "Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes"—in other words, the young men who make up the army. The assonance between "eyes" and "fine," in particular, reinforces the line's strong stresses, emphasizing the strength of these soldiers who are (or were) in their prime.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "sleeping," "green," "between"
- **Line 13:** "seems," "inwardly grin"
- **Line 14:** "eyes, fine"
- **Line 23:** "whose roots"

CAESURA

Caesuras help control the poem's pace and rhythm. The first two examples occur during the speaker's apostrophe to the rat:

> Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew

[...]
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure

Here, caesura helps suggest a conversational familiarity between the speaker and his new rodent companion. It's as if the speaker is leaning on a friend's shoulder to say, "You know..."

Caesura can also create lists and suggest abundance, as it does in line 14:

Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,

Combined with the packed-in, stressed syllables, these caesuras give the line a robust, muscular quality that mirrors the men it's describing.

The final two caesuras (lines 22-24) create dramatic emphasis:

What quaver—what heart aghast?
Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
Drop, and are ever dropping;

The dash makes line 22 seem fretful and nervous, like the "quaver[ing]" soldiers. The comma in line 24 lends "Drop" extra weight, emphasizing the power and suddenness of death. ("Drop" is made even more emphatic and surprising by its enjambment over the line break.) By implication, the speaker, like the poppy, could suddenly "Drop" dead at any time.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "rat, they"
- **Line 11:** "Soon, no doubt, if"
- **Line 14:** "eyes, fine limbs, haughty"
- **Line 22:** "quaver—what"
- **Line 24:** "Drop, and"

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem's end stops help create dramatic emphasis and tension. Rosenberg uses them unpredictably, making the poem feel spontaneous (like the arrival of the rat).

In lines 6, 8, and 12, for example, end stops create little extra beats in which the absurdity of war can sink in with the reader. They also create an eerie quiet—as though the battlefield is *too* peaceful at the moment.

The end stop in line 18 concludes a long list of metaphors that capture the horror of war:

Bonds to the whims of murder,
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
The torn fields of France.

The sudden hush of that full stop enhances the cumulative impact of this unsettling passage.

Both of the poem's rhetorical questions (lines 21 and 22) are end-stopped with question marks. This gives the verse a suddenly desperate, searching sound. The poem's final three lines are end-stopped, respectively, with a semicolon, dash, and period. This causes the final line to "land" more powerfully after two suspenseful pauses.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "away."
- **Line 2:** "ever,"
- **Line 3:** "hand,"
- **Line 4:** "rat,"
- **Line 6:** "ear."
- **Line 8:** "sympathies."
- **Line 12:** "between."
- **Line 14:** "athletes,"
- **Line 15:** "life,"
- **Line 16:** "murder,"
- **Line 17:** "earth,"
- **Line 18:** "France."
- **Line 21:** "heavens?"
- **Line 22:** "aghast?"
- **Line 24:** "dropping;"
- **Line 25:** "safe—"
- **Line 26:** "dust."

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is a key part of the poem's structure, allowing sentences to unfold over multiple lines of varying length. Sometimes it has more striking effects, too, as in the enjambments between lines 9 and 12:

Now you have touched this English hand
You will do the same to a German
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
To cross the sleeping green between.

These lines describe how the rat, by moving freely across the battlefield, draws a kind of link between the two warring armies. The enjambment here suggests interconnection, joining the "English hand" with the "German" even as it joins one line to the next

In the following lines (13-14), enjambment creates a sense of darting movement:

It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,

Notice how the reader's eye "pass[es]" from one side of the poem to the other, mimicking the rat's jumpy travels across the trenches.

Enjambment can also place extra weight on the first words of a

line, as it does in lines 21 and 24:

> What do you see in our eyes
> At the shrieking iron and flame
> Hurled through still heavens?
> [...]
> Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
> Drop, and are ever dropping;

Both "Hurled" and "Drop" become extra emphatic ("Drop" all the more so because it's followed by a caesura), adding to the poem's violent, jarring atmosphere. The speaker's world is one in which danger and death can arrive very suddenly.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "poppy / To"
- **Lines 7-8:** "knew / Your"
- **Lines 9-10:** "hand / You"
- **Lines 10-11:** "German / Soon"
- **Lines 11-12:** "pleasure / To"
- **Lines 13-14:** "pass / Strong"
- **Lines 19-20:** "eyes / At"
- **Lines 20-21:** "flame / Hurled"
- **Lines 23-24:** "veins / Drop"

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition occurs as part of the speaker's apostrophe to the rat. In lines 13-18, the speaker juxtaposes the rat with the strong young men it encounters on the battlefield:

> It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
> Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,
> Less chanced than you for life,
> Bonds to the whims of murder,
> Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
> The torn fields of France.

Though the rat is small and vulnerable and the young soldiers are in their physical prime, the former stands a better chance of surviving than the latter. That's because the rat exists outside the (human-dictated) framework of the war. It's neither friend nor foe, can come and go as it pleases, and is apparently fearless in its movements. By contrast, the soldiers are terrified and trapped by the war, able to survive only through incredible luck and/or skill.

Broadly, most of the poem juxtaposes the animal with the human world, suggesting that war is uniquely human in the worst sense. In other words, war is so insane, horrific, and destructive that only humans would attempt it.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-18:** "It seems you inwardly grin as you pass / Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes, / Less chanced than you for life, / Bonds to the whims of murder, / Sprawled in the bowels of the earth, / The torn fields of France."

METAPHOR

Much of the metaphor in this poem is also personification, which is covered in a separate section of the guide.

The poem starts with a metaphor describing the arrival of the dawn: "The darkness crumbles away." Rather than focus on the sun *appearing*, the speaker notices the darkness *disappearing*. Night "crumbles" like a derelict old building, establishing an atmosphere of destruction and decay. It's an unexpected, unsettling way to describe daybreak, which is typically associated with hope and renewal.

The metaphor in line 2, describing "Time" as an "old druid," is also an example of personification. Druids were religious authorities in ancient Celtic culture and reportedly engaged in sacrificial rituals. By mentioning them here, the speaker captures the ancient and mysterious quality of Time, while linking the present moment—and perhaps the wasteful sacrifice of men in battle—with the wider history of humanity.

Later, the speaker metaphorically describes the young soldiers as:

> Bonds to the whims of murder,
> Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,

Murder is also personified here, as a godlike entity capable of deciding who lives and who dies. The men are "Bonds" (servants or slaves) to murder's "whims"—that is, there is nothing they can do about their fate. The "bowels" metaphor also evokes the system of trenches the soldiers have dug (as well as the holes that shelling has "torn" in the fields), such that bodies seem to be sprawled in the "bowels," or guts, "of the earth."

Finally, there's a metaphorical element to the description of a "heart aghast" as something the rat might "see in [the soldiers'] eyes." This isn't literally possible, of course, but suggests the horror that might show through in the soldiers' expressions.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The darkness crumbles away. / It is the same old druid Time as ever,"
- **Lines 16-17:** "Bonds to the whims of murder, / Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,"
- **Line 22:** "what heart aghast?"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is one of the poem's main devices, allowing the speaker to imagine the war from a non-human perspective. After the quiet opening, the star of the show—a humble rat—makes its appearance. The speaker personifies (or, more specifically, anthropomorphizes) his rodent companion, which provides the imaginative direction for the entire poem.

To the speaker, the rat seems indifferent, even mocking. It can come and go across the battlefield as it pleases, and it seems to smirk at the ridiculous, deadly rituals of war. Of course, the rat is neither indifferent nor invested in what's happening; it exists outside the realm of human concepts and discourse.

In that way, it's a kind of ambassador of nature and non-human life. Its ignorance of the war shows how deeply *human* warfare is. Ironically, the speaker gets at this idea by personifying the rat, granting it the capacity to find humanity ridiculous. In reality, the rat is just trying to survive and thrive.

In line 20, the speaker also personifies the weaponry of war:

> the shrieking iron and flame
> Hurled through still heavens?

Though it's a subtle effect, the "shrieking" of the bombs mirrors the terror felt by the soldiers (while also capturing the horrific sound of the battlefield).

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Line 4
- Lines 7-22

POLYPTOTON

Polyptoton occurs in lines 23 and 24:

> Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
> Drop, and are ever dropping;

Here, "drop/dropping" can be read as a synonym for both "droop/drooping" and "die/dying." (Also, "ever" means "always.")

The repetitive effect of polyptoton helps evoke the repetitiousness of death and tragedy. Poppies droop and die individually, in the present, but from a broader perspective, they're *always* drooping and dying. In other words, death and tragedy are abundant and eternal. This image might also suggest that the suffering of the war, in a way, never ends, living on as historical trauma.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 24:** "Drop," "dropping"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

At the end of the speaker's apostrophe to the rat, he asks three rhetorical questions:

> What do you see in our eyes
> At the shrieking iron and flame
> Hurled through still heavens?
> What quaver—what heart aghast? (lines 19-22)

The speaker wonders what the rat sees in the soldiers' eyes as they, in turn, witness the horrors of World War I. Through these questions, the speaker captures the incomprehensible absurdity of mechanized warfare (which, in WWI, took place on an unprecedented scale).

What does the rat make of the sky full of flashing metal and fire? Does it perceive the fear and disgust in the soldiers' hearts? In asking these questions, the speaker knows they're unanswerable. (The rat can't reply!) Nevertheless, they illustrate the emotions of the speaker and his fellow soldiers, capturing their distress from an unexpected angle. They also depict the war as something unnatural—terrifying to humans and likely baffling to other creatures.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-22:** "What do you see in our eyes / At the shrieking iron and flame / Hurled through still heavens? / What quaver—what heart aghast?"

VOCABULARY

Druid (Line 2) - The druids were religious authorities in ancient Celtic cultures, such as those in Britain and France. Here used ambiguously (it can be read as a noun or an adjective), "druid" suggests that Time is both ancient and mystical.

Sardonic (Line 4) - Mocking or sarcastic. The appearance of the rat seems to mock the human soldiers.

Parapet (Line 5) - The top of the trench.

Poppy (Line 5) - A red flower associated with World War I (because it grew abundantly on the battlefields of Europe).

Droll (Line 7) - Wry and mocking.

Cosmopolitan (Line 8) - Worldly and at home with different cultures. Here, the word suggests that the rat is equally at home on both sides of the battlefield.

The Sleeping Green (Line 12) - The battlefield, which is perhaps quiet at this particular moment.

Haughty (Line 14) - Superior.

Chanced (Line 15) - Likely. (In other words, the strong soldiers are less likely to survive than the puny rat.)

Bonds (Line 16) - Here, an archaic noun meaning serfs or slaves.

Whims (Line 16) - Spur-of-the-moment feelings or decisions.

Bowels (Line 17) - The interior parts or depths.

Hurled (Line 21) - Thrown with force.

Quaver (Line 22) - Nervousness.

Aghast (Line 22) - Filled with horror/shock/disgust.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem doesn't use a regular stanza form. Instead, it's a single 26-line block of text. This gives it a spontaneous quality that seems fitting for a poem written and set in a World War 1 trench.

Though the poem opens with an almost meditative sense of quiet, the speaker has to be on his guard at all times: danger could strike at any moment. The dynamism of the poem—its variation in line lengths and lack of neat structure—seems to speak to this edgy state of mind. It's as if the poet is reacting to images and sensations in real time, as a soldier does in battle. This spontaneity also fits with the surprising intrusion of the rat.

Notably, though, the poem does subvert a particular mode of poetry. As it's set at dawn, "Break of Day in the Trenches" is a kind of *aubade*: a morning poem. But while aubades are typically romantic, this poem focuses on fear, tragedy, and the waste of human life.

METER

"Break of Day in the Trenches" doesn't have a regular meter. In this context, a strict rhythm would probably feel too strict and safe. The poem has a spontaneous quality, as evidenced by the fact that a rat—a surprise intruder—takes up most of the action! Rosenberg's free verse plays into this feeling that anything could happen.

Notice, though, how the first line briefly leads the reader to expect iambs before immediately undermining the pattern:

> The dark- | ness crum- | bles away.

The sound of the line also has a crumbling effect: it builds up a potential iambic meter, then dismantles it in the third foot, giving the poem dynamism and surprise from the outset.

RHYME SCHEME

This is an unrhymed poem. The freedom of its verse gives it an improvised quality. In fact, it was written while Rosenberg was serving on the front line, and the absence of rhyme helps it read like an authentic record of that experience.

SPEAKER

The poem uses a first-person perspective throughout. The speaker is a soldier fighting on the English side of World War I, stationed somewhere in the trenches of the Western Front (the line of battle that stretched from Belgium through France).

\Given that Isaac Rosenberg himself served in these trenches—in fact, this poem was sent from the front line to one of Rosenberg's literary supporters—it's not a stretch to view the speaker as Rosenberg himself. But by avoiding specific details about the speaker's identity, the poem retains a universal quality. The experiences it describes could be those of thousands of young men at the time.

The speaker isn't strongly judgmental about the war. That is, the poem lacks the patriotic hype of Rupert Brooke *and* the cutting condemnation of poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Instead, this speaker struggles to understand the war, and, by imagining it from the rat's perspective, expresses the absurdity of the experience.

SETTING

As the title suggests, the poem is set at dawn in the trenches of World War I. This gives the poem an eerily quiet beginning: the soldiers are just waking up to another brutal day of trench warfare. While dawn is usually associated with warmth, light, hope, and renewal, here it's just the dismantling of "darkness." Rather than the glorious arrival of the sun, the poem opens with an atmosphere of destruction and decay, suggesting that war itself is more destructive than glorious.

The speaker is situated in the "torn fields of France," somewhere on the English side along the Western Front. In other words, he's right in the heart of the battle, close enough to see the "shrieking iron and flame" that fill the skies. His observation that the soldiers are "Less chanced than [the rat] for life"—less likely than the rat to survive—indicates the scale and fury of the fighting.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Isaac Rosenberg was one of the most talented and ill-fated poets of World War I. He was born in 1890 and fought in the war between 1915 and 1918 as a private in the British Army. He was killed in action during the Battle of Arras (120 miles north of Paris), just a few months before the war ended. His initial motivation for joining the war was to earn money for his family. In his own words, Rosenberg "never joined the army for patriotic reasons. Nothing can justify war."

Rosenberg's reputation sits somewhat awkwardly within the

canon of WWI poetry. He lacks the patriotic fervor of poets like Rupert Brooke (e.g., "The Soldier") and the provocative horror of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.

Still, his poetry is dynamic and unpredictable, often composed while serving on the front line. (Sassoon and Owen wrote much of theirs during periods of convalescence.) His trench poems, such as "Dead Man's Dump" and "Daughters of War," chronicle his front-line experience with a heady mix of realism and imaginative imagery. One prominent critic, Paul Fussell, called "Break of Day in the Trenches" the greatest poem of World War I.

Rosenberg was also an artist, and some of his work can be seen here.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War I lasted from 1914 to 1918 and was known, at the time, as "the war to end all wars" (a label that proved tragically inaccurate). Most historians set its starting point as the 1914 assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, but it was a politically complex conflict that eventually pulled in most of the world. France, Russia, and England allied against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy as the main belligerents, but many other countries became involved, too.

Due to major advances in military technology—including "improvements" to machine guns and artillery, as well as the introduction of warplanes, tanks, and chemical weapons—World War I killed an unprecedented number of soldiers and civilians. The Western Front, which ran from Belgium through France and constituted the main area of fighting in Western Europe, has sometimes been likened to a meat-grinder for its destruction of lives by the thousands. This front line, with its network of trenches, was where Rosenberg served and died.

Both the rat and the poppy are historically accurate details. Rats thrive on other creatures' disease and death, so they found the horrific trench environment a perfect breeding ground. Poppies, too, flourished in this gruesome landscape, which was churned up by artillery fire and rich in nutrients due to the sheer number of decomposing bodies. These blood-red flowers ultimately became a symbol of the war itself, still used today in commemorative ceremonies.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Significance of Poppies — A BBC article looking at the history of the war's emblematic flower. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/remembrance/how/poppy.shtml)
- More Poems and a Biography — Read more about Rosenberg's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/isaac-rosenberg)
- The World War I Poets — A discussion of World War I poetry, together with examples of the poems themselves. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/101720/world-war-i-poets)
- Footage from World War I — A clip from director Peter Jackson's WWI documentary, They Shall Not Grow Old, that offers a vivid glimpse of the poem's world. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZY7RQAX_03ca)
- The Trenches of World War I — More information about life and death in the WWI trenches. (https://www.history.com/news/life-in-the-trenches-of-world-war-i)

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