

## Detailed Analysis- Break of Day in the Trenches

### Lines 1-6

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.

The poem begins with the narrator announcing that the night is coming to an end. This is not a peaceful or romantic beginning to a new day, but one that will be filled with the horrors of war. In the first lines of the poem, the reader does not yet understand where the speaker is in physical space, but the choice of the word, "crumbles," in regards to the fading of "darkness," gives some initial context. The word casts images of collapsing, dissolving, and decaying structures or states of being into the reader's mind.

The speaker is clearly on the unsteady ground before the poem has even really started.

The second line does nothing to lift the general spirit of the piece. The speaker has not chosen to interpret the beginning of a new day as a harbinger of new possibilities or hope, it is the same, “as ever.” What this “ever” is, the reader has yet to find out. All that one knows for sure is that it is the speaker’s life following a regular and monotonous pattern of days. One day appears to be like any other.

Additionally, the poet has made two quite interesting choices in this line. First, he has selected “druid” as the adjective to describe, “Time.” This word is traditionally associated with ancient Celtic magicians or soothsayers, but when utilized in this context it comes across facetiously. There is nothing magical about “Time” at this moment. Nothing promising or noteworthy. The poet’s second choice was to capitalize on the word “Time.” This gives the word a greater meaning and imbues it with an amount of control. The poet is casting “Time” as an independent entity that is capable of effecting a chosen change over a landscape.

Luckily, the next line introduces a more active and “lively” character into ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’. Within all the monotonous, dilapidated darkness the speaker lives in, there is one “live” thing. This “thing” makes a move and “leaps” at the speaker’s hand. The following line reveals that the “it” is in fact, a rat. It did not “leap” into his hand, or onto his hand, it just moved at it. The speaker describes the rat as being “sardonic,” or mocking, and “queer” or odd and strange.

It is clear that the speaker is very thrown off by the coming of this creature. Its presence does not, initially, seem to mesh with the environment that he is in. At the same moment that the rat was leaping at the speaker’s hand, the speaker was reaching out to “pull” a poppy from the “parapet,” or wall.

Finally, the reader is being given some description of what this place is. There are walls surrounding the speaker, some of which appear to have poppies stuck in them. This should immediately draw one’s mind (especially when taken into consideration along with the title) to the trenches of World War I.

The image of the poppy was popularized and officially associated with WWI through John

McCrae's poem, "In Flanders Fields". This piece enshrined forever the bright red poppy flower as the memorial image of those lost in the war. The movement of the speaker's hand seems to have attracted the rat. It was drawn to the narrator as he moved to touch the poppy.

At this point in the piece, the speaker's tone changes. It is no longer as bleak and hopeless as it was, it morphs into something closer to amusement. Rosenberg will maintain this pleasing undertone as the poem progresses, making it seen through his adjective choices and the speaker's attitude towards the rat.

### 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.

The next section of the poem is spoken directly to the "queer" rat. The speaker turns, looking down at

the rat, and calls him, “Droll,” or curious and unusual. The poet is truly emphasizing the oddness of this creature in the trench with the speaker. He continues on to state that “they,” the other soldiers,

...would shoot you if they knew  
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.

On a first read the choice to utilize the word, “cosmopolitan,” might seem like a strange one. The word is used here to describe knowing, and being known, to the people of other countries. It is truly a striking word to place in the context of a dark battlefield trench. It was chosen in an effort to maintain the poem’s lilting humor and, strangely enough, as a wholly accurate representation of what this rat is and what he represents to the poem’s overall theme.

The rat is said to be “cosmopolitan” in his “sympathies.” He is endeared to and engaged by anyone who comes from anywhere. The rat is interested in being around people from every country on earth. There is no place that he will not or cannot

go, nor any race that he shuns. This way of being is completely antithetical to the point of war.

As the two opposing sides of this battle sit in their trenches, separated by the brutal stretch of no man's land, alienated from one another, they dwell in their hatred for the "other." In this particular instance the "other" is narrowed down to the country they are engaged with, but all the same, they have no contact besides that which is deadly. The rat on the other hand has no such hangups, loyalties, or patriotic duties. He is free to move from country to country, trench to trench, whenever he pleases.

The following lines are also spoken directly to the visiting rat. The soldier speculates about the life of the rat and about the fact that after it has touched his "English hand" it will go and touch a German one in no time at all. The rat will pay equal attention to both of the countries currently fighting, it does not choose sides. The rat, the speaker thinks, actually takes a "pleasure" in the fact that it is able to cross "the sleeping green," or the land between the two trenches.

Throughout this poem, the narrator continuously casts his own desires onto the small body of the rat.

He is desirous of the ability to move freely from place to place and is sick and tired of the “crumbling” darkness and the monotony of his days. He does not want to be caught up in his pit anymore. The final lines of this section speak the awful truth about the rat and reinforce why it is that the speaker cannot move freely.

He states that if the rat was to be outed to the other side, that it had touched the hand of an Englishman, it would surely be shot. The same would apply in the opposite situation, the English would shoot any creature associating with the Germans. So saturated is their hate for the “other” that anything can be contaminated by it.

### 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.

In the second half of 'Break of Day in the Trenches', the speaker continues to elaborate on the abilities of the rat. He starts by returning to the rat's innate skill, the crossing of borders. It is able, without consideration or fear, to pass from the English-side of the war to the German-side. As was mentioned previously, the speaker is projecting his own feelings onto the rat. He interprets a string of the rat's features and movements that he longs to participate in.

When imagining what the rat is thinking as it moves through the forbidden middle ground of the battlefield, he sees it "inwardly grin," as it contemplates its own power. It passes unmolested from side to side, this is something that no human can do. This fact elevates the rat over the humans that surround it. It has a "cosmopolitan" way of life that no human being, at least at this time, in this place, is able to experience. It has greater power and access to resources than anyone else.

From the speaker's perspective, the rat is able to see the soldiers on the battlefield and know that they have "Strong eyes," "fine limbs" and are "haughty athletes." These men are in more danger from their

circumstances “than you.” They have all the training, physical abilities, and fine-tuned senses, but because they are in fear of the men on the other side of the battlefield, are more likely to die than a little, seemingly helpless, rat. Once more the rat is elevated above humans. This will continue in the next lines.

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

The rat has more than physical and circumstantial advantages over the soldiers. It is not part of any army circumscribed to fight to the death, nor is the rat facing its own death on the “fields of France.” It moves with a grin, unaffected by the dead “Sprawled” around it. The place that they are in is truly horrific, the poet has decided to describe it as being the “bowels of the earth.” It is nowhere that any man, or rat, should ever have to see, much less spend an extended period of time.

At this point in the poem, the undertone of humor has receded. The speaker has returned to his initial

dark tone. It moves the speaker away from the amusement of this powerful rat, to the acknowledgment of the lack of power that these men have over their destinies. They are bound to their comrades, their countries, and this earth until a resolution is reached, one way or another.

### Lines 19-26

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.

In the final eight lines of 'Break of Day in the Trenches', the speaker delves deeper into the inner lives of the men who are fighting in the trenches of World War I. He sees the rat as being beyond the horror that he is engulfed in, and able to be an impartial judge of their situation. The rat is not

biased towards one side or another, it will tell the truth as it sees it.

He asks the rat if it is able to “see in our eyes.” Can it see the terror there? He wants to know if the rat is able to observe, and at least acknowledge, the “shirking iron and flame” that is continually filling and destroying the world. The speaker continues with another question. He admits, shaking off his mask of bravery, if the rat is able to see the “quaver” or shaking, in the hearts of the men. No matter how long they stay in the trenches or on the battlefield, they do not become fully immune to what they see. They still shake inside.

In the concluding lines of ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’ the speaker returns to the image of the poppies. These flowers, which symbolize hope, as well as the horrors of World War I, are said to have their “roots... in man’s veins.” Man has within him the power to commit great atrocities, and initiate braver recoveries. The peace and hope that are represented in the symbol of the poppy are said to be “dropping” from “man’s veins.” They are draining from the body of a man into the earth. The battlefield

is taking the greatest and most worthy parts of human life.

The speaker is not impacted by this draining as the other men are. He has hidden his poppies away within his body. There they are safe from the horrors he has seen and he can turn to his inner strength and goodness when he needs to.