

Break of Day in the Trenches- Isaac Rosenberg

'Break of Day in the Trenches' is by one of the First World War's leading war poets, Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918). The poem might be analysed as war poetry's answer to John Donne's 'The Flea' – because the rat which is so friendly towards the English poet will also cross No Man's Land and make friends with the German enemy. The rat, that ubiquitous feature of WWI imagery, here acts as a reminder of the English and Germans' common humanity, even in times of war.

Summary

The poem begins with the speaker introducing the fact that a new day is dawning. The sunrise brings no hope to the world of the narrator, in fact, the dark is described as "crumbling" as if it has no solid structure. The days of this person's life are monotonous and dreary in the extreme. In contrast to this dark subject matter, a pinpoint of life and light arrives around the narrator's personality. A rat comes out of nowhere and jumps at the narrator's

hand. He is surprised to see such a “queer” creature at this particular moment.

It is at this point in the poem that the reader comes to understand that this man is an English soldier in World War I, trapped in the trenches. The rat represents an ability that the soldiers do not have. The rat is able, through its “cosmopolitan sympathies” to travel from one side to the other. It can visit the Germans and English without prejudice or fear.

The speaker is deeply jealous of this ability and projects his own feelings onto the rat. He speaks aloud, stating that if the Germans knew the rat had touched an English hand or visa versa, it would surely be shot. This is not the case though and the rat, with a “grin,” is able to pass through no man’s land. He continues on to describe how the rat surpasses all men in its strengths. It can complete feats that no living man could ever dream of.

In the final section, he asks the rat if it is able, through its enhanced senses, to see that all these men, no matter how long they’ve been there and how much death they’ve seen, are not immune to it. They still “quake” at the sight of the battlefield.

'Break of Day in the Trenches' concludes with the narrator returning to his darkest thoughts. He imagines the image of a poppy and its melting from the arms of all the soldiers. It is a metaphor for both strength and peace, the war is draining all the good in man. The final line reveals that the speaker is keeping a little of that strength hidden away.

Themes:-

The Un-Idealizing of War

Rosenberg belongs to a group of British writers collectively known as the "trench poets" whose portrayed life in World War I battles from the unique perspective of being there on the front lines. While most of these poets either hailed the glory of fighting for God and country or used their disillusionment with the crumbling of such ideals to fuel their writing. Rosenberg particularly stands out for rejecting the idealization of the unmitigated horrors of that bloody and wasteful conflict. He was moved to enlist on purely economic reasons and never had the chance to become a poet of disillusionment since he had no illusions about the nobility of the cause or any

particular tied to England's claims of greatness to begin with. The portrait he paints in verse of being in the trenches is one in which the days become impossible to distinguish from another and in which the only certainty is that death is all around and inescapable.

Irony

Irony is pervasive throughout the poetry of Rosenberg and hardly limited to just his war verse. Irony is typically a reaction to powerlessness; humor is a strength that cannot be taken away, but only given away. Rosenberg's life was hard from the beginning to the end and this is especially so during his short career as a soldier. The irony can be lofty and comprehensive such as recurring motifs that change and evolution for civilization usually comes only after great violence and violation. Rosenberg was also capable of using irony in a corrosively specific way such as the rat scurrying across his hand in "Break of the Day in the Trenches" which may be a less noble creature than man, but enjoys far greater freedom than the soldiers and will almost certainly outlive many of them as well.

The Devastation of War

The devastation of war extends far beyond the soldiers fighting in the trenches. For Rosenberg, war a devastating pestilence that reaches into every aspect of the lives of those involved. One of his most famous poems tells of the delousing process for soldiers and reveals the dehumanizing effect of merely being a soldier that has nothing to do with engagement or combat. Other poems touch upon the effects of strained relationships and the pressure placed upon women whose partner is daily facing the prospect of annihilation. The immediate impact of battle touches upon the landscape and the small details never imagined to become luxuries back during the serenity of peacetime.

Forms and Devices

Much in “Break of Day in the Trenches” is characteristic of English World War I poetry. For instance, while many English poets wrote in the traditional poetic genres—in this case, the pastoral—they enriched the genres and played on

the expectations of their readers by introducing wartime experience as new subject matter. Further, some poets used unconventional meter and rhythm to approximate the broken rhythms of life during war. While “Break of Day in the Trenches” draws on both conventions of war poetry, its visual imagery is its most important aspect.

As a young man, Rosenberg showed considerable natural talent for drawing. Later he studied art at Birkbeck College and the Slade School of Art in London. Although he ultimately gave up the visual arts for poetry, the pictorial quality of some of his poems is particularly notable. In “Louse Hunting” (1917), for instance, Rosenberg first presents his readers with an image of naked soldiers, “Yelling in lurid glee,” who have stripped off their clothes to kill the vermin infesting them. This initial image is strongly rendered, dominated by the “Grinning faces/ And raging limbs” that “Whirl over the floor one fire.” Similarly, two strong visual images dominate “Break of Day in the Trenches”: the grinning rat and the poppy. In the first place, the rat imagery encompasses both the animal and the speaker who notices it. The line “A queer sardonic rat” refers to

the animal, but it also indicates the speaker's tone and situation: He, too, is a sardonic rat. Although the rat imagery is important in establishing connections between these two unwilling victims of the war, the considerably more dense poppy imagery universalizes the situation of this individual soldier. The poppy is both image and metaphor. The plucked poppy serves as an example of the casual killing that accompanies life in the trenches. The poppy is also a well-chosen way to indicate this death, since the flower was normally planted alongside graves. Metaphorically, the poppy indicates ways of dying. The speaker's placement of the red flower behind his ear points to a considerably more brutal image, the "flowering" of blood from a head wound. That Rosenberg had this subtlety in mind is suggested by his repetition of the poppy imagery a few lines later, where one reads that the poppies grow from "roots that are in man's veins." Blood is both flower and fertilizer in this vivid wordplay.

In his early twenties, Rosenberg had felt forced to choose between writing and painting, remarking that art requires "blood and tears." He chose poetry, as Jon Stallworthy points out in *Lost Voices of World*

War I (1987). Thereafter, Rosenberg strove to write “Simple poetry,—that is where an interesting complexity of thought is kept in tone and right value to the dominating idea so that it is understandable and still ungraspable.” While Rosenberg achieved this balance in his greatest poems, it is also true that the concentration on evocative pictorial images renders “Break of Day in the Trenches” as inscrutable and immediate as visual art.