



Isaac Rosenberg

(1890-1918)

Life and works

Isaac Rosenberg was born in 1890 into a working-class Jewish family that had emigrated to the East End of London from Lithuania. Although economic difficulties prevented him from attending Oxford or Cambridge, he was a talented artist and managed to enroll at the prestigious Slade School of Fine Art in London. He hoped to make his living as a portrait artist, when the war broke out. He enlisted in 1915 and was killed at the front on 1st April 1918.

Rosenberg differs from the other War Poets not only for his poor background. His poems may be regarded as modernist in technique. His vision of the war was unsentimental and less concerned with the pity of things; he presented realistic and shocking details, sometimes with a touch of irony or through paradox and contrast. His use of language was 'scriptural and elemental', as Sassoon described it. His finest poems were published in *Collected Works* in 1937.



Break of Day in the Trenches

The poem presents an insight into the life in the trenches and it is an example of how a trivial event may lead to a painful reflection.

Isaac Rosenberg
Collected Poems
(1937)

The darkness **crumbles** away.
It is the same old druid¹ Time as ever,
Only a live thing **leaps** my hand,
A **queer** sardonic rat,
5 As I pull the parapet's poppy²
To **stick** behind my ear.
Droll³ rat, they would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.
Now you have touched this English hand
10 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 inwardly⁴ **grin** as you pass
Strong eyes, fine **limbs**, haughty athletes⁵,
15 **Less** **chanced** than you for life,
Bonds to the whims⁶ of murder,
Sprawled in the bowels⁷ of the earth,
The **torn** fields of France.
What do you see in our eyes
20 At the shrieking iron and flame
Hurled through still heavens⁸?
What **quaver** – what heart **aghast**?
Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
Drop⁹, and are ever dropping;
25 But mine in my ear is safe –
Just a little white with the dust.

- 1 **druid.** Dei Druidi (il riferimento alla religione celtica dà una dimensione mitologica al contesto temporale).
- 2 **poppy.** Papavero.
- 3 **Droll.** Buffo.
- 4 **inwardly.** Intimamente.
- 5 **haughty athletes.** Superbi atleti.
- 6 **Bonds to the whims.** Legati ai capricci.
- 7 **Sprawled in the bowels.** Distesi nelle viscere.
- 8 **shrieking ... heavens.** Ferro e fuoco stridente / scagliato attraverso cieli immobili.
- 9 **Drop.** Cadono.

**LITERARY COMPETENCE****> VOCABULARY**

1 READ the poem and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- | | | | |
|---|---------------------|----|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | put | 6 | strange |
| 2 | bodily parts | 7 | disrupted |
| 3 | jumps | 8 | with fewer possibilities |
| 4 | smile broadly | 9 | filled with fear and horror |
| 5 | disintegrate | 10 | shake |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the poem again and answer the following questions.

- 1 What time of the day is it?
- 2 What is the speaker doing?
- 3 What happens to him suddenly?
- 4 What will it probably do?
- 5 What is the place setting?
- 6 What does the speaker wonder?
- 7 Where is the flower at the end?

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

3 WRITE down the words used to describe the rat. What connotation do they give to the animal?

4 DESCRIBE the soldiers. How does their condition contrast with that of the rat?

5 FIND the images the poet uses to convey the horror of warfare.

6 EXPLAIN what the poppy symbolises.

7 DEFINE the tone of the poem.

> COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

8 DISCUSS. Explain in which ways World War I was different from the previous wars.

9 COMPARE the war poems you have read as regards

- imagery;
- style;
- the poet's mood.