

“Only a live thing leaps my hand,/ A queer and sardonic rat” – “Break of Day in the Trenches” lines 3-4

“Break of Day in the Trenches” is a poem that uses vivid imagery to illustrate the desolate area that was used in trench warfare. With death and dying all around, the speaker seems frozen in a dream as the world around him pauses for him to observe the actions of a rat crawling through the trench. While time does not actually stop, the detailed observations of the characteristics and mannerisms of the rat give the soldier an opportunity to forget his surroundings and focus on the connection he shares with the rat.

While these lines seem fairly straightforward, I found them to offer a lot more significance than one might gather upon first glance. One thing that I found particularly interesting was the use of the word “leaps” to describe the actions of the rat. Typically, a rat would be described as crawling. This is important because it gives the rat this position of superiority. In a normal setting, the rat would be considered scum of the Earth, but here it seems like his life is given more value than those dying around it. One could also suggest that the rat leapt his hand because he found the soldier repulsive. This is significant because it dehumanizes the soldier by reversing the roles of the rat and the human.

I also believe the adjectives chosen to describe the rat are extremely important. Specifically, the use of the word “sardonic” which suggests the rat is mocking the human. The rat is currently in a state where he has ample food supply and has no enemy to fear. Whereas, the human is being hunted and deprived of many necessities of life. The soldier is dealing with poor living conditions that the rat is not only used to, but the rat thrives in these conditions. The rat is

able to mock the soldier because he has less to fear. This reduces the soldier's quality of life to being less than that of a rat.

In class, I discussed with a partner the importance of the phrase "only a live thing." The rest of the poem concerns itself with the decomposing bodies and foul sights in the trenches. Yet, the rat can move freely between both sides of the war without having to feel as though it is a target. This suggests that the rat has more to live for than the humans, and it certainly has a chance of living longer.

Overall, the significance of word choice of these lines leads the audience to believe that the soldiers are in a more vulnerable and poor state than that of a rat. It makes a bigger statement on the obscenities war. This poem makes an emotional appeal to the audience by comparing the life of a soldier to the life of a rat. A creature that is usually so quickly exterminated by humans has more confidence and ability to leap across war grounds. In this playing field, humans are being exterminated. This reversal of roles is truly "queer" or odd which the soldier notices for himself. Even he is stumped by how he is more trapped than a rat.