

## Rosenberg'in *Siperde Şafak Vakti* Şiirinin Tartışmacı Analizi

### An Argumentative Analysis of Rosenberg's *Break of Day in the Trenches*<sup>1</sup>

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**Özet:** 19. yüzyıl, İngiliz toplumsal reformlar, ekonomik büyüme, teknolojik ve bilimsel yenilikler, kültürel evrim, sanayileşme vb. olmak üzere yaşamının her alanında meydana gelen gelişmelerin olduğu bir refah çağıydı. Ancak, 20. yüzyılın başında Kraliçe Victoria'nın ölümüyle İngiliz halkı çalkantılı bir son beklemekteydi ve savaş hayatlarının en önemli gerçeği idi. Birçok şair, savaşın ilk yıllarında onur, şan, vatanseverlik ve kahramanlığı ele alırken savaşın sonraki yıllarında ortaya çıkan şiir zulüm, acımasızlık ve keder gibi konuları ve savaşın beyhudeliğini işledi. Sonraki şairler kahramanlık, vatanseverlik ve fedakârlık gibi ölümsüz değerlere kuşkuyla yaklaştılar ve aynı zamanda savaşı körü körüne destekledikleri için generalleri, politikacıları ve kilise adamlarını eleştirdiler. Şiir, giderek artan dehşet, asker ve sivillerin yaşadığı kelimelerle anlatılamayacak acılar ve çamurlu siperlerde meydana gelen toplu katliamlar nedeniyle yeniden şekillendi. Savaş sadece milyonlarca insanı öldürmedi; aynı zamanda bir zamanlar milyonlarca insanı vatani için ölüme gönderebilecek şiir formunu da öldürdü. Bu tarz şiir, duygusallık ve aşırı milliyetçilik unsurlarından dolayı aşağılayıcı bir şekilde hicvedildi. Bu çalışma, en çok okunan İngiliz savaş şiirlerinden bir tanesi olan Rosenberg'in *Siperde Şafak Vakti* adlı şiirine daha derin tartışmacı yaklaşımlar getirmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Savaş şiiri, İngiltere, Georgian şiiri, tartışma, savaş, cephe, kahramanlık

**Abstract:** The 19<sup>th</sup> century was an age of prosperity with developments in every sphere of British life – made up of social reforms, economic growth, technological and scientific innovations, cultural evolution, industrialisation, etc. Yet, the British people were waiting for a turbulent destiny for their country with the death of Queen Victoria at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and war was the single most important fact of their life. Many poets dealt with honour, glory, patriotism, and heroism in the early years of the war which is completely at odds with the poetry that emerged from the later years of the war that spoke of the cruelty, brutality, and sorrow, and addressed the futility of war. Future poets were skeptical about the eternal values such as heroism, patriotism, and sacrifice, and they also criticized generals, politicians, and churchmen for their blind support of the war. The poetry was reshaped due to the ever increasing horrors, unspeakable suffering of soldiers and civilians, and mass murders in the muddy trenches. The war did not merely kill millions of people; it also killed off the form of poetry which could once urge millions of people to die for their country – which was contemptuously satirized for sentimentality and jingoism. This paper aims at analyzing Rosenberg's *Break of Day in the Trenches* to provide deeper argumentative insights into one of the most read British war poetry.

**Key Words:** War poetry, Britain, Georgian poetry, argumentation, war, trenches, heroism

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## Introduction

The application of argumentation-based approach to poetry, we feel obliged to focus on the central arguments made by the text/author. At times, we may also tend to focus on one or more of the characters and the arguments they make. For this purpose, we are mostly concerned with the central issues raised in the poem, the standpoint(s), and the claims.<sup>2</sup> Unpoetic claims are mainly (at least to a definite extent) explicit, overt and openly expressed while the argumentative claims and elements in poetry are usually more implicit and covert. (Wood and Miller 2017: 615). There may also be claims/ideas/arguments in one and the same work (e.g. in sonnets where the solution of the problem is not supported by the epigrammatic part) that seem at times to contradict each other.

In analyzing the suggested poem, mainly pragma-dialectical model of argumentation will be used. We find this model of argumentation to be useful for analysis and understanding of the main line of argument in poetry. Another distinguishing aspect of argumentation in poetry is that an appeal of the protagonist may be considered as a merely suggested dialogue where viewpoints are exchanged and the main character takes turns looking at (and judging) the pros and cons of two possible but opposed courses of action. There are times when such solitary argumentation is realized through the imagination of the author where the characters argue for/against the suggested/opposed view. But as stated above, argumentation in poetry is not always in the form of solitary arguments. The main thread of reasoning (the major power of argumentation in poetry) that holds an argumentation (process/procedure) together is called practical reasoning, a species of goal-oriented reasoning where an agent reasons toward a conclusion that represents a course of action as prudent, based on premises describing goals and the particular circumstances of the agent's situation as known to the agent (Walton 1990: 1; Walton 2004: 142).

This form of prosaic dialogue does not merely aim to seek information (as in information-seeking dialogues in prose-conversation or dramatic/comedy plays) although any information is generally required in planning. It rather aims at finding the means and planning in a specific instance. The problem, therefore, is not one of finding or communicating information, but of solving this or that problem by determining the best way of solution/resolution of difference of opinion in the given situation.

The premise of planning (how to communicate information) in poetry is based on the framework of an agent (the author/the central image) with a goal who assesses a situation for a sequence of reason-based actions that could lead to the realization of this goal (Cf.: Wilensky 1983: 5).

As formulated, planning is a type of problem-solving based on the idea that relevance in argumentation is determined by the way the sequence of practical reasoning links up to the original issue of the dialogic poem. It is the fitting together or conflicting of the goals that define their relevance in a given case (Gorayska and Lindsay 1993: 306).

Accordingly, an element X of a plan Y is relevant to Y if, and only if, the plan is sufficient to achieve the goal, although some scholars cite definite problems in this definition indicating that it needs to be revised (Cf.: Mey 1995). In these cases, an action is usually considered as relevant on a conjectural basis through scripts and dialogues rather than on explicit and overt links in practical reasoning in implicit premises. The literature on planning of argumentation in different genres has brought out an important way that its relevance is essentially different in prosaic and poetic literature.

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<sup>2</sup>We also understand that all these parameters and the procedures can vary in accord with the kind of a poem.

This paper explores some of the possible ways of argumentation in Isaac Rosenberg's "*Break of the Day in the Trenches*" by partially applying pragma-dialectical model of argumentation. The poem offers key elements in understanding the brutality of trench warfare from the standpoint of a representative of the Georgian Poetry. But prior to the analysis of this poem, we find it necessary to provide a historical contextualization.

### **Historical Background and Literary Context**

After the era of Queen Victoria whose legacy and name became synonymous to prosperity in all spheres of life, war cast its long shadow over the Britain at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Álvarez (2011) states: "The beginning of the twentieth century brought a profound feeling of anxiety among the British. Having reached its apex during the long and changing reign of Queen Victoria, Britain was now waiting expectantly for its turbulent destiny; British people asked themselves if their country will remain the same after such a long period of industrial, political, scientific and military prosperity."

It can be said that the poetry has never played such a key role as it did in the World War I. The first years of the war were accompanied by patriotic poetry which urged so many people to join the army. It was then replaced by poems concerned with the horror of the war rather than the "honour" of the war. In other words, it shifted from an unquestioning acceptance of and blind support for war to an ever increasing disillusionment.

When we look at the literary context of Britain, we find it necessary to provide some information about the Georgian Poetry. We can see how the characteristics of this form of poetry became distorted once the World War I broke out. Bullough (1941: 45) lists five main tendencies of the Georgianism:

1. A literary tradition that revives classical themes and forms. It also revisits Shakespearean traditions and themes as well as other eternal figures of English poetry.
2. A metaphysical use of elaborate forms and witty and entangled imagery
3. Art for art's sake
4. Evoking the rural landscape for inspiration. Because an individual (and his or her poetry) is inextricably linked with the natural world. Georgian Poetry is in an attempt to escape from urban and industrial life
5. Giving up of complex forms so that making it more acceptable to all readers.

As Das (2009: 76) claims: "Darkness, guns, mud, rain, gas, bullets, shells, barbed wire, rats, lice, cold, trench foot: these images which have formed the 'modern memory' of the war are largely culled from the trench poetry of Owen, Sassoon, Graves, and Rosenberg—to name only a few."

### **Isaac Rosenberg**

Born in Bristol, the poet moved to London in 1897. His parents, as Birch states (2009: 861), "were émigrés of Lithuanian origin, and his father, a scholarly Jew, worked as a pedlar and market dealer. In 1912 he published at his own expense a collection of poems, *Night and Day*, and was encouraged by Gordon Bottomley, Ezra Pound and others. He went to South Africa in 1914, but returned in 1915 and published another volume of verse, *Youth*, which passed largely unregarded" (p. 861). Although he was against the war, he joined the army and began serving as a private in the trenches, where he died in the battle of Arras in 1918.

The poetry of Rosenberg is forceful – rich in style and diction. Besides, he holds a starkly realistic attitude towards war. Having a poor and immigrant Jewish background and growing up amidst poverty in the East End of London, Rosenberg’s form of poetry was characterized with a divergence from the work of the war poets of his time. As Das (2009: 91) reminds us: “Rosenberg’s background may partly explain his divergence from the dominant vocabulary and poses of the fin de si`eclé”. He was not in favour of Brooke’s “begloried sonnets” although they belonged to the same literary tendency.

It was not until the publication of his collected works in 1937 that he received a public acclaim. Vivien Noakes edited *The Poems and plays of Isaac Rosenberg* (2004) (Birch 2009: 861).

Prior to the analysis of the poem in the framework of argumentation, we find it necessary to reemphasize his attitude to war: “I never joined the army from patriotic reasons. Nothing can justify war. I suppose we must all fight to get the trouble over...” (Undated letter). It is mainly for this reason that he was considered a poet whose “experience he sought to present was not merely a reportage of his personal life but apprehension of the complexity of a wide universe” (Sisson 1981: 89).

### Analysis

In his “The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg”, Sassoon(1984: ix) writes the following special note for “*Break of Day in the Trenches*” in the foreword: “Sensuous frontline existence is there, hateful and repellent, unforgettable and inescapable.”

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.

(Rosenberg, *Break of Day in the Trenches*)

In applying the pragma-dialectical model of argumentation to this poem, we can all agree that a claim of fact is expressed in the first line and expressed again in a different way in the second line, difference reflecting the support constituent of the argument. As for the main argument of the poem, there would not be much disagreement about that claim: “War, which is the reason of death, blood, unhappiness, can in no way be justified. It brings happiness only to such creatures as rats whose pleasure is the richness and variety of the dead/killed/sleeping green”. When we read through the first lines, we can vividly imagine how Rosenberg places us in the trenches, where we can observe with our own eyes “the crumbling away of the darkness”.

Furthermore (Line 2), taken metaphorically, he estimates the time of the first line, as “the same old Druid time as ever”, serving as well to express the subclaim of line 1, while in line 3 he presents the concept of pastoral by concentrating on a rat, i.e., “only a live thing leaping his hand” as a claim of fact. Identifying it as “a queer sardonic rat”, Rosenberg implicitly demonstrates his hatred concerning war (as a partial indicator of the main argument of the poem) and exposes a sophisticated portrait of life and death: “Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew/your cosmopolitan sympathies”.

Rosenberg verifies the idea of the main argument of his poem suggesting that the rats are considered the only victorious sides of the wars. Because, they get the biggest share by scavenging the remains and transmitting diseases: “Now you have touched this English hand/You will do the same to a German”. These lines combine in themselves both fact and value elements of the argument and describing such an unimaginably awkward picture, the poet enhances the idea of cosmopolitanism in two meanings: (i) the troops of the dead soldiers belong to different nations, and (ii) the rat has a chance to choose the best one from amongst of those representatives. Disappointed and unhappy with the situation, the poet “indicates the absurdity of the situation by permitting the rat, a supposedly lesser creature, to do what men dare not” (Silkin 1972: 127).

It is also possible to find a sort of the metaphorically strengthened idea of the sacrifices of the young people to denote which the poet has chosen the word “green” in the lines “soon, no doubt, if it be our

pleasure/to cross the sleeping green between”. The other metaphorically expressed notion is “the sleeping green” which, in fact, means: The poet cannot believe his eyes that such young boys are dead. He imagines that they are sleeping, thus, likening death to sleeping, he condemns the war and the calamities it brings. Some researchers (Sisson 1981: 91), misunderstanding the denotative and connotative meanings of “green”, dare wrongly claim that “to cross the sleeping green between” is an idealised view of the war field.

For Sisson (ibid), “obviously there was no green at all, since the battlefield was a complete wasteland. So, this poem, written from the trenches, really shows a concern for the visual aspects of war as well as for the subcutaneous suffering” (p. 91). Rosenberg’s poem, written in the shape (and mood) of a macabre irony, and being a sardonic one (poem) shows (as a result of analysing the situation in the warfield) us that, in a war, there are no winners whatsoever (as a proof justifying the main argument/major premise of the poem). For Alvarez (2011), “The melancholic mood, so typical of much of Victorian poetry, exploded in the English World War Poetry in a myriad of disturbing variations, all of them trying to account for the blatantly absurd waste of human lives” (p. 61). And Rosenberg’s *Break of Day in the Trenches* is not an exception to this.

The support to the main idea of the poem is supplied in the form of consequences which the poet, as a soldier of the World War 1, could witness with his own eyes: the rat (who is the poet’s addressee), touching “this English hand, will do the same to a German”. The other warrant that connects the support to the main argument is that the rat, as the only beneficiary from the war, “feels pleasure in making its choice as well as crossing the sleeping green between”, and “seems inwardly grin as it passes strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes”. The people who accept the main argument of the poem as “nothing can justify war...”, should be persuaded to fight to prevent it from happening at all costs/by putting all possible/available difficulties in its way.

In fact, Rosenberg’s hatred to war is immeasurable in the sense that victims of war are not only the humans but also “bonds to the whims of murder, /sprawled in the bowels of the earth, /the torn fields of France”; the arguments/claims in the poem are not always easily identifiable. In many cases, the readers may be required to ask some questions to identify what is in question and to formulate the argument. The following set of questions may be helpful while making the analysis:

1. What is this poem all about? The answer will enable us to uncover the main topic of the poem.
2. What is the main argument of the poem? That is, it would help you discover the poet’s attitude to the subject.
3. Can the subject and the attitude of the poet (in terms of the main argument) be regarded as a form of complexity? This question will enable us identify the issues from the points of both poet and the rat or the possible interpretations of the issue by different layers of the society.
4. What positions on the issue have been emphasized in the poem and how it has been done? The answer will be useful in identifying explicit and implicit arguments as well as who realizes them.
5. If the argument (either in its main or subcategory form) is unexpressed, what further evidence can we use to locate it? This will result in an explicit argument.
6. Will everyone agree that the claim(s) made by the title, the content of the poem and the poet are/is viable? This will help you identify whether these three issues/agents display disagreements over how to state the main argument in the poem

Questions 1, 2 and 6 have been answered in the earlier part of the analysis. As for the other questions, one could argue that the suggested aspects of the poem express conflicting claims about an issue. In terms of question 3, the addressor/the narrator and the rat as the addressee are on the extreme edges of the claim of value, at least in the context of the opposition “happy” (winner)-“unhappy” (loser). The literal meaning of the narrator’s “It is the same old druid time as ever” (question 4), can be accepted as violation of more than one maxim (maxim of quantity, maxim of quality) the implications of which induce that the “crumbling of the darkness” is attributed to the down break praying of the religious people in the ancient times.

Another relevant information expressed in “Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure/ to cross the sleeping green between” implicitly expresses a strong hatred and regret of the narrator without mentioning it; the lines are also implicating that the rat, being overjoyed and inflamed, as well as without feeling any danger, crosses the sleeping green between in the air of “I just like doing it!” and gets all the possible pleasure, what is repeatedly implicating that the only winner of the war is the rat. And as the “*Break of the Day in the Trenches*” suggests, this war, like any other, aiming at dominance, brought nothing but misery and death to so many nations in the world and the question of the narrator (5) “What do you see in our eyes/ at the shrieking iron and flame/ hurled through still heavens?” requires neither an answer nor an evidence since the preceding lines give “clue” to such claims as “only grievances, horror and despair”. And “The heavens remain still at the shrieking iron and flame”, the contradiction enhancing the terrorizing influence of the war field still more.

The other aspect of the argument in the poem is concerned with its being of traditional type, according to which it is the duty of the individual who introduces an argument to find all available tools to persuade an audience to change their standpoints and agree with that person (Wood 2009: 5). This form of standard argument, also called as “single perspective argument” used by Rosenberg in the above-mentioned poem, takes place when a person develops his/her own point of view on an issue and argues to persuade a mass audience to agree with his/her own single view, which, we, also, encounter as the main argument-vehicle of all the events in the poem: “There is no winner in the war”.

Rosenberg, as the arguer, provides consequences of the war via personal evidence as a soldier and refutes the possible opposing views although it is not clear whether anyone judging so (Rosenberg included) “can win” such an argument. But, Rosenberg, reasoning logically, understands “human characters and excellences, and understands the emotions—that is, knows what they are, their nature, their causes and the way in which they are excited” (CWA 1995: 2156).

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