STRANGE MEETING ANALYSIS
Symbols, Imagery, Wordplay

Form and Meter
Let's get one thing straight right off the bat: a slant rhyme is a rhyme that isn't full or perfect (cat and hat are examples of a perfect rhyme). This entire poem is made up of slant rhyme. Look at hall and Hell, moan and mourn, hair and hour. These words sound a lot alike, even if they don't exactly rhyme. Of course, there are a few variations. The last line, for example, is cut off, so there is no corresponding rhyme. It's on its own.

So we have to ask: what's the point of using slant rhymes instead of perfect rhymes? Did Owen flunk his rhyme exam in poetry school? Of course not! This guy's a pro.

For one thing, slant rhymes are a little easier on the ear. Sometimes perfect rhymes can get a little, well, Cat in the Hat, especially if they're smack dab next to each other like in this poem, and especially if they go on for forty four lines. In this poem, perfect rhymes would be distracting, obnoxious even. The slant rhyme allows Owen to use a subtle formal element to tie his poem together without bashing us over the head with it.

Plus, in the same way that it's unifying, it can also be disorienting, like hearing a faint echo. The slant rhyme adds to the dreamlike, almost discombobulating state that speaker number one is probably experiencing. Things seem sort of normal at first, but then we realize that there's something off here. He's just been dumped into hell, and not that we're experts on what it's like to end up in hell, we imagine that it would be pretty trippy.

About Those Couplets
The slant rhymes come in couplets, heroic couplets, to be exact. The slant rhymes are at the end of each line, and come in sets of two lines. So every two lines, you'll have a whole new set of slant rhymes.

The fact that Owen chose heroic couplets in a poem about war is pretty slick (we didn't exactly chat with him over the phone about it, but it seems perfectly intentional). When we think of war, we often think of war heroes. The tricky thing about heroic couplets here is that most of the poem is dedicated to talking about how war is a bust, and how there's nothing heroic about killing your fellow man. In the case of this poem, we think Owen's use of heroic couplets is a little bit ironic, and the slant rhyme definitely pokes holes in all that heroic perfection.
You might notice the lines are of mostly equal length. That's no coincidence. Owen wrote this poem in iambic pentameter, which affects the rhythm and syllable count of each line. An iamb is an unaccented syllable followed by accented one (daDUM, or to use an example from this poem, it SEEMED). Penta means five (think pentagram), and meter just refers to the rhythmic pattern of the lines themselves. So a line of iambic pentameter is made up of five iambs (each iamb has 2 syllables), for a total of ten syllables: daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM.

Just like the rhyme in this poem, there are variations in the iambic pentameter, too, which you might be able to spot yourself. We'll give you a hint: metrical variations in iambic pentameter often come at the beginning of a line where the first iamb is inverted or backwards—so the stress is on the first syllable instead of the second.

Here's one: AAfter. It would be weird to say after, and Owen isn't trying to weird you out any more than he already is with this "Strange Meeting." He uses the metrical variations to keep the lines sounding natural, smooth, and even conversational. If this guy ever took a poetry class, you know he totally aced it.

**Speaker**

Owen dishes out a two-for-one in this poem—and you don't even need a coupon. That's right: there are two speakers for the price of one. The first speaker is rumored to be based on Owen himself, which makes it all the more eerie when we finally get to the part in the poem when he discovers where he's ended up:

And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall;

By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell. (9-10)

**Speaker #1**

Speaker number one is a recently fallen soldier who ends up in this strange place (we eventually realize it's hell) where he runs into a soldier from the enemy army, who we eventually realize he's killed in battle.

Through speaker number one we get a pretty familiar first-person narrative where we get only a vague sense of where we are and what we're doing there. The first three lines from his point of view ("It seemed that out of the battle I escaped / Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped /"
Through granites which Titanic wars had groined") make us feel his disorientation, as if he's waking up from a bad dream or serious head injury.

Speaker #2

We only actually hear the first speaker speak very briefly before we're introduced to speaker number two, the soldier who was killed by speaker number one. Awkward. The majority of the airtime in this poem is dedicated to this guy's speech. He rants on and on about the destructive and evil qualities of war and how it's ruining men and nations alike:

The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress. (25-29)

It's through this speaker that we get most of our information, and the most complex emotional output. Speaker number two is Owen's main vessel to deliver his own thoughts and opinions on war. And we've got to say, he gives quite the riveting performance.

**Setting**

Let's just be straight up about it: this poem takes place in Hell. Owen doesn't tell us that right away. He opens by describing the tunnel that the speaker has fallen through, a tunnel that had been (figuratively) carved out by all the terrible wars in the history of the world. Apparently this tunnel feeds into a very special place in hell where fallen soldiers get to spend forever and ever in a cauldron of misery.

While Owen doesn't spend a ton of time describing hell (no mention of fire or heat, and not a single cameo appearance of the devil), he gives us enough info to know that everyone there is sufficiently miserable:

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless. (4-8)

This version of hell is inhabited by some miserable and shady characters. We're not sure what the speaker is doing trying to get their attention by probing one of them, but now that he's made eye contact, he's really in for it.

"With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained" is how Owen describes the second speaker. He probably looks, oh, about a thousand times worse than he ever did on his worst hair day. But this is hell, after all, and what would hell be without eternal ugliness and suffering?

**Sound Check**

If there's a poetry equivalent to the soundtrack of the descent into hell, this is it. Oh wait, maybe Dante's Inferno already cornered the market on that one, but "Strange Meeting" isn't too shabby in the tension-building, dread-inducing sound effects department either.

In the "Form and Meter" section, we discussed how the slant rhymed couplets and iambic pentameter created a smooth and regular rhythm to the poem. We like to think of it as a particularly dreadful and slow march into hell.

As each couplet unfolds, we find out more news about where we are and what's going on—and none of it is good. The regularity of the iambic pentameter keeps us chugging along, and the not-so-perfect rhymes urge us to the next line, and we go willingly, even though we should probably know better. It's kind of like the creepy music in a horror movie: we know the protagonist totally should not open that door, but we also can't wait to see what's behind it.

But wait, there's more. The repetition of certain words and alliteration (words beginning with the same sound that are placed near each other) make for a sort of echo effect—like you could have sworn you heard this before but you can't quite place it. The sounds overlap and even meld together, like the voice in a dream, making it hard to distinguish one sonic element from another.

It can get intoxicating, and a little disorienting. Look at how Owen ssssslides us into the poem with all of those S sounds in the first eight lines: seemed, escaped, some, since scooped, sleepers, bestirred, sprang, stared, distressful, and bless. Be careful you don't slip.
The repetition has a similar effect. While the rhyme and meter seem to coax you forward, the repetition is very gently tripping you up—not quite enough so you fall over—but just enough so your ear does a sort of double take. Owen, being the baller that he is, ups the level of difficulty by often modifying the words he repeats ever so slightly.

See how he follows "hope" with "hopelessness," "wild" with "wildest," and "pity of war" with "the pity war distilled." These modifications alter the meaning and the sound, while still remaining familiar. They overlap and twist in our ears, like the tortured groaning of the sleepers.

**What's Up With the Title?**

Strange indeed. Wilfred Owen might have made the understatement of the century when he called this one "Strange Meeting." As a first impression, it doesn't give too much away and sets a sort of mysterious vibe as we dive into the poem. It helps to create suspense, too, because it raises all sorts of questions—who is meeting? What's so strange about it? Where's it going down?

We don't realize just how strange this meeting actually is until several lines in. when we find out they're in hell. And of course, it gets weirder. At the very end of the poem we realize that our speaker is chatting it up with a guy he just killed. It doesn't get stranger than that.

Although there are so many twists and turns in this poem, the title never really abandons us. It's echoed in the middle of the poem when they first meet with, "Strange friend" and as the drama builds to the very last line, we can't help but the feel the explosive impact of the title long after the poem is over.

**Calling Card**

*The Fallen Soldier*

We know that Wilfred Owen wrote most of his poetry in a short period of time all while fighting in the horrific battles of WWI. We're no psychologists, but it's pretty plain to see that all of that fighting had a tremendous impact on his poetry.

While he has dedicated almost all of his poems in one way or another to the horrors of war, we think he had a particular interest in the fallen (or soon-to-be fallen) soldier. These guys had the real short end of the stick. If they weren't having to deal with the fear of their own death, they were dealing with the destructive guilt of being responsible for someone else's death. You can see other examples of this in the (un) cheerily titled "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and in his most famous poem "Dulce et Decorum Est." Unfortunately for Owen, he got to experience the suffering and death as a soldier, and his poetry, especially "Strange Meeting" illustrates this perfectly.