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THE SIGN AND THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING IN THE SHORT-STORY COLLECTION “WHAT HAPPENED TO ME TOMORROW”

Rahli Naima

PhD Student University Mohamed Lamine Debaghine,
Sétif 2 (Algeria) Laboratory: Methods of Criticism and Discourse Analysis
Email: n.rahli@univ-setif2.dz

Professor: Azeb Abderrahim

(Academic Supervisor)
University Larbi Ben M'hidi, Oum El Bouaghi (Algeria)
Laboratory: Methods of Criticism and Discourse Analysis
Email: abderrahimazeb_alg@yahoo.fr

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Abstract:

This article examines the role of the sign in the production of meaning in Saïd Boutajine's short-story collection *What Happened to Me Tomorrow*, in light of Umberto Eco's semiotic conception. The study adopts a semiotic approach to analyze linguistic and symbolic signs and to reveal their semantic functions. The analysis demonstrates that the sign exceeds its immediate function to become an open structure capable of producing multiple meanings through interpretation, thereby contributing to the foregrounding of issues of alienation, identity, and marginalization. The study concludes that meaning is produced through the interaction between the text and the reader, and that the sign constitutes a fundamental axis in the construction of narrative discourse.

Keywords: sign; meaning production; Umberto Eco; interpretation.



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Introduction:

The sign has occupied a central position in contemporary semiotic studies, as it constitutes the instrument through which meaning is formed within literary texts. Umberto Eco contributed significantly to consolidating this conception by viewing the text as an open structure in which signs interact to produce multiple meanings that exceed the limits of immediate meaning. Reading therefore becomes a continuous search for the semantic relations embedded in discourse.

From this perspective, the literary text is not a container of ready-made meaning; rather, it is a dynamic space in which symbols, signals, and cultural representations intersect to guide the reader toward renewed interpretations.

Within this semiotic framework, Saïd Boutajine's short-story collection **What Happened to Me Tomorrow** emerges as a narrative world rich in signs distributed across the title, characters, events, and narrative spaces. These elements contribute to the construction of a coherent semantic network that moves beyond the surface of the story toward deeper symbolic and suggestive dimensions. Accordingly, this article seeks to uncover the role of the sign in producing meaning within the collection through a semiotic approach that examines the mechanisms through which meaning is formed and the interaction of signs in constructing the narrative vision, starting from the following question:

- How does the sign contribute to the production of meaning in the short-story collection **What Happened to Me Tomorrow**, and what are the principal semantic patterns revealed by a semiotic reading of the text?

1. The Concept of the Sign According to Umberto Eco:

Eco does not view the sign as an isolated entity or merely as a "thing that automatically and directly replaces something else"; rather, he defines it as a dynamic "process" through which "raw action" is transformed into a "cultural version." At its core, the sign is an instrument through which human beings mediate their relationship with the world, as objects and events are incorporated into a network of cultural codes that confer meaning upon them.

Consequently, the sign is not a natural datum that precedes human existence; rather, it is the product of social practice. Meaning does not reside in the material bearer of the sign in itself, but in the "possible relations between the elements of each event," which are contextually governed. Accordingly, semiotics, from this perspective, is not a science concerned with isolated signs; it is the science that observes "semantic fabrics," their modes of operation, and their production within society (Eco, 2010, pp. 12–13).

Umberto Eco maintains that the sign cannot be understood outside its cultural context. It is not merely a fixed linguistic element, but part of a semantic system that takes shape within society and acquires its meaning through use and human interaction. Thus, every communicative act is based on a system of signs that extends beyond the linguistic

dimension to include the cultural and social dimension that gives the sign its actual significance (Khansali, 2021, pp. 305–306).

Eco further emphasizes that the sign is not a closed entity whose meaning can be definitively fixed through a final definition. Rather, it is an ongoing process of interpretation that changes according to the context in which it is used. It is not understood in isolation, but through its relation to other signs and to different social situations, which makes it capable of producing multiple and renewed meanings within human experience (Khansali, 2021, p. 307).

In Eco's conception, the sign appears as a product of cultural codes that confer meaning upon things. It is therefore not regarded as an isolated entity or a natural, fixed referent, but as a semantic event and a dynamic process taking shape within human practice. In this way, the sign is liberated from the rigidity of lexical definitions to become an integral part of a complex fabric of social practices and cultural processes. Meaning thus becomes an act of production rather than a ready-made datum, making semiotics a science that observes "semantic fabrics" and their modes of operation and production, rather than merely classifying symbols.

From Eco's perspective, the sign functions as an essential mechanism for adaptation and for decoding the world. Individuals employ it as a communicative support that exceeds its initial function and enables them to gain control over "nonsense" and interpret new situations. This procedural character of the sign—as illustrated in the "Mr. Sigma" model—reveals it as a cognitive instrument that gives human beings the capacity to read their surroundings and adapt their everyday actions. Signs do not remain confined within linguistic dictionaries; they penetrate the depth of human experience and become a means of interpreting the world through an endless process of interpretation in which signs continuously interact with the vitality of life (Ait Hamdouch, 2018, pp. 92–93).

In modern semiotic thought, the sign has shifted from a closed structure with a fixed meaning to a dynamic space for producing semantic possibilities. It is no longer understood as a rigid linguistic unit referring to one final meaning, but as a starting point for a series of relations and interactions that contribute to the generation and continual renewal of meaning. Reading, therefore, is no longer merely a passive reception of ready-made codes or stable meanings; it has become an interactive interpretive act in which the reader participates as an active element in constructing and reshaping meaning. In this context, the material dimension of the sign, represented by its form or signifier, interacts with its conceptual dimension, or signified, within a network of cultural and symbolic relations that leads to the decoding of textual codes and the exploration of their deeper levels, ultimately reaching what may be called the "meaning of meaning," that is, the meaning underlying the apparent meaning (Boukrouh, 2011, p. 22).

Within an interactive reading, the literary text is not viewed as a completed product whose meanings are definitively fixed. Rather, it is regarded as an open semantic project whose

actual existence is realized only through the act of reading. The reader does not merely receive the textual message; instead, the reader assumes a productive role by filling gaps, connecting signals, and reorganizing relations among textual units, thereby revitalizing the text and releasing its latent semantic potential. In this sense, reading becomes a continuous negotiation between text and reader and a creative relationship through which the recipient rearranges the systems of writing and their mechanisms of operation, allowing new meanings to be produced without becoming detached from the textual structure or exceeding its limits (Al-Zubaidi, 2010, p. 82).

Meaning is produced through the interaction between the internal references of the text, including its symbols, allusions, and codes, and the cognitive and cultural references possessed by the recipient, represented by reading experience, literary memory, and cultural knowledge. Hence, structuralist perspectives intersect with modern semiological conceptions, particularly those of the pioneers of semiology, in emphasizing that the text does not impose one closed meaning; rather, it offers a range of interpretive possibilities activated by the reader according to their interpretive competence. Yet this openness does not imply unrestricted arbitrary interpretation, since the production of meaning remains governed by textual codes, internal evidence, and cultural constraints that guide reading and limit its deviation. This ensures a balance between interpretive freedom and textual objectivity and makes reading a cognitive and aesthetic act that contributes to revealing the richness of literary discourse and the multiplicity of its semantic levels (Abdel Nasser, 1999, p. 112).

2. The Visual Sign and the Production of Meaning: A Reading of Umberto Eco's Conception:

Umberto Eco argues that the visual sign cannot be apprehended as a direct visual datum. Rather, it is the product of a continuous semantic process established within a complex cultural and interpretive system, where perception intersects with knowledge and experience through what he calls semiosis. Meaning does not emerge from the visible object in itself; instead, it takes shape through its positioning within a system of symbols and cultural norms that guide understanding. This falls within the idea of "cultural coding," which makes the sign subject to prior interpretive systems that determine how it is perceived and interpreted (Walid, 2025, pp. 21–23).

In this context, Eco emphasizes that understanding the visual sign requires a shared body of knowledge among members of a culture. This is embodied in the concept of the "encyclopedia of knowledge," understood as a collective store of knowledge and experiences that enables interpretation to be activated. Perception, therefore, is not based on direct sensory imitation, but on complex mental processes that reorganize visual data according to shared cultural models, making the sign an open structure capable of producing multiple and renewed meanings.

Eco also argues that the sign does not acquire meaning in isolation, but through its relationship with a system of semantic units that continuously changes within the cultural

context, making interpretation a dynamic and non-final process. Every sign refers to a network of prior cognitive relations that allows its significance to be determined; however, this network itself remains in a constant state of transformation in response to changes in cultural and communicative contexts. Consequently, Eco considers a final and comprehensive definition of the semantic system impossible, because the sign can only be understood through its interpretation within its cultural context.

On the other hand, Eco highlights the importance of “recognition codes” and “representation codes” in organizing visual perception. The former enable the selection of features that signify the visible object, whereas the latter determine the cultural frameworks according to which visual representations are constructed. Perception, therefore, does not constitute an automatic reflection of reality; it is a symbolic reconstruction of reality within a pre-existing cultural system, making the sign a purely cultural product subject to mechanisms of interpretation and semantic reproduction (Walid, 2025, p. 23).

This conception leads to the conclusion that, for Eco, the visual sign is not a ready-made datum but a renewed semantic construction based on the interaction between perception and culture. The visible is transformed into the symbolic through a series of interpretive processes that keep meaning permanently open to renewal.

3. The Sign and the Production of Meaning in Saïd Boutajine’s Short-Story Collection **What Happened to Me Tomorrow**

In Umberto Eco’s conception, the sign is an open semantic structure that does not produce one final meaning but remains open to reinterpretation according to the reader’s cultural and cognitive context. From this perspective, the story **What Happened to Me Tomorrow** is founded upon a network of signs that interact with one another to generate meanings extending beyond the surface of the narrative toward profound symbolic and philosophical dimensions.

This becomes apparent in the opening scene, in which the narrator states:

“The judge said hesitantly: ‘The aforementioned Abdallah Al-Yatim is accused of raping Ma’shiya, in violation of chastity, religion, and the future of the nation. A scandal that deserves the utmost attention. A genuine sin that God cannot forgive. Furthermore, the morals of the ancients have become an example for those who came after them, so that one may recognize the absurdity that has befallen others, and read about the stories of bygone nations and what happened to them, and thus become disturbed...” (Boutajine, 2017, p. 7).

This narrative threshold reveals a set of interconnected signs. The “judge” does not refer merely to a particular individual; rather, it represents a sign of judicial and social authority. However, its association with the adjective “stammering” destabilizes the stereotypical image associated with decisiveness and certainty. Meaning here arises from the discrepancy between the judge’s function as guardian of truth and the state of hesitation that

accompanies him. According to Eco's conception, the reader does not receive this sign as a passing description; instead, it is connected to a broader cultural system referring to a crisis of justice and a disturbance in the symbolic authority of institutions.

The exaggeration of the accusation and its association with "chastity, religion, and the future of the nation" also transforms judicial discourse into a sign of ideological exaggeration, making the individual a victim of collective judgments that exceed the reality of the act itself.

What Happened to Me Tomorrow is constructed through a high density of signs that places the reader before a text open to multiple interpretive possibilities. This corresponds to Umberto Eco's conception that the literary text does not provide ready-made meaning; rather, it constructs a network of signs that calls upon a reader capable of decoding their codes and reproducing their meanings. One of the most prominent signs employed in the text is the sign of identity, which moves from being a mere personal datum to becoming an existential and intellectual problematic.

The sign of the "name" does not merely identify the character; it becomes a semantic focal point revealing the crisis of the self in confrontation with authority. Abdullah's refusal to state his name is not simply a refusal to answer; it is a rejection of the identity that the institution attempts to impose upon him. According to Eco, the sign derives its meaning from the context in which it occurs. Thus, the repetition of the question about the name within the courtroom makes identity itself the object of interrogation and trial. Likewise, the slogans "justice, brotherhood, and equality" become ironic signs, producing a meaning contrary to what they ostensibly proclaim because their presence coincides with the character's sense of suffocation and alienation, revealing the discrepancy between discourse and practice.

This meaning is reinforced when the dialogue becomes an absurd interrogation of existence, as the narrator states:

"My name? You are looking for my name?" He refrained from speaking. A dark fissure crept through his being, making him hear blood dripping from his memories, while a haze enveloped him: shortness of breath and sleeplessness. For many long hours, he had not closed an eye. Rank after rank, the darkness assailed him, forcing him to drive his restless thoughts away in every direction, until he could barely steal a handful of minutes to comprehend the list of prohibitions that multiplied like locusts." (Boutajine, 2017, p. 9).

In this passage, the sign produces a meaning that exceeds civic identity to encompass existential identity. The question about the name leads the character to summon a memory burdened by pain and rupture, making the self itself a sign of anxiety and fragmentation. From Eco's perspective, this sign cannot be understood separately from the surrounding signs, such as "darkness," "prohibitions," and the "dark fissure," all of which constitute a semantic system suggesting an individual trapped within a world of constraints and symbolic authorities.

Meaning continues to be produced through the statement:

"The heat, she said, was a beast creeping through the body, while the beads of sweat were like little witches in the lower reaches of hell." (Boutajine, 2017, p. 65).

Here, heat is not represented as a natural phenomenon but as an "animal" that moves and acts, thereby giving it a mythical dimension. The "drops of sweat" are transformed into "little witches," a sign that moves the reader from reality to an imaginative space in which the senses and anxieties intersect. From Eco's perspective, these signs do not merely describe reality; they reshape it according to a symbolic vision that makes the body and the psyche spaces for producing meanings of anxiety and suffocation.

Elsewhere, he states:

"Go to hell. I have no need for you at this plague-ridden time. Movement is the moment when the body melts away and transforms into an abstract idea wandering through distant horizons... A cigarette—and they smoked me with it." (Boutajine, 2017, p. 65).

The sign here produces a meaning different from its conventional sense. The melting body does not refer to a material transformation, but to a desire to detach oneself from a crisis-ridden reality, while the expression "a cigarette smoked me" reverses the relation between agent and object, making the self a symbol of burning and exhaustion. Accordingly, Saïd Boutajine deconstructs prevailing political, social, and cultural signs and reconstructs them within a satirical context, making the reader a participant in producing meaning and discovering the meanings concealed behind the manifest discourse.

The narrator also recalls:

Glory be to Him, the One who changes circumstances. He provides for you from where you do not know... With age, the rupture occurred; the old sensibility faltered, the earth no longer wrote, and the price of a sheep became higher than the price of its owner." (Boutajine, 2017, p. 40).

The meaning of this passage is founded upon the interaction of a set of signs that move from their direct meaning toward broader symbolic functions. The Qur'anic phrase "He provides for you from where you do not know" evokes, within collective consciousness, a cultural system associated with hope and trust in divine care. Yet the narrative context redirects it so that it becomes a sign of prolonged waiting in which faith becomes intertwined with the bitterness of need. Its original meaning is not erased; rather, it is reproduced within a human experience oscillating between hope and disappointment. This accords with Umberto Eco's conception of the sign as capable of generating renewed meanings according to cultural and interpretive context rather than according to lexical meaning alone.

The narrator states:

"I am not well by inheritance. The entire United Nations is against me. The laws and conjunctions are against me. I am my own adversary, and the opposition is against me. Therefore, it is impossible to build a civilization the size of a little finger, for example. That is why I have no tomorrow. I am merely a mistake. You are a typographical error." (Boutajine, 2017, p. 73).

This passage embodies semantic density that exceeds direct meaning toward profound symbolic and psychological dimensions. The narrator employs signs with suggestive connotations, such as "the United Nations," "laws," "conjunctions," and "typographical error," to express the character's state of alienation and rejection. These signs do not refer to their literal referents as much as they symbolize a broad system of pressures and constraints within which the individual feels trapped.

The sign "I am my own opponent and the opposition is against me" expresses the fragmentation of the self and its internal conflict, as the human being becomes an adversary to himself before becoming a victim of others. Likewise, "I have no tomorrow" produces a meaning of lost hope and a blocked horizon, becoming a sign of the existential frustration that shapes the character's vision of the world. The image of the "typographical error" is among the most significant signs in the text, as it condenses the character's sense of non-belonging and the belief that he is an excessive or incongruous element within his social environment. Thus, linguistic signs become an artistic means of revealing the crisis of the self and its rejection of a reality lacking harmony and meaning.

Elsewhere, we find: "I wished with all my heart that I could die for a little while, to please the people; a moment of ecstasy, and I lived on the threshold of absence as nothingness, where the realms of possibility, oblivion, and solitude reside." (Boutajine, 2017, p. 81).

This passage contains a network of symbolic signs that contribute to the production of meaning within the text. Death does not appear here as a biological ending, but as a sign of the desire for temporary separation from a reality burdened by disappointments. The "thresholds of absence" likewise become a symbolic space expressing the search for salvation and tranquility away from the pressures of the material world. The signs of "the possible," "forgetfulness," and "solitude" acquire psychological and existential meanings reflecting the character's longing for an alternative world in which the frustration and helplessness that characterize everyday life can be transcended.

Accordingly, these signs produce the meaning of existential alienation that dominates the text. The character appears unable to adapt to reality and therefore seeks refuge in imagination and the metaphysical in search of lost balance. Narrative language thus becomes a means of exposing the predicament of the self and its continuing desire to free itself from the constraints imposed by reality.

The narrator conveys the character's words:

"I bought a rope, hid it in my wallet, and resolved to do it. Thus, I would destroy the universe in one stroke. I would not give it a chance to forget me or humiliate me. Rather, I would teach it how to stir its memory and look toward the margins, where submerged beings like me dissolve."

"(Boutajine, 2017, p. 81).

This narrative threshold reveals a semiotic system charged with existential and psychological meanings. The signs contained within it exceed their immediate meanings to establish a network of suggestions reflecting the depth of the narrator's crisis. The sign in this context is not reduced to an informative function; rather, it becomes a symbolic mediator expressing internal fragmentation and the breakdown of the relationship between the self and the world. Narrative discourse consequently becomes a field for embodying the tragedy of modern human beings who find themselves unable to secure recognition of their existence within a reality characterized by indifference and exclusion.

The sign of the "rope" produces a complex meaning that exceeds its material significance as an instrument, becoming a symbol of the desire to separate oneself from and protest against reality. It does not refer to the act itself so much as to an extreme state of psychological collapse, a sense of a blocked horizon, and a loss of the value of existence. In this sense, the sign becomes a symbolic representation of a crisis of the self that no longer perceives the world as a space embracing its existence, but as a space that reinforces its isolation and intensifies its sense of betrayal. Concealing the rope inside the "wallet" adds another dimension to the sign, suggesting that the decision remains imprisoned within, and that the crisis develops in the depths of the self before becoming manifest in external reality.

This symbolic dimension is reinforced by the narrator's statement, "Thus I will destroy the universe at once," where a semantic shift occurs from the particular to the universal and from individual experience to an encompassing conception of the world. The universe here is not understood merely as material existence; rather, it represents the symbolic system through which the narrator feels marginalized and excluded. The desire to "destroy the universe" is therefore a metaphorical expression of rejecting a reality in which the human being has lost value, and of a desperate attempt to restore recognition of the self by magnifying the impact of individual action. This narrative exaggeration reveals an imbalance in the character's psychological experience, in which the sense of self expands as the sense of helplessness and rupture deepens.

The expressions "forgetting me" and "insulting me" also acquire striking semiotic value, referring to two fundamental human needs: recognition and dignity. The character does not suffer merely from material poverty or helplessness; above all, he suffers from symbolic erasure of his existence. Forgetting becomes a form of social annulment, while insult becomes a sign of the collapse of human value within a society that has lost sensitivity toward

marginalized individuals. Thus, the significance of the text expands to touch upon social and cultural dimensions that exceed the individual experience.

The sign of the “margins” is among the most semantically dense signs in the passage because it does not refer to a geographical location or material site. Rather, it establishes a symbolic space of exclusion, marginalization, and non-recognition. The margins represent the space to which forgotten selves are pushed, away from the center of action and influence, where they live a faint existence almost devoid of social value. The description of the characters as “submerged beings” deepens this conception: the self becomes a being deprived of presence, living outside the circle of light and attention, making marginalization an existential destiny rather than merely a temporary social condition.

From this interweaving of signs, it becomes evident that the text constructs its meaning through an interconnected semiotic network in which psychological, social, and existential signs interact to produce a critical vision of reality. Saïd Boutajine does not present the crisis of an isolated individual; rather, through these signs, he formulates an image of contemporary human beings who experience a dual alienation: alienation from themselves, whose certainties have been lost, and alienation from a society that no longer recognizes their existence. In this way, the narrative sign becomes an aesthetic and intellectual instrument that reveals the text’s deep structure and opens the way for multiple readings of its psychological, social, and philosophical dimensions, in harmony with the semiotic conception that makes meaning production dependent upon the interaction between signs and their various contexts.

The narrator states:

“Who are you?” she asked. “A citizen without a moon,” I replied humbly. Then I did not say: “I am not here now; I am in the lower reaches of hell.”(Boutajine, 2017, p. 65).

This passage constitutes a dense semiotic structure in which a set of symbolic signs interact and exceed their immediate lexical meanings to produce meanings related to the crisis of the self and the rupture of its relationship with the world. The “moon” does not appear merely as a cosmic element; it becomes a cultural and aesthetic sign referring to light, guidance, completeness, and tranquility. Its negation in the expression “a citizen without a moon” consequently reveals a state of inner loss: the self is deprived of a symbolic source of hope and belonging, as though its existence lies outside the circles of light and recognition.

The significance of this sign does not stop at personal feeling but extends to reveal a crisis of identity. The word “citizen,” which is expected to refer to belonging and participation within the community, is combined with the sign of deficiency, “without a moon,” producing a semantic paradox between formal belonging and actual alienation. The character belongs to the place in terms of physical existence, yet remains detached from it in terms of a sense of dignity and meaning.

The expression "the lower floor of hell" constitutes another symbolic sign that moves the experience from its spatial dimension to its psychological and existential dimension. Hell here does not merely represent an eschatological space; it becomes an internal reality experienced by the character through suffocation, isolation, and rupture. Adding the adjective "lower" to hell intensifies the sense of descent, as though the self is no longer facing temporary suffering but has settled into the deepest levels of pain and alienation.

The tension between the signs of the "moon" and "hell" reveals a central binary opposition in the text: absent light versus present darkness, and the dream of belonging versus the reality of exclusion. Through this contrast, the narrator constructs an image of a human being who has lost his relationship with certainty and lives between the desire for salvation and the feeling that attaining it is impossible. The signs in this passage thus become instruments for producing meaning that exceeds the individual experience of the character and expresses a broader human condition characterized by marginalization and the search for the self in a world dominated by disorder and meaninglessness. The reader consequently becomes an active participant in eliciting the implicit meanings of narrative discourse.

The narrator states:

"And she will ask me about the meaning of joy, and I will answer her that I do not know it, owing to my scientific and existential integrity... Then she will persistently press me, and I will reply: What is the meaning of joy?"(Boutajine, 2017, p. 116).

This passage reveals a semantic displacement that makes "joy" an open sign for interpretation rather than a familiar emotional state. Instead of providing a definition, the narrator responds to the question with another question, transforming meaning into an object of inquiry rather than a ready-made truth. This reversal reflects a profound state of alienation in which everyday concepts lose their self-evidence under the pressure of a crisis-ridden reality. Thus, "joy" becomes a sign of absence more than presence, and its meaning emerges from the character's inability to grasp it, revealing the fragility of the world in which he lives and the breakdown of its value system.

The narrator states:

"He awakens from his slumber like a terrified child, gathering the scattered fragments of his self, vainly attempting to rid himself of the flocks of crows fluttering in his eyes, their wings having bathed in the annual drought." (Boutajine, 2017, p. 117).

This passage reveals the presence of symbolic signs expressing the fragmentation of the self and its internal disturbance. The image of the "terrified child" refers to the character's fragility and loss of security, while the "flocks of crows" become a sign of pessimism, ruin, and accumulated fears. "Annual drought" exceeds its natural meaning to become a symbol of the drying up of hope and the persistence of suffering. Thus, the meaning of the text is formed through a network of signs that render the character's psychological state visible through

metaphorical images exposing alienation and struggle with a reality burdened by anxiety and waiting.

The narrator states:

"All religions appeared to me as a successful artistic lie, enclosed beneath the dome of illusion and hidden in the vaults of the bestial soul. I, whose molars still bore the traces of my mother's milk, became certain that I was in the abyss, in a bankrupt labyrinth within the barren sacred circle." " (Boutajine, 2017, p. 138).

This passage opens onto the operation of the sign as a semantic structure that reveals the disturbed relationship between the self and the world. The signs in it do not remain confined to direct reference but open onto symbolic and philosophical dimensions reflecting the character's crisis and existential questions. The phrase "a successful artistic lie" constitutes a striking linguistic sign that reverses the traditional function of the sacred, shifting discourse from the sphere of faith toward that of doubt and questioning, thereby expressing the internal rupture experienced by the self before the great systems of meaning.

The sign of the "dome" in "enclosed by a dome of illusion" becomes a symbol of closure and concealment. It does not perform an architectural function but points to a symbolic cover preventing access to truth as conceived by the character. "Illusion" is associated with ambiguity and the loss of certainty, becoming a sign of the distance between what is believed and what is actually lived.

The sign of the "labyrinth" is among the most semantically dense signs in the text. It does not indicate spatial disorientation but refers to an existential condition characterized by confusion and the inability to find a clear path toward meaning. This significance is intensified by its association with the adjective "bankrupt," turning the labyrinth into a space devoid of possibilities and reflecting the character's sense of a blocked horizon and inability to overcome his crisis.

The phrase "the barren sacred circle" carries a striking semantic paradox, bringing together two opposing signs: sacredness, with its connotations of fullness and transcendence, and barrenness, which evokes emptiness and dryness. Through this opposition, the narrator reveals a conflict between the need for meaning and the sense of its absence, and between the search for reassurance and the feeling of being lost.

4. Conclusion

The study of the sign in Saïd Boutajine's short-story collection **What Happened to Me Tomorrow** has revealed a dense semiotic presence that transforms the text into an open space for meaning production and multiple interpretations. The sign is not limited to its direct communicative function; rather, it becomes a semantic structure capable of accommodating multiple levels of reading. The writer employs an interconnected system of linguistic, cultural, social, and symbolic signs that interact to form a network of textual relations contributing to

the construction of an intellectual and aesthetic vision reflecting the complexities of contemporary human reality. Through this semiotic system, the text raises multiple existential and intellectual issues, most notably alienation, the crisis of identity, the disintegration of human relationships, the decline of the value system, and the dominance of absurdity and uncertainty. The sign thus becomes an artistic medium for re-questioning reality and exposing its profound contradictions.

The analysis also demonstrates that Saïd Boutajine's narrative language is characterized by a high degree of poetic quality and semantic deviation, which endows signs with suggestive and aesthetic energy enabling them to move beyond direct meaning toward broader and richer symbolic spaces. The sign in this collection does not settle upon a single meaning; rather, it opens onto multiple interpretive possibilities determined by textual context, the recipient's competence, and cultural background. This makes the text continually open to rereading and grants it semantic vitality renewed with every act of reading. The use of symbolism, paradox, satire, cultural allusion, and intertextuality further deepens the semiotic structure and enriches its aesthetic dimension, reflecting an artistic awareness of the sign's capacity to condense human experience and express it through the fewest and most intensive means.

The analysis of the textual corpus shows that Saïd Boutajine does not reproduce reality directly; rather, he reproduces and reconstructs it within an imaginative space in which truth intersects with illusion, the real with the symbolic, and satire with tragedy. The text thus becomes an open structure that calls for the reader's participation in decoding its signs and completing its meanings. The reader, from this perspective, is not a passive recipient but a partner in the production of meaning, investing cognitive and cultural experience in interpreting signs and connecting them to their various contexts. This is consistent with modern semiotic conceptions, according to which meaning is not given ready-made but is produced through continuous interaction between text and recipient.

Study Results

- The study demonstrates that the sign constitutes the central structure in the production of meaning within the short-story collection **What Happened to Me Tomorrow**.
- Saïd Boutajine employs diverse signs—social, cultural, religious, political, and psychological—that enrich meaning and broaden the horizon of interpretation.
- The characters, settings, and everyday objects of the text function as symbolic signs that exceed their direct meanings and acquire deeper social and intellectual meanings.
- Satire emerges as an artistic strategy through which familiar signs are transformed into critical signs exposing the dysfunctions of reality.
- Linguistic deviations and metaphorical images contribute to reproducing meaning and giving the text a symbolic and suggestive character.
- The textual corpus reveals a clear presence of themes of alienation, identity, deprivation,

and marginalization through an interconnected network of signs.

- The writer makes the reader a partner in constructing meaning: meanings are not presented in ready-made form but emerge through the process of interpreting and interrogating signs.
- The study demonstrates that the short-story collection represents a narrative model in which the aesthetic function of the sign intersects with its critical function, contributing to the construction of an intellectual and humanistic vision of reality.

Foot notes:

1. Umberto Eco, **The Sign: Analysis of the Concept and Its History**, trans. Saïd Benkrad, 2nd ed. (Casablanca: Arab Cultural Center, 2010), pp. 12–13.
2. Saïda Khansali, "The Linguistic Sign According to Umberto Eco: Its Mechanisms and Modes of Operation," **Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**, University of Constantine 2 – Abdelhamid Mehri, Vol. 07, No. 03 (December 2021), pp. 305–306.
3. Saïda Khansali, *ibid.*, p. 307.
4. Makhlof Boukrouh, **Reception in Culture and Media** (Cairo: Maqamat Publishing and Distribution House, 2011), p. 22.
5. Roland Barthes, **Criticism and Truth**, trans. Ibrahim Al-Khatib, **Al-Karmel**, No. 11 (1984), p. 26; see also Jawad Al-Zubaidi, **Phenomenology of Visual Discourse**, 1st ed. (Damascus: Dar Al-Yanabee, 2010), p. 82.
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