

Case studies in English

1.2 Communication: from sign to discourse

Case study 1.2

“The Appointment in Samarra”

as retold by W. Somerset Maugham, from *Sheppey*, 1933

An Appointment in Samarra is W. Somerset Maugham's retelling of an ancient Mesopotamian tale which is about the encounter of death (or the angel of death) and a man from Baghdad.

The speaker is Death.

- There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture, now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the marketplace and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.

Analysis

The story retells a very old apologue (an apologue is a fictional narrative that conveys a moral lesson). In this case, the moral centers on the impossibility of escaping a predetermined fate. The earliest versions of this apologue appear in Judeo-Talmudic literature of the 6th century and in the Sufi Muslim tradition between the 9th and 13th centuries. In modern times, there is a well-known French version, which Jean Cocteau includes in his novel *Le grand écart* (1923), as well as numerous versions in many other languages—including a Spanish version by the Basque writer Bernardo Atxaga and the English version by William Somerset Maugham. In all cases, the events take place in Persia.

The moral of this story could be summarized as follows: there is a higher order that determines man's destiny, and it arrives when that order so decides — man must therefore always be prepared for death, for death defines the human condition.

Beyond the moral of the story, what is particularly interesting to highlight in the development of this narrative is the ambiguity of gestural language compared to verbal language. The young prince's gardener sees Death, and she makes a gesture. Frightened by her presence—and especially by her gesture—the gardener interprets it as a threat and decides to flee, as he does not want to die and believes that by putting distance between them, he can escape Death. Later, the verbal exchange between the prince (the gardener's master) and Death reveals the true meaning of her gesture. What she had expressed was surprise—not threat—because the young gardener was in Baghdad, even though she knew he was destined to die that very evening in Isfahan. The prince—and the reader—then understand that by fleeing to Ispahan, the gardener

was unknowingly heading straight toward his fate: he was going to die in Isfahan, and any attempt to escape what fate has in store is bound to fail.

As specialists know (and indeed anyone attentive to how language works), the degree of codification of gestures, emoticons, and much iconography varies greatly. Codification guarantees precision. Some gestures are highly codified—for example, the gesture for requesting silence by placing an index finger vertically over the lips, or the thumbs-up gesture signalling approval. But when gestures are less codified, the message may be unclear. In the story of the prince's young gardener, the reader knows that Death makes a gesture (line 6), but does not know what that gesture looks like. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the gesture was ambiguous and poorly codified. This ambiguity leads to a misunderstanding. The terror inspired by Death contributes to this misinterpretation. In contrast, the clarity of the verbal exchange between Death and the prince dispels the misunderstanding (lines 12-15). Thanks to the use of language, the prince is perfectly certain of Death's message and understands that the young gardener's tragic fate is inevitable. This is not to say that misunderstandings cannot occur in language, but it is undeniable that linguistic signs offer far greater precision than gestures.