

The Characters in The Good Woman of Szechuan

Shen Te

Shen Te, a prostitute in the capital of the Chinese province of Szechuan. Later, she assumes the identity Shui Ta, supposedly her male cousin and a ruthless businessman. A kind, charitable woman who cannot say “no,” Shen Te apparently is the only person left on Earth who fulfills the prerequisites of a “good” human being. Although the three gods in search of such a person reward her with sufficient money to enable her to buy a tobacco shop, she soon finds herself again in a state of destitution when the news of her new possession attracts many alleged relatives and debtors who sponge off her meager means. To survive, Shen Te is forced to play the role of an assumed cousin named Shui Ta, whose ruthless acts enable “him” to increase Shen Te’s possessions.

Wang

Wang, a water-seller. He has a naïve, unshaken belief in the power of the gods, who appear to him in his dreams at regular intervals during the play and who reveal to him their impotence in the light of Shen Te’s social dilemma. Ironically, it is through Wang’s incorrect perception of Shui Ta’s use of physical coercion toward Shen Te that the three gods are called to serve as judges.

The three gods

The three gods, nameless deities vaguely resembling a popular concept of the Christian Trinity, and with distinctly human characteristics. The first one is strongly authoritarian, the second one pessimistically cynical, and the third one noncommittally jovial. The three gods appear to be blind to the causes of human misery and, against all proof to the opposite during the final trial scene, they reaffirm their belief in Shen Te’s ability both to be good and to survive without the help of Shui Ta.

Yang Sun

Yang Sun, an unemployed airman. Yang is a selfish egotist who wants to use Shen Te’s money to bribe a prospective employer in Peking. Although he reveals his self-seeking intentions to Shui Ta, Shen Te is willing to marry him because she truly loves him and she wants him to become a mail carrier pilot, symbolizing the stringing of positive bonds between human beings everywhere. Instead of going through with his intention, however, Yang becomes a cruel and merciless foreman in Shui Ta’s factory.

Shu Fu

Shu Fu, a barber. He is a wealthy capitalist who wants to seize the opportunity of Shen Te’s financial dilemma to make her become his wife. Although apparently helping her to

become the “angel of the suburbs” by letting her use some of his warehouses as shelters for homeless people, he shows his true character when he breaks Wang’s hand with his curling tongs and when, following his realization that he cannot get Shen Te as he had expected, he lets Shui Ta turn his damp and unhealthy warehouses into an exploitative tobacco factory.

Mrs. Yang

Mrs. Yang, Yang Sun’s mother. She talks in bourgeois clichés and claims that her son will marry Shen Te out of love, when actually she sees only the opportunity for a financial profit. She calls off the wedding when Shui Ta does not show up in time to clear Shen Te of her financial debt, and she later supports Shui Ta in his ruthless business practices.
