

SYNOPSIS OF “S.” by Constance Congdon

Act I

Scene 1: Sarah Price Worth, a born-and-bred North Shore WASP, is on an airplane heading west, having left her husband, Charles, a prominent Boston doctor. She sings through the contents of a note she has left for her husband as he enters their darkened house to find the note and to read it aloud to himself. Charles immediately telephones their daughter, Pearl, in London, and, then, Sarah’s mother in Florida. The plane lands in Los Angeles and Sarah walks through the airport to the rental car counter, continuing her monologue to the absent Charles. She tries to explain her love for her spiritual teacher (whom she has yet to meet in person) and she anticipates her new way of life on his ashram as a sannyasin, a Hindu disciple. In a juxtaposed trio, Charles, Pearl, and Sarah’s mother express their horror and outrage that Sarah has done something so “insane.” The scene ends with Sarah, driving to the ashram in Arizona, singing about her spiritual rebirth, the big western sun sinking slowly behind her.

Scene 2: Arriving at the ashram, Sarah is confronted by Durga, the ashram’s volatile chief administrator. Sarah changes into work clothes which she has bought in an Army-Navy store on Boston’s Boylston Street. Durga is profoundly skeptical that Sarah, with her privileged background, has the discipline, experience, or commitment to survive the life of a sannyasin in a desert community where “work is worship.” But Sarah is determined. One of the sannyasins puts a tool belt on Sarah, and she takes her place on the work crew that is building a structure. The Arhat passes by in a limousine and the sannyasins stop work to wave and chant “Ommmmmmmm.” Sarah, overjoyed to be a true pilgrim at last, joins in.

Scene 3: Charles seeks the advice of his investment counselor, Ducky Bradford, and his lawyer, Gilman. The men are outraged that Sarah, by forging Charles’s signature, has sold the couple’s jointly-held stocks. Meanwhile, at the ashram, a meditation session is in progress, led by Fritz and then by Alinga. The meditation group disperses, leaving Sarah alone. It is the end of her first day of work at the ashram, and she is tired and dirty, but happy to be in her new home. As she prepares for bed among the other sannyasins, she sings of her devotion to the ashram and to the Arhat. Charles, in his separate space, joins her in a duet in which he expresses his anger and his determination to be revenged.

Scene 4: As the scene opens, Sheriff Yardley, the local lawman, is observing the ashram through binoculars. Sarah, now elevated to the position of foreman, enters with a work crew of sannyasins, ready for agricultural labor. She is telling them what to do, using her extensive knowledge of gardening. Alinga, Sarah’s new friend, chastises Sarah for working too hard and gives her a salt tablet, which Yardley thinks is LSD. When Sarah asks the ever-present Durga how they are going to find enough water in the desert surroundings for any real successful farming venture, Durga becomes suspiciously angry. After Durga tells the story of the beginning of the ashram in India and of the Arhat’s plans to found a town called Varunaville, Sarah realizes that her concerns are “too western” and joins Alinga and Durga in a trio celebrating Varunaville.

Scene 5: Sarah is becoming an evangelist, but through the mail. Several people from her “old life” receive letters from this new Sarah, who sometimes signs herself as “S.,” advising them all on the fruitful adjustments they could make in their lives, mirroring the changes in her own. The stage fills with all the letter readers, as the chaos Sarah has created becomes aural.

Scene 6: Sarah is making another tape for Midge, her best friend in Boston, giving her an on-the-spot report of the current happenings at the ashram. Sitting in a large chair near her is, at last, the Arhat, surrounded by his sannyasins, of which Sarah is one. Television cameras and technicians are nearby because a nationally televised talk show has come to the ashram to do an entire program on the Arhat and his followers. Sarah stops her tape to Midge as the television broadcast begins with Miles Murrow, a talk show host, asking probing questions. Soon the program erupts with accusations from the local people that the Arhat is a “fake!” This is too much for Sarah. She stands, and with every bit of upper-class WASP arrogance she can muster, informs everyone of the Arhat’s childhood poverty in Bombay and his mission in the world. Sheriff Yardley accuses the Arhat of all sorts of state legal violations. When the talk show host insists that the Arhat respond to these accusations, the Arhat breaks his serene silence with an aria about Kundalini, the little snake that lives at the base of the spine and how its travel through the body burns away all “maya” (illusion). The Arhat names Sarah “Kundalini” on television and mesmerizes nearly everyone with his manner and speech, which has been filled with Indian-based exoticism. Miles Murrow drops the bombshell that the Arhat is planning to found a town at the ashram. Everyone gets upset again and the act ends with the sannyasins chanting the name of the town the Arhat wants to found, “Varunaville,” and “Varuna,” god of the waters.

Act II

Scene 1: Dressed in a sari, Sarah sits at a word processor; she has been promoted to an executive position in the Arhat's office. He is dictating a letter with Sarah's help. Durga and Alinga arrive for an executive meeting, at which Sarah takes over with her incredible and newly-found knowledge of taxes and the ashram's accounting system. Sheriff Yardley, an IRS agent, and men in suits enter with a court order to seize some of the ashram's financial records and Sarah complies. Durga becomes enraged at Sarah's betrayal of the ashram and exits, after which Sarah gives the Arhat the real records, on a diskette, which she has been concealing on her body. He is very pleased.

Scene 2: Back in Marblehead, Gilman and Charles are drinking while Charles is pouring out his sorrow and incomprehension of Sarah's leaving him. The scene becomes a split scene as Sarah and Alinga enter, having become lovers. Gilman breaks this news to Charles.

Scene 3: Pearl, Sarah's daughter, sees her mother on television in the BBC re-airing of the talk show and is horrified. Pearl has fallen in love with a Dutch aristocratic boy and is embarrassed about her mother's behavior-she has also decided not to return to Yale. Sarah pleads with Pearl to fulfill her potential. In a split scene, they share a duet in which they oppose each other on love and the future.

Scene 3a: A Swiss banker opens and reads a letter, in French, setting up a Swiss bank account for one Sarah Worth.

Scene 4: Working late in the Arhat's office, Sarah is making another tape for Midge, while she shreds offensive articles about the Arhat and the ashram that her mother has been sending her. Sarah's mother appears in Florida where she is cutting out more damning articles to send to Sarah. They share a duet until the Arhat enters, pleased to find Sarah working late. He expresses his attraction to her, calling her his "Kundalini." They seduce each other and their passion seems to spread, as the scene ends with the sound of lovemaking coming from the entire ashram.

Scene 5: The ashram is under siege and Alinga is clearing out, running back to Iowa. Durga enters with guns, but despairs that all she has to fight with is a "bunch of pacifists." Men in suits, Sheriff Yardley, and police officers enter the ashram and start removing computers, chairs, files, etc., for nonpayment and tax evasion. The Arhat appears and, to allay Sarah's worries that he will be deported back to India, reveals something about his identity that upsets Sarah. When he tries to make up with her, she rejects him. A tear gas bomb is exploded and everyone has to clear out. Out of the smoke emerges Sarah, driving again, but away from the ashram, singing that the "distance between us grows." She is traveling again and Pearl is getting married in London, with Charles and Midge, a new couple, present, but no Sarah. Pearl worries about her mother, but everyone tells her that Sarah's "gone insane." The wedding party exits and Sarah is on an airplane again, naming the cities she passes over as she heads south. The opera ends as Sarah is sitting on a tropical beach, a fugitive, but financially secure. She is writing a letter to Charles, admitting that every evening she listens for the sound of the garage door opening when he would come home. Yet she feels, at last, benign and serene.