

“Congruent Figures”
Takahashi Takako

Cheryl Cornwell
Arlington Memorial High School
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Grades 11/12
College Prep (CP) English
Lesson length: 7 days

Lesson Objectives

By completing these activities students will be able to:

- State an opinion about “Congruent Figures” using examples from the text to support the opinion
- Define, identify and analyze symbolism within “Congruent Figures” using examples from the text to support the analysis
- Identify and analyze aspects of psychological realism using examples from the text to support the analysis
- Analyze the narrator’s portrayal of motherhood in “congruent figures”
- Draw comparisons between different literary genres
- Identify elements of traditional Japanese family structure and notions of motherhood

Summary

“Congruent Figures” details the relationship between the first person narrator, Akiko Matsuyama and her daughter, Hatsuko. The story opens as Akiko receives a letter from her daughter, whom she has not seen in more than four years. In her letter, Hatsuko reveals that she has a child who is a year and three months old and that she plans on visiting in order to introduce the child to her parents. In her letter, Akiko’s daughter questions her mother’s dislike of her, as well as the reasons for her distant behavior. Akiko affirms what her daughter has said by suggesting the universality of these antagonistic feelings that all mothers feel toward their daughters.

After reading the letter, Akiko takes the reader through a series of flashbacks that recount her mounting antagonism towards her daughter. Her first flashback begins when Hatsuko is in third grade. As the family sits down to dinner, Hatsuko usurps her mother’s place at the dinner table by both acting and speaking as Akiko herself would have. During a meeting with her sister-in-law, Akiko’s role is again usurped as Hatsuko kicks a moth out the door in the same way Akiko would have. Akiko notes that she should have been proud of her daughter’s behavior toward the sister-in-law, but instead she experiences a lingering sense of irritation attributable to her daughter.

Akiko is increasingly unsettled by Hatsuko’s behavior. One day at school Hatsuko intentionally frames another girl for an accident that Hatsuko caused by running downstairs to chase a popular teacher. Akiko admits that she herself also had an experience like this one as an adolescent. Later, as Akiko flashes back to a boat trip that the whole family took, she begins to indulge in fantasies in which Hatsuko is consumed by a shark. This violent fantasy demonstrates Akiko’s rising antagonism and resentment toward her daughter.

Akiko comes to realize that she is envious of her daughter’s relationship to a young man in town. Akiko reveals her sense of sexual frustration and loss of sexual identity at the same time she sees these characteristics blossoming in Hatsuko. Akiko fantasizes about a scene in which her daughter and the local baker are involved in a sexual encounter on the river. However, her fantasy conflates the daughter and mother and it is Akiko who feels a sense of sexual pleasure while imagining her daughter’s sexual experiences.

Akiko has an encounter with an old woman in the town which causes her to reflect on her ambivalent feelings toward motherhood in general and Hatsuko in particular. The woman reminds her that her blood runs in Hatsuko's veins as readily as her mother's blood runs in her own. At the end of the story the reader is left with a portrait of Akiko, Hatsuko, and Hatsuko's daughter Misako. Akiko silently notes that Hatsuko, in time, will also experience the same feelings that she did.

Historical/Literary Context

Takahashi Takako was born on March 2, 1932 in Kyoto, Japan. Takako majored in French literature at Kyoto University, writing her senior thesis on Charles Baudelaire. While an undergraduate Takako met Takahashi Kazumi, a student of Chinese literature who later went on to write philosophical novels to some acclaim. Kazumi and Takako were married in 1954, the same year that Takako graduated from university. After completing her master's degree in 1958, Takako began writing her first novel, *A Ruined Landscape*. After winning a major literary award in 1962, Kazumi's literary success allowed Takako to quit her job and focus on literature full time. Takako's husband died an early death in 1971 from colon cancer. After her husband's death Takako went on to write prolifically in the 1970s crafting novels and short stories. In 1975, Takako converted to Roman Catholicism, later moving to France where she became a nun in 1985. Eventually she returned to Japan and continued to write until her death in 2013. Takahashi Takako's literature, Maryellen Toman Mori notes, "although not written from an explicitly feminist perspective, shares considerable common ground with feminist literature written in the 1970s and 1980s, both in Japan and in the West" (206). However, Takako's work is most characterized by the debunking "of myths of women's innate disposition to such traditional feminine virtues as maternal feelings...sexual passivity..." (Mori 207).

Historically, Takahashi Takako's writing can be placed in the latter half of the Showa period's literary tradition of psychological realism, which has been one of the major trends in Japanese literature from the Meiji period to the present (Alvis). Post-World War II authors built on earlier forms of psychological realism, using their writing to usher in "a new phase of psychological 'realism' as social critique" (Alvis). Within this tradition, characters are presented without conformance to social or cultural ideals. In addition, the technique of psychological realism portrays the thoughts and feelings of a character without "idealization." In other words, there is no attempt to "prettify" or mitigate a character's inner thoughts. Takahashi is known for her portrayals of motherhood and her stories further go on to "deconstruct stereotypes of female nature and desire, and thereby unsettle gender categorize themselves" (Mori 207). Thus, the main focus of Takahashi's "Congruent Figures" is a critique of the institution of motherhood.

Essential to a nuanced reading of "Congruent Figures" is a basic understanding of general attitudes toward motherhood in modern Japanese culture and society. In her article "Unstable Mothers: Redefining Motherhood in Contemporary Japan," Megan McKinlay notes "Contemporary Japanese constructions of the maternal owe a great deal to a redefinition of motherhood which took place in the Meiji period concomitant with the process of modernization, and nation and empire building." Prior to the Meiji period (1868-1912), women were expected to bear children, but the burden of raising them would fall mostly on the shoulders of other women, such as extended family member or nannies. As a result of the increasing influence of western ideas and heightened nationalism following the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), women's roles

within the home evolved from that of caretaker for the *ie* (the traditional family structure), to that of caretaker of the nation. The idea of “Good wife, Wise mother” or “*ryōsai kenbo* saw a re-defining of women in terms of their roles as nurturers of children and overseers of the domestic arena” (McKinlay). Furthermore, “The state-ordained emphasis on motherhood which began in the Meiji period ultimately led to a reifying of 'maternal love', together with the notion that motherly love and devotion were vital to a child's development” (McKinlay). Thus, in her writing, Takahashi is directly challenging the legacy of Meiji period policies on women's roles within the home.

Discussion Questions and Answers

1. How does the first person point of view contribute to the reader's involvement with the story?

Possible answer: Because of the first person point of view, the reader is placed directly into the action of the story. Readers are able to experience the narrative from the viewpoint of the narrator speaking directly about herself. The reader is aware of the intimate, private thoughts of the narrator and a sympathetic link is created between reader and narrator, which allows the reader to feel more invested in the narrator's story. Writing within the genre of psychological “realism” the reader is privy to the unfiltered, raw emotions of the narrator. Furthermore, these emotions and thoughts directly subvert traditional feminine roles and ideals surrounding motherhood and the mother-child bond. Considering that psychological realism was used as a literary means of social critique, the dark and seemingly violent fantasies indulged in by the narrator highlight the institution of motherhood that created the feelings of anger, hatred, and jealousy that the first person narrator, Akiko, initially experiences. Within this context the reader is aware of the private emotions of Akiko and a common understanding is created because the reader feels like they “know” the narrator. While the reader may be surprised at the violence of Akiko's fantasies, she is ultimately able to understand the underlying reasons for these emotions because she is drawn into the action and emotions of the story. The danger in a first person point of view narrative, however, is that all of the events are filtered through the character of the narrator. This may bring up complications as to whether or not the narrator is reliable. The reader is often left wondering what is included in the narrative and what might have been left out.

2. Within the narrative the reader is given several examples of Akiko's antagonism toward her daughter, Hatsuko. What do these examples say about the relationship between mother and daughter?

Possible answer: Akiko shows her antagonism toward her daughter by distancing herself from Hatsuko. Hatsuko is aware that her mother's feelings have changed, but Akiko never directly addresses her feelings towards her daughter. Instead, Akiko acts in ways which demonstrate her growing distance and antagonism toward her daughter. For example, Akiko becomes aware that Hatsuko arranges flowers in the same way she does. She confronts Akiko asking, “Are you imitating me?” Unsatisfied with her answer, Akiko creates further distance from her daughter when her daughter says, “You know, mother.” Akiko responds in a cold and antagonistic manner saying “How would I know?” Akiko admits that she “negated her again” in an attempt to distance herself from her daughter. In a later scene, Akiko's

jealousy of her daughter's relationship with the village baker is manifest in Akiko's attitude toward the young body of her daughter. Akiko asks "Where are you going" and "What's that dress for." Hatsuko responds with a question of her own, "Where are you going yourself, Mother?" The dress and the eroticism implied in Hatsuko's behavior cause Akiko to admit that "Hatsuko's behavior was completely unintentional. Yet all the more for that reason the erotic atmosphere...flickered like a thin veil...Hatsuko was acting the part of the woman I had seen momentarily in my dream. This is what irritated me" (186). Akiko further notes that "Hatsuko had stolen from me the woman whom although longing for I had locked up, the woman who applied lipstick but later wiped it off" (186). Akiko's antagonism towards her daughter stems from the feeling that Hatsuko has both stolen her sexuality and sucked out her vitality. This vampire-like behavior creates a tense relationship in which Akiko is resentful of Hatsuko's appropriation of her behavior, as well as Hatsuko's burgeoning sexuality, which Akiko feels she has stolen from her. Mother and daughter, while physically similar, are at different stages of their lives, which causes a conflict between them. Hatsuko is unaware of her mother's repressed feelings of sexual frustration, thus she does not understand why her mother acts so coldly toward her. Akiko is aware of her frustrations and hatred of her daughter, but she does not give voice to these feelings that directly contradict the expectations society sets out for women in general, and mothers in particular. Thus, this antagonism remains felt, but unspoken causing Hatsuko to feel disliked by her mother, while Akiko struggles to deal with emotions that challenge society's expectations "Poor Hatsuko. But I was trying as hard as I could. As hard as I could?...what does it mean to try hard for something which leaves only a sterile wasteland inside me?" (180).

3. Define psychological realism. How is psychological "realism used to critique motherhood and maternal love in the story?

Possible answer: Post-World War II authors built on earlier forms of psychological realism, using their writing to usher in "a new phase of psychological 'realism' as social critique" (Alvis). Within this tradition, characters are presented without conformance to social or cultural ideals. In addition, the technique of psychological realism portrays the thoughts and feelings of a character without "idealization." In other words, there is no attempt to "prettify" or mitigate a character's inner thoughts. Within the context of "Congruent Figures" there are numerous instances in which Akiko, as a mother, does not act in a socially acceptable way. For example, instead of feeling love for her daughter and pride in her development, Akiko is resentful of her daughter's looks, behavior, and burgeoning sexuality. Akiko is angry by comparisons made between her and her daughter and she seeks to distance herself from Hatsuko. In addition, Akiko indulges in violent fantasies in which her daughter is eaten by a shark and one in which she "shoots" Akiko while watching her from the window. A mother's expected role is that of teacher and nurturer. Akiko's ambivalent and violent feelings toward her daughter directly contradict what Japanese society expected in terms of motherhood and maternal love. Textual examples of psychological realism can be seen in the following quotes:

"It was an emotion which all the mothers of this world must have felt about their daughters...I must have lived that emotion as if I had enlarged it through a magnifying glass" (170)

"I should have rejoiced in the sensitivity that a daughter of only nine had just displayed. But instead, some unexplainable feeling of minding it stayed in my mind" (172-3)

“That time, too, I should have felt proud of Hatsuko’s response to my sister-in-law. Yet instead...my irritation over my sister-in-law disappeared, but a new irritation came over me” (175).

“I negated her again. I felt secretly that Hatsuko had begun to follow me even in such perceptions” (176).

“Before me there was a picture of happiness...it did not include me. What kept me away from it was Hatsuko” (178).

“The vision of a shark springing up...I could see before my eyes a vision of Hatsuko’s body, swallowed by its sharp, wide-open mouth...” (180).

“I aimed the gun, so to speak...Hatsuko, move away quickly. If you don’t, mother will shoot you...quickly retreat to some place where mother cannot see you. The pencil in my hand felt heavy and hateful” (184).

“Hatsuko had stolen from me the woman whom although longing for I had locked up, the woman who applied lipstick but later wiped it off” (188).

“I had no way of taking back my self which was taken away by Hatsuko” (189).

“...here try to scoop it, where can you find maternal love? It is nothing but an illusion manufactured by men” (191).

“‘You too bore a girl,’ I said, smiling thinly. I checked my impulse to say that it will begin with you now” (193).

4. Discuss the role and function of flashbacks in the telling of Akiko’s story?

Possible answer: Flashbacks allow the narrator to bridge time and place, while moving the story forward or by revealing information about the narrator that would otherwise not be available to the reader. The function of the flashbacks in “Congruent Figures” is to reveal the narrator’s ambivalent feelings about motherhood, thus indirectly answering and affirming Hatsuko’s accusation that her mother disliked her and actively sought to create distance between them. The flashbacks create a way for the reader to understand the narrator’s evolving feelings of ambivalence toward her daughter and to observe the struggle that she has had, emotionally, since her daughter’s adolescence. Without these flashbacks, the reader would be left with an incomplete and possibly confusing picture of a mother who seemingly treats her daughter badly without cause or reason.

5. Identify and discuss symbolism in the story.

Possible answers:

Blood--symbolizes the familial bond between women. Blood can also symbolize the passing down of traditions through the female line. The implication here is that women’s feelings of antagonism toward their daughters are part of a recurring cycle that begins at birth. Blood can also symbolize violence and passion.

Color Red--symbolizes Akiko’s suppressed sexuality and anger towards her daughter. Hatsuko’s red sweater contrasts with the opaqueness of Akiko’s illness the day she fantasizes about “shooting” her. Also, the red fan that Akiko uses (perhaps as a last foothold in the world of femininity and sexuality) is appropriated by Hatsuko as she flirts with the baker, the object of Akiko’s sexual desires. Red here can also be tied in with images of blood.

Waves--Andra Alvis argues that the waves represent the family dynamic between Akiko, her husband, and Hatsuko. "It was a quiet sea after the tide had ebbed and before the new tide swelled. There were no high, coiling waves, but thin flat ones, widely separated, which formed a stripe design...and when I looked into the depths of the water, I found only a dark green stagnation" (170-1). While the water remains common on the surface, underneath the waves Akiko's relationship to her daughter, husband, and in-laws is constantly in flux, creating a stir of emotions that seem to engulf Akiko. Moreover, the stagnation beneath the waves may refer to Akiko's feelings toward her husband, including sexual frustration.

River-- The river symbolizes Akiko's awakened sexual desires "[A] river flows from the lower part of my body. The river gradually becomes warm and my body and the river become a continuous, long flow of wax coating, melting down the river" (189). Unlike the waves, the river is free of constraints. In addition, the river is a symbol of unadulterated pleasure that stands in stark contrast to the subdued action above the water, also read as the "real world."

Lipstick--symbolizes Mother's repressed sexuality as well as being a symbol of femininity, "lipstick inside was whitish on the surface as if some mold had grown there" (186). "The sweet smell of the perfume of the lipstick induced a gay feeling in me (186). Also see 187. The lipstick is moldy (old and unused) just like Akiko who no longer seems to have a feminine self. This self is now only visible in the burgeoning sexuality seen in Hatsuko. The lipstick represents the side of Akiko that she has had to repress in her role as wife and mother. The act of putting on the lipstick represents her desire, while the removal of the lipstick represents the futility she feels at being able to move outside of her prescribed role.

Flowers--Akiko's latent sexuality (see 186). Akiko describes herself as suppressing her desire to bloom, while maintaining a sweeter fragrance for it. The image of the flower here is symbolic of female genitalia as well as the fragrance. The blooming of the flower implies sexual desire that, as Akiko puts it, exists despite its inability to free itself from the confines of her body. She is unable to act on her sexual impulses, thus she feels that her desire is stronger because it has no outlet. This passage on 186 represents stifled potential and dormant sexuality.

Hands, handwriting, pencils, etc. These objects symbolize an ability to create, but also to fabricate meaning. Hatsuko's appropriation of these personal and individual attributes symbolizes her attempt to write Akiko out of her own narrative by adopting her personality and mannerisms. The letter that frames the beginning of the story can be seen as an attempt by Hatsuko to write her own narrative which challenges Akiko's version of events.

6. What does the title of the story refer to? What "congruent figures" do you find in the story? Cite specific examples from the text to support your position.

Possible answer: Most obviously the title refers to "maternal fantasies of the daughter as persecuting double" (Alvis, 73). Because of the physical similarities between Akiko and her daughter and Hatsuko's similarity to Akiko in terms of temperament and behavior, these two characters become congruent figures. Akiko and Hatsuko possess congruent past experiences as explained in the story of the fish bowl and Hatsuko's tripping of her classmate. This

similarity troubles Akiko since Hatsuko has now appropriated not only her actions and physicality, but she has also reminded Akiko of her own flaws, which she now sees has manifested in her daughter's behavior. They also share congruent triangular relationships with the male figures in the story. As Andra Alvis has noted, they are "... 'congruent' in terms of their parallel mechanism of displacing sexual conflict from the narrator's relations with her husband, sister-and-mother-in-law to her relationship with her daughter Hatsuko" (73). In other words, there are erotic nuances and a similar method of scapegoating Hatsuko in both scenes in which mother and daughter are pitted against each other when interacting with the father/husband and baker/object of sexual desire. In both instances, Hatsuko usurps her mother's role and renders Akiko impotent. Akiko is neither able to express her emotions outright, nor is she permitted to speak her mind freely in order to receive compassion or understanding.

"Hatsuko's hand picked up the bowl...leaving my hand dangling helplessly midair. I saw that he hand was exactly like mine in shape and color" (172).

"...these resemblances began to bear a certain meaning because of this small incident. I felt there was a miniature me beside me" (173).

"I intended to kick the moth away. I thought by that action the scene would be resolved. But Hatsuko did it before me. What my foot was trying to do, Hatsuko's foot did" (175).

"I felt as if...my hands and feet were invaded by Hatsuko's hands and feet" (175).

"The details of that part of her which resembled me gathered to my consciousness like distinct black spots" (176).

"I felt secretly that Hatsuko had begun to follow me even in such perceptions" (176).

"As if looking at the image of myself in a large mirror placed before me, I, sitting in the back, gazed at Hatsuko" (179).

"While I was feeling that Hatsuko had come to resemble me even in her smell..." (181).

"I was forced to smell my body smell even in places where I had not gone. I was forced to have the strange feeling of encountering my body smell outside of myself" (182).

"Hatsuko suddenly became feminine and like me" (182).

"How eerie, I thought in bed, that while I am lying here like this another me is walking around me..." (183).

"But Hatsuko had stolen from me the woman whom although longing for I had locked up..." (188).

"I had no way of taking back myself which was taken away by Hatsuko" (189).

7. What is the significance of the reference to Noh masks in the story?

Possible answer: Noh masks imply the covering up of one's true personality or the adoption of a role that obscures reality and allows the "actor" to perform an act that may or may not correspond to their true feelings. Akiko notes that behind this "mask" lies emotions too strong to voice "I remember quite well the Shakumi mask which expresses the middle-aged woman...the mask itself was expressionless. The reason why it had to be expressionless is that it contained overflowing emotions inside" (171). Hatsuko, too, comments on her mother's seemingly indifferent attitude toward her. She was always aware that some emotions existed, but she was never able to crack the mask that Akiko put up "Your face was like that of a Noh mask. As the boat swayed...a certain vivid emotion seemed to appear on it, but your face kept its overall expressionlessness" (169). Whether this mask was adopted as a

defense mechanism or a way to outwardly make up for her dark internal thoughts, is up to the reader's interpretation. However, considering social restraints placed on mothers and cultural expectations for women, it is not surprising that this type of mask would be adopted to compensate for emotions that were too subversive to voice.

8. What fantasies of violence does Akiko indulge in? To what end?

Possible answer: The fantasies of Hatsuko being eaten by a shark and "shooting" Hatsuko with a pencil allow Akiko to express her sexual anger, frustration, and subversive feelings of maternal hatred and jealousy. Akiko feels that she is being persecuted by her double and these fantasies allow her to take control and mimic the destruction of her double, the thief of her identity, body, and sexuality. Akiko narrates these scenes with raw, impersonal prose which enhances the unsettling feelings the reader experiences. Unable to fully express her anger, fear, or frustration, Akiko uses these fantasies as an outlet for the oppression she feels at her position as mother and wife. Since these fantasies occur within her mind she is not violating any actual taboos. However, because of the first person narration and the style of psychological realism used, the reader feels as if they are a witness to a gruesome desire on the part of a mother to destroy or see her child destroyed.

9. In what ways does Akiko seem constrained by the traditional Japanese family structure she has married into?

Possible answer: Virilocal marriage, as Andra Alvis notes in "Fantasies of Maternal Ambivalence in Takahashi Takako's 'Congruent Figures'," often prevented intimacy between husband and wife because the wife's primary role was pleasing her in-laws, not her husband. Alvis argues that women were distanced from their husbands, thus inadvertently encouraging extramarital affairs (for men) that were condoned by the family. For women, however, extramarital affairs were punishable by law. This could explain not only Akiko's emotional frustration, but also her feelings of sexual frustration caused by restricted sexuality and a weak marital bond. Within this system, women would often divert hostility away from their in-laws, instead transferring that hostility to their daughters. In this way, they did not threaten the familial system they were a part of, but were still allowed to vent their frustrations. Alvis also argues that mothers may have intentionally distanced themselves from their daughters because they were raising them to become daughter-in-laws. Within the story Akiko's relationship to her husband, her sister-in-law, and her late mother-in-law are fraught with frustration. Akiko has essentially become her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law says as much, causing Akiko to feel antagonism not toward her patronizing sister-in-law, but toward Hatsuko. Various quotes could be used to support this answer. For example, "I have not lived in a carefree way; I have been managing this old house, which has been in the family for several generations, according to the instructions of my mother-in-law...I am confident that by this time I have tamed every visible and invisible thing which I inherited from my mother-in-law" (173). Within this passage the sister-in-law represents modern ideas of marriage, while Akiko is left to the old system as a reminder of how times have changed. Akiko remains part of the cycle by taking over her mother-in-law's home while caring for her husband and children. The strained relationship with her husband is visible in the exchange at the family dinner table. Akiko contradicts Hatsuko and her husband takes Hatsuko's side

while he “cast a weak smile at me” (172). This alienation is again evident in the family outing on the boat “Before me there was a picture of happiness framed by the melting lights of the sky and sea. Since it was before me, it did not include me” (178). While Hatsuko jokes with her father and brother, Akiko is left on the sidelines. She does not appear to have a strong relationship with anyone in her home, only a growing antagonism toward her daughter, her role as mother, and her stagnant place within the family system.

10. How is this story a rejection of Meiji-era notions of motherhood?

Possible answer: “Congruent Figures” directly confronts the idea that women should be nurturers to their children. Takahashi refutes the idea of maternal love through the character of the old woman who says, “...where can you find maternal love? It is nothing but an illusion manufactured by men” (191). Takahashi also alludes to the fact that she is not unique in her feelings toward her daughter “It was an emotion which all the mothers of this world must have felt about their daughters” (170). Whereas Meiji period expectations toward women focused on their role as devoted mothers dedicated to nurturing their young, Takahashi highlights the flaws in this system which erases a mother’s sexual identity by denying women a sexual or emotional outlet within the family structure. Takahashi gives agency back to Akiko by allowing her to indulge in fantasies of sexuality and violence. As a first person narration, Akiko’s inner thoughts are delivered to the reader who is also allowed to see events from her point of view. Instead of events being seen through a patriarchal lens, Takahashi opens up a space in which women are free to give vent to their desires and frustrations. In this way she forcefully lays bare the contradictions that exist between being a mother and an individual.

Activities

Day 1: The instructor will give a background lecture on Japanese family structures, psychological realism, and other elements of Japanese culture needed to understand “Congruent Figures.” Images can be found in appendix A. The presentation will provide context for the reading of “Congruent Figures” and open up a space for students to ask questions and become more invested in their reading. Short video clips illustrating Japanese homes and customs may be included as cultural background. Students will also begin reading “Congruent Figures” in class. The reading can take place as a whole class, in small reading groups, or as silent, individual reading.

Day 2: Finish reading “Congruent Figures” in class (I have found that for reluctant or struggling readers, reading in class allows them to achieve a greater understanding of the text. Reading in class also allows students to receive immediate feedback on any questions they may have). Students will also complete comprehension questions in small groups, focusing on providing textual evidence for all answers. Answers that do not cite specific examples from the text will not be accepted.

Day 3: Students will complete the seed card/speed dating activity outlined in appendix B. For this activity each student will be given a card that contains questions and quotes from the text. Students will be arranged in rows facing one another to facilitate discussion. Each pair of students will share their cards and engage in a discussion about specific parts of the text (students

should take a copy of the story with them for reference). After 4-5 minutes, one row will be asked to move one seat to the left, thus leaving each pair with a new partner. When students move into a new pair group, they should also exchange cards so that they will have a new card each time (this allows students to discuss a new card each time, while hearing a new perspective on their previous card). Students should allow their partner to speak before jumping into a discussion. The time for this activity will vary depending on the number of students in each class and the quality of discussion. After you have determined that students have successfully completed the activity, students should return the room to normal and prepare for a whole class discussion. At this point, each student should be given a complete list of the “seeds” so that they can see all discussion points even if they did not have a chance to interact with a particular “seed.” A whole class discussion can help clear up any lingering questions or areas of confusion. Students could then be asked to write a one-page reflection on the story for homework that incorporates their pair and classroom discussions.

Day 4: Symbolism worksheet and poster activity. Students are given a copy of the handout in Appendix C and arranged into pairs or threes. Students work in their groups to complete the sheet. After students have finished, they will be asked to create a poster that explains the story symbolically. They will not be allowed to use written words on their poster. Posters should be creative and use symbolism to represent the main themes of the story. Students will display their work on large Post-Its in the room and participate in a gallery walk so they will have the opportunity to see everyone’s project. Students will then present on their work and explain their reasons for choosing certain symbols. This activity could be done in one block or be divided up into two days of 43 minute classes.

Day 5: Students will engage with the theme of Japanese motherhood through a close reading of translated poetry by Japanese women. There are a total of five poems and groups of 3-4 students will be given one of the poems to work on in class. They will use the handout in appendix D as a guide in their analysis. This activity will culminate in a class presentation in which students will present their poem to the class. Student presentation should include: copies of the poem for their classmates (at the end of the presentations, students should have copies of all five poems); a brief cultural and historical context for the poem that includes elements that may have influenced the poet and her writing; a brief overview of the (possible) meaning(s) of the poem; an analysis of the literary elements used by the poet (alliteration, imagery, metaphors, analogies, etc.); and the students’ reaction to the poem and how it ties into what they have read about motherhood in Japanese culture (they should tie in connections to the presentation on day one about attitudes toward motherhood in modern Japan, as well as Takahashi Takako’s “Congruent Figures”). There is an optional writing extension for this activity that can be assigned for homework. The extension asks students to imagine that they are responsible for writing an introduction to a collection of Japanese poems on the theme of motherhood. Using their poem as an example, they need to decide what literary elements, context, and general cultural information they should include in order to help the reader understand the collection of poetry. Students should be shown examples of poetry introductions for ideas and structure prior to writing.

Day 6: This day can be used for poetry analysis presentations and the remaining class time can be used to prepare for a culminating Socratic seminar. In order to prepare for the Socratic seminar students are asked to record quotes, questions, and any areas of confusion for class

discussion. Each student must come prepared with at least five questions (questions cannot be simple yes/no questions or questions that are plot based) and five quotes. Depending on the size of the class, students may all be in the inner circle or they can be divided into an inner and outer circle. In the latter case, students in the inner circle are responsible for the class discussion, while students in the outer circle are responsible for taking notes and providing feedback on a classmate's performance in the inner circle. For feedback and as a template for drafting questions early in the year, I use the documents created by The Northwest Association for Biomedical Research (NWABR). Their website has detailed Socratic seminar instructions and a blank template for drafting questions and evaluating classmates that I have found to be very helpful. This document can be found at: <https://www.nwabr.org/sites/default/files/SocSem.pdf> (see citation page for full citation). I often print out these documents and use them as a guide to get younger students and reluctant or struggling readers involved. By providing students with examples of upper level questions and the criteria for evaluation, students are aware of my expectations well in advance of the seminar itself.

Day 7: Socratic Seminar (fishbowl adaptation). Before students enter the room, desks should be arranged into two circles, one inside the other. Students are randomly assigned to an inner or outer circle seat as they enter. Students in the inner circle must show the instructor the quotes and questions they prepared the night before. Failure to complete this step will result in an automatic zero for the assignment. Students in the outer circle must also show their quotes and questions to receive credit. In addition, students in the outer circle are given a document for evaluating a specific classmate's performance in the inner circle. Students in the outer circle are paired with students in the inner circle at the instructor's discretion. If there are an odd number of students, someone in the outer circle may be responsible for two students. Students in the inner circle are responsible for initiating conversation and controlling the flow of dialogue among students. One student in the inner circle may be appointed as the discussion leader. Their role is to move the conversation along should it begin to wane. In some versions there is an appointed "hot seat" that allows a student in the outer circle to temporarily place themselves in the inner circle discussion. In past Socratic seminars I have placed myself in the outer circle as an observer. I do not involve myself in the conversation at all unless students begin to struggle to the point that conversation has stopped or is no longer pertinent to the topic at hand. Students are given 38 minutes to discuss the book and 5 minutes to debrief with their partner. Students must participate in some capacity. Failure to participate will result in a grade of zero regardless of preparation. I keep track of student participation by using a circle chart in which I label the circle with students' names and keep track of how many times they speak and relevant points made in the conversation. Students will not receive a passing grade if they talk just to hear themselves talk. Their discussion should be anchored in the text and their arguments must be backed up by concrete examples and supporting quotes from the text.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Images for Day 1 Lecture/Background Introduction (For full image citations see works cited page)

Motherhood



Uemura Shoen. *Mother and Child*, 1934

Noh Mask



Yamaguchi Bidou. *Zo-onna (Middle-Age Woman)*. 1998.



Michael Lyons. Edo-period Magojiro mask at 13 different vertical inclinations.

Persimmon Tree



Japanese Persimmon. Digital image. *Easybloom*. Plantsense, n.d. Web. 23 July 2015.



Fuyu (Jiro) Persimmon. Digital image. *SmugMug*. Creators Palette, n.d. Web. 23 July 2015.

Appendix B

Possible Seeds for “Congruent Figures”

1. Speculate about why the author includes these references to trees, flowers, and nature:

- Persimmon leaves scattered across the entrance to Akiko’s home.
- Colorful and distinct persimmon leaves
- “If given a chance it could have bloomed into a large flower spreading wide its pink petals and wafting around a sweet fragrance” (186)
- “It existed inside of me without shrinking or withering...containing a still richer fragrance precisely because it could not bloom fully” (186)
- The autumn wind “had blown all through the night, and the voice of the forest in back of the house, as if weeping or panting hard, continued to stir the deep layers of darkness” (168)
- “The cloudy heavens became dyed red around the western mountains” (192)
- “It looked as if the sky had a deep wound at one end from which blood was seeping to cover the whole sky” (192)
- The exchange of persimmon fruit between Akiko and Hatsuko at the end of the story.

2. Describe the tone of the following passage:

“I who was disliked by mother without knowing why,’ Hatsuko had written. She could not have known the reason, for I made it my task to hide it from her. Since Hatsuko was sensitive like me, I had to be perfect in hiding it from her. Poor Hatsuko. But I was trying as hard as I could. As hard as I could? Trying hard not to climb up the numbers of plus but to run down the numbers of minus--what does it mean to try hard for something which leaves only a sterile wasteland inside me?” (180).

3. Make some determinations about the old woman based on the following details from the text

- “The old woman came on, looking straight at me and Hatsuko. he had an air of arrogance which indicated she did not consider such a gaze to be impolite” (185)
- “The old woman stopped right in front of us, making a sound like a sigh” (185)
- “She was living separately from her family in a dilapidated house at the foot of the mountain” (185)
- “She was called a crazy old woman...” (185)
- “It’s better that two similar ones do not stay together. It’s inviting trouble”(185-6)
- “I felt that that ugly, shrunken body contained an ominous power to see through the mind of others...I fled, afraid of having anything to do with that power” (186)
- “It’s the face of mother in general...it was the blood of women, look there is a limitless amount...it is transmitted to the woman who comes out of your stomach, then to another woman...and what is transmitted is woman’s karma, here try to scoop it, where can you find maternal love? It is nothing but an illusion manufactured by men. Look, look, there, there is only blood, why is there such a thing?” (190-91)

4. What do you make of the multitude of references to blood?

- ...it was the blood of women, look there is a limitless amount...it is transmitted to the woman who comes out of your stomach, then to another woman...and what is

transmitted is woman's karma, here try to scoop it... look, there, there is only blood, why is there such a thing?" (190-91)

- "The same blood as mine was running through that body, I felt with a strong, sure feeling I had not felt before" (180)
- "It looked as if the sky had a wound at one end from which blood was seeping to cover the whole sky" (192)
- "Because I happened to bear Hatsuko, my blood ran in her, and since Hatsuko bore Misako, my blood continued to run even in Misako" (193)
- "I could see before my eyes a vision of Hatsuko's body, swallowed by its sharp, wide-open mouth, shining more vividly red than in reality" (180)
- Hatsuko's menstruation
- "The artery was cut...the spray of blood made a veil between the old woman and me" (191)

5. Several times the narrator engages in violent fantasies about Hatsuko either dying or being killed. Analyze the scenes with the shark and the pencil, especially in connection to Akiko's feelings of jealousy.

6. According to Andra Alvis, Akiko perceives Hatsuko as a "vampire-like' double who mirrors and mimics the heroine [Akiko] and thus subverts her identity" (63). Akiko feels that Hatsuko is sucking out her life force. How does this image relate to Akiko's overall feeling toward Hatsuko? How do these feelings contradict the Meiji period notions of motherhood and maternal love?

7. Speculate as to why the author includes these references to Noh masks:

- "Have you ever taken a Noh mask in your hands and looked at it? It is very strange. When I hold the mask in both hands and gaze at it from the front, it does not have any expression. Yet shifting the mask...makes some emotion appear vividly on it" (169)
- Each time the angle is changed slightly something emerges, but its existence is only hinted at and the mask returns to its former expressionlessness---indeed, the Noh mask is strange" (169)
- "Your face was like that of a Noh mask..." (169)
- I remember quite well the Shakumi mask, which expresses the middle-aged woman...while the mask looked as if it were smiling, sad, angry, afraid, or mad, it neither smiled, nor was sad, nor angry, nor afraid, nor mad. The mask itself was expressionless. The reason why it had to be so expressionless is that it contained overflowing emotions inside" (171).

8. Akiko reflects on her physical appearance after the visit from her sister-in-law saying, "I thought I could have lived with such a face. My sister-in-law was a woman who had chosen such a life. But I did not do so...Yet I did think about the gorgeous woman which had been crushed inside of me" (186). Following this observation she says, "If given a chance I could have bloomed into a large flower spreading wide its pink petals and wafting around a sweet fragrance. Such a flower which could not bloom existed inside of me. It existed inside of me without shrinking or withering, no, containing a still richer fragrance precisely because it could not bloom fully" (186). Looking beyond the obvious, what metaphor is being created here, and how does it relate to the rest of the story?

9. Is it possible to infer that Akiko and her husband and in-laws do not have a close relationship? What evidence can be used to support this assertion? How is this relationship significant to the theme of the story? What is the connection between this relationship and the traditional *ie* family system?

10. What do you make of the references to water and waves?

11. Discuss the role of the flashbacks in the structure of the text.

12. Several times the narrator experiences herself outside of herself. Analyze the significance from the following excerpts:

- “I felt that there was a miniature me beside me” (173)
- “I felt as if the contents of my body flowed out in large quantities from its external structure while my hands and feet surely remained...” (175)
- “I was forced to smell my body smell even in places where I had not gone. I was forced to have the strange feeling of encountering my body smell outside of myself” (182)
- “How eerie, I thought in bed, that while I am lying here like this another me is walking around me and talking to the peasant woman” (183)
- “I had no way of taking back my self which was taken away by Hatsuko” (189)
- “But the lower part of Hatsuko’s body has already fallen into the water...” (189). Reference page 189 for the full passage.
- “I opened my awakened eyes feeling as if I were watching myself in the past” (192)

13. Akiko dreams of the old woman who says “...where can you find maternal love? It is nothing but an illusion manufactured by men” (191). What overall message is Takahashi Takako making about the institution of motherhood in modern Japan?

14. Read the following excerpt from the story:

“Where are you going?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“What’s that dress for?”

“Where are you going yourself, mother?”

I realized that although I had applied the lipstick meaning to wipe it off immediately, I had come out carelessly forgetting to do it.

“Since we have a guest--” I said, quite disconcerted.

What is the underlying subtext of this passage?

15. Akiko has a dream in which the old woman offers her a copper mirror and urges her to look into it. While looking in the mirror Akiko notes, “My face was reflected in vague outline on the dull surface. While I stared at it the face began gradually to change. Or should I say that from behind the blue-brown surface of the mirror a strange, unfamiliar face emerged vaguely, and it

overlapped my face. The face which revealed itself contained anger” (190). The old woman tells her that it is “the face of mother...the face of mother in general” (190). How can this brief encounter with the old woman be seen as a critique of motherhood? What is the symbolic significance of the mirror?

16. When Akiko and her daughter and granddaughter meet at the end of the story, the encounter is punctuated by brief snippets of dialogue. Read the following excerpts and speculate on the relationship between Akiko and Hatsuko. Has it changed? Is it the same? Do they see each other in the same terms as in the letter Hatsuko writes to her mother?

- “Here, I’ll throw a persimmon” (192)
- “Am I not good?” (192)
- “This is your grandmother...”
“I don’t like to be called such.”

“You think you are still young?”

“I have aged all right. (192-3)
- “So it was a girl” (193)
- “Take her in your arms once” (193).
- ““She looks like me, doesn’t she?” Hatsuko said” (193)
- “You too bore a girl” (193)

17. As the narrator sees her daughter for the first time in four years she says, “I opened my awakened eyes feeling as if I were watching myself in the past. I must have looked like that when over twenty years ago I walked this road holding Hatsuko” (192). What type of awakening does the narrator have and how does it tie into the story of the relationship between Akiko and Hatsuko?

How does the title tie into the theme of motherhood?

3. In your own words, paraphrase the content of the poem.

4. What meaning can you gain from reading this poem? Think figuratively as well as literally as you answer the following questions:

* Who/what is the subject of the poem?

* What is the main idea of the poem? _____

* Why do you think the author wrote the poem?

* What is happening during the poem?

* What is the setting of the poem? _____

5. What is the poet's attitude toward her subject? Angry? Serious? Funny? Mocking? Thoughtful?

Cite specific words, phrases, and lines from the poem to support your answer to the question above.

6. Identify the theme (main idea) of the poem. How does the theme convey the poem's meaning?

7. Review your answers to the above questions. How has your understanding of the poem changed since your initial reading?

8. Find information about your author online and list important experiences that may have influenced the author's life and work.

*

*

*

9. List at least two circumstances in the author's country that influenced his/her life (feminism, poverty, politics, lack of opportunities, traditional constraints placed on women, tradition, warfare, etc.):

*

*

Presentation:

Your presentation should include the following elements:

- * Copies of your poem for each of your classmates.
- * Brief cultural and historical context for the poem that includes elements that may have influenced the poet and her writing.
- * A brief overview of the (possible) meaning(s) of the poem.
- * A brief analysis of the literary elements used/omitted by the poet (alliteration, imagery, metaphors, analogies, etc.)
- * Your reaction to the poem and how it ties into what you have read about motherhood in Japanese culture (you should tie in connections to our presentation on attitudes toward motherhood in modern Japan, Takahashi Takako's "Congruent Figures").

Writing Extension: Analysis Draft

Imagine that you are responsible for writing an introduction to a collection of Japanese poems on the theme of motherhood. Using your poem as an example, what themes, context, and general cultural information should you give the reader to help them understand the collection of poetry?

ON A DAY WITH A GENTLE BREEZE

Kiyoko Nagase

*

You arrived on a day with a gentle breeze
crying suddenly as if you came rolling out of the heavens
All of a sudden, at that moment, inside me
rose up the roar of a lioness,
“I will endure anything for you!”

*

A baby recalls its heavenly friends
though its eyes do not see well yet
It smiles gently in the morning light
the way an empty swing
sways slightly in the breeze

*

It looks like the start of a hot day.
Golden dewdrops have formed on the bamboo leaves outside my window.
I am recovering day by day.
Looking forward to happy days when I can work
I rest for now, a clear pool of time

*

You come to me and suckle
like a little fish
picking at a lotus leaf

*

You cast a green shade
over my solitary life
like a readily swaying maple branch
arching outside my window –
just a shapeless flickering light
yet you bring me thoughts of infinity
With a few beautiful words
and a soft loving gaze
you glue my solitary life
to this world

KILLING KANOKO
Hiromi Ito

About this time three years ago
My close friend “Hiromi”-san’s motive for jumping to her death
was
“man-problems”
supposedly, but
“athlete’s foot”
seemed to have been
troubling her as well
Which is why “Hiromi”-san
meticulously hid the “athlete’s foot” on her toes with socks
Put on a pair of jeans
jumped
threw herself down
on the ground
The dead legs
of a quite attractive twenty-four year old woman
the belly into two
Even now, three years later I can’t help but picture it
Not that I even saw it but
dead legs, belly in two
dead legs, belly in two
Congratulations on your destruction
I lost it, my temper
slammed Kanoko’s (six month) head
with the alarm clock that was close at hand
and Kanoko fell limp
wouldn’t flinch at all
even when I called and shook and hit her
I killed her I’ve done a terrible thing, I thought
got scared
left her just like that
and went out
When I returned home in about two hours
she appeared dead, as I had so feared
and black ants were swarming all over her body
and from where I had first placed her
she seemed to have moved just a tiny bit
And so I found struggling on the road
a sparrow
It was so very hot out and
rather than leave it on the parched road, I thought
first, to place it on the damp part on the side of the road
but it was still a road
and it had nowhere to hide, was still in danger, I thought

at least
the dirt
a place with some grass, I thought
and found such a place and put the sparrow there
and then stopped to take a look on my way home
Congratulations on your destruction
Well, it seems
before I saw the sparrow
I had noticed all the ants nearby
but it didn't occur to me there would be a connection
The sparrow, excepting its head
was crawling with ants
steadily making their way right up to its head
The sparrow was moving
its featherless wing, the flesh exposed
tense
was crying
while trying to escape the ants all over its body but
Congratulations on your destruction
Congratulations on your destruction
I
could touch the sparrow that was not teeming with ants but
could not touch the sparrow that was teeming with ants
Without doing a thing
I got out of there
Of course I am directly responsible
but somehow
I associated it with
Kanoko, teeming with ants and
discarded
It's not that I am afraid of Kanoko
It's the teeming immensity of the ants that scare me
Congratulations on your destruction
Congratulations on your destruction
Congratulations on your destruction
Congratulations on your destruction

BAD BREAST

Hiromi Ito

Hot winds blew
Plants flourish
Insects propagate
High temperatures, high humidity
Plants flourish
Insects propagate
In the tropical low pressure
The rain forms white whorls
Plants flourish
I am tying up things for my move
I am all tied up
All parts of my bound body
Transform
Into breasts
Insects flourish
Breasts so swollen in the morning
They can hardly be sucked dry
Are sucked unceasingly
By night, they shrivel
Bearing nothing more

Sucking insincerity
Sucking me

Sucking unceasingly
Sucking me who withers and goes dry
Sucking insincerity

...

From the good breast
To the bad breast
The babies plot revenge
On the bad breast

...

MOTHER
Kiyoko Nagase

I am always aware of my mother,
Ominous, threatening,
A pain in the depths of my consciousness.
My mother is like a shell,
So easily broken.
Yet the fact that I was born
Bearing my mother's shadow
Cannot be changed.
She is like a cherished, bitter dream
My nerves cannot forget
Even after I am awake.
She prevents all freedom of movement.
If I move she quickly breaks
And the splinters stab me.

Story of My Life (Excerpt)

Hiromi Ito

Dad and Mum
And midwife, too
Any tipster or tout or whoever
Bet it was going to be a boy
So I desperately broke the placenta
As a girl

Then
Everybody was disappointed
So I decided I would become a boy
Then
Everybody praised me
So I became a girl
Then
Everybody was mean to me
So I became a boy

Coming of age
Because my lover was a boy
I reluctantly became a girl (Ellis 101)