

“Congruent Figures” (Takahashi Takako)

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Grade: 11
Subject: IB English Literature HL Year One
Time: Five 40-minute class periods

Lesson Objectives:

Students will be introduced to psychological realism in modern Japanese fiction, the work of Takahashi Takako in particular, and the traditional Japanese family structure, *ie*. They will learn the basic terms associated with defining psychological realism, as well as unfamiliar concepts (such as Noh masks) necessary to understanding the patterns of symbolism in the story.

Students will read and understand Takahashi's story "Congruent Figures" from the perspectives of psychological realism, Jungian and Freudian readings, and from their own unique perspectives as readers. They will use their visceral reactions to the text in order to analyze symbolism, point of view, and character sympathy in the story. They will also use their critical powers as readers to evaluate the text, especially to explore how Takahashi fulfills the intentions of a psychological realist writer.

Ultimately, students will synthesize the text in order to develop an argument in response to the following question: Is Akiko a sympathetic character? Why or why not? Students will then engage in a whole-class, modified Lincoln-Douglas debate in order to explore the affirmative and negative positions in response to this question. As a result of our discussions of the text and the debate, as well as their initial responses to this question of character sympathy, students will understand that Takahashi's story is a nuanced portrayal of a complex, and thus a richly human, character. Finally, students will be able to reflect on their own learning in order to chart an evolution in their thinking about the text.

Summary:

Mrs. Akiko Matsuyama goes out one morning to get the mail. Upon picking up the one letter in the mailbox for her, she has the uncanny feeling that the handwriting is her own. The letter is, however, from her daughter Hatsuko, from whom she hasn't heard in a very long time. Hatsuko's letter announces the birth of her first child, but also addresses the distance between she and her mother: Hatsuko wonders why she has always felt disliked by Akiko. She recounts in her letter one day in particular: while on a family boat ride, Hatsuko saw a certain emotion flash in her mother's face, which soon receded into expressionlessness, like a Noh mask. Startled, Hatsuko stood up quickly, only to fall in the ocean. From that point forth, Hatsuko says, Akiko has always been cold to her. Hatsuko ends the letter by announcing her forthcoming visit, and her desire that Akiko meet her first grandchild.

Akiko muses on the day, but insists that she must go back earlier in time to explain the feelings she harbors towards her daughter. She remembers one day, when Hatsuko was a third-grader. During dinner, Hatsuko anticipated the words and actions of her mother, who was concerned about her husband's mood that day. Subsequently, Akiko was disturbed by her daughter's empathic resemblance to herself. She remembers another incident, when her sister-in-law, with whom she was in constant competition, was visiting. Akiko was irritated by her sister-in-law, but also surprised to find that Hatsuko's coldness towards her aunt didn't satisfy Akiko: it further irritated her to have Hatsuko seemingly mimic her displeasure.

Over the years, Akiko realizes that Hatsuko is like her in many ways: her mannerisms, her habits. She also realizes that this isn't simply unconscious imitation: there is something less perceptible going on, something deeper. Hatsuko even seems to mirror her mother's shortcomings, her competition with women and her duplicitousness, as a somewhat disturbing incident involving Hatsuko tripping a classmate at school reveals. Akiko gives her own accounting of the day on the boat with Hatsuko: Hatsuko's cruelty towards the girl at school forced Akiko to remember a childhood incident rather like it in her own life. It is this recognition of sameness that triggered the 'Noh-mask look' that sent Hatsuko falling into the ocean.

As Hatsuko matures sexually, Akiko becomes even more disturbed: even her daughter's smell is uncannily her own. One day, as Hatsuko and Akiko walk home, an old woman remarks upon their similar appearances, and insists that people so similar shouldn't be together. Later, in a dream, Akiko meets the old woman again, who shows her the mirror image of motherhood, and the blood of women, which flows from mother to daughter, but which does not contain maternal love.

Finally, the day of Hatsuko's visit arrives. Akiko meets her daughter again after their prolonged estrangement, and meets her granddaughter for the first time. Akiko's final thoughts are that Hatsuko will experience with her daughter exactly what Akiko experienced with Hatsuko.

Historical/Literary Context:

Takahashi Takako is writing in the Japanese tradition of psychological realism in the Showa period (1926-89). In the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa periods, spanning the years from 1868 to 1989, psychological realism is seen in literary revision, literary style, and social critique, respectively. The idealization or virtuous stereotypes seen in Edo-era literature are abandoned in psychological realism, as is overt stylization. Taisho psychological realist authors began to present their own feelings and subjective experiences, even embracing taboo topics/thoughts and irrationality. Psychological realism at this time is characterized by a rejection of "prettifying" content, as well as a rejection of conventional plot. In the Showa period, psychological realism becomes explicit social critique: thus, Takahashi's story actively rejects the social and cultural ideals associated with a perfect picture of motherhood (Alvis).

As for the traditional Japanese family structure that sets the stage for Takahashi's critique of motherhood, the *ie* system, as it's called, is a "multigenerational," "patrilineal" system. Under the *ie* system, "the greatest amount of tension was between the role of the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law," since "they are both strangers to the household" (Bestor). (Akiko even qualifies her ownership of the house by admitting "[she] inherited it" (Takahashi 173).) This tension figures significantly in Takahashi's story in both the overt competition between Akiko and her sister-in-law, as well as the possessiveness over the house that Akiko now feels (and feels as if she has to defend aggressively from encroachment). In addition, according to Helen Hardacre, "It is common for the mother [under the *ie* system] to bear the full responsibility for raising children, overseeing their education, and also managing the family's finances. This puts a heavy strain on Japanese women, and also a strain on the relation between the mother and the

child” (“Contemporary Japan: The Japanese Family”). As readers, we see Akiko “entering the figures in the home account book” (Takahashi 182) even while sick with a cold, of course raising Hatsuko and Masao, and even lamenting the life she could have lived if she had not been a mother and wife (“Such a flower which could not bloom existed inside of me” (Takahashi 186)).

Takako Takahashi was a wife and daughter-in-law, but not a mother. She was born in Kyoto in 1932. She majored in French literature while at Kyoto University in the 50s (her thesis was on Baudelaire) and soon after graduating married Takahashi Kazumi, a famous Japanese novelist. She began publishing short stories, including “Congruent Figures,” in the 1970s, and novels soon thereafter. In 1971, Takahashi’s husband died of cancer. In 1975, Takahashi converted to Catholicism, and in 1985, became a nun, entering a convent in Paris. During this time, she abandoned writing. After 1988, she returned to Japan and entered a convent of a different order (Morton). She eventually left the convent to take care of her sick mother, and never had any children (Alvis). Takahashi died in 2013 at the age of 81.

Discussion questions:

1.) What is the first example in the story of a similarity between Akiko and Hatsuko? Why is this significant to the story as a whole?

Akiko has a “strange feeling” (168) that the letter she finds in the mailbox was written in her own handwriting, or in “a handwriting with the same characteristics as my own” (169). This is the first example of the uncanny in the story, the eeriness that Akiko experiences when she has the feeling that her concept of self is disrupted as she sees it mirrored or replicated in her daughter.

2.) Why is Hatsuko returning home after such an extended absence?

Her husband has a business trip in the area and she wants Akiko to meet her grandchild.

3.) Why does Hatsuko make reference to traditional Japanese Noh masks? What does Akiko later say about the Shakumi mask in particular? How do masks function symbolically in the story? What connections can you make to what psychological realist writers were trying to do with their work?

Noh drama “portrays one all-encompassing emotion dominating the main character.” The masks used in the drama “raise the action out of the ordinary”: when the character puts on the mask, “his individuality recedes and he is nothing but the emotion to be depicted” (“Noh Drama: An Introduction to Noh”). Noh masks also “appear to change expression as the vertical inclination of the mask changes” (Lyons et al.). Hatsuko uses the Noh mask as a metaphor for the “certain vivid emotion” that “seemed to appear” on her mother’s face that fateful day on the boat, but which “kept its overall expressionlessness”: emotion is “only hinted at” (169). She knows that something is wrong with her mother, and that she is disliked for some reason, but the true reasons for Akiko’s feelings are kept hidden from her. Akiko later specifically references the “Shakumi mask which expresses the middle-aged woman”: “The reason why it had to be so expressionless is that it contained overflowing emotions inside” (171). As a psychological realist writer, Takahashi explores Akiko’s taboo feelings surrounding motherhood, but Akiko herself attempts (and somewhat fails) to hide her true emotions from her daughter. This metaphor of blank surfaces and turbulent depths also figures in the references to the bubbles in the swamp

(170), and the “illusion” of the ocean’s immobility or stagnation (171) on the day of the boat ride (we know what lies beneath). It’s also particularly interesting that Akiko references the mask of the middle-aged woman (Hatsuko doesn’t specify): there is the sense throughout the story (and many women would likely concur with this feeling) that Akiko is slowly disappearing as a woman. As her daughter becomes more vital and sexually mature, Akiko becomes more and more the mask of the middle-aged woman: allowed only to appear blank, forced to hide her true (and often disturbingly violent or sexual) feelings behind that mask.

4.) Describe Akiko’s relationship with her sister-in-law and its significance to the meaning of the story as a whole. How does the *ie* family system figure into this relationship?

Akiko feels as if her sister-in-law’s entire life is “a weapon to compete with me” (173). Akiko notes her “affected air,” her “pretentious [...] mannerism” (and, of course, the red lipstick). The sister-in-law is characterized by Akiko as a stuck-up urbanite, vainly concerned with the appearance of her eyebrows and with her fear of missing out while cooped up in the sticks (“I fear I would be left outside of the age” (173)). She is carefree and seemingly without the attachments of motherhood: she “do[esn’t] look like anyone else” (174), while of course Akiko is decidedly preoccupied with Hatsuko becoming more and more like her by the day. (Actually, the sister-in-law does like *her* mother, which is Akiko’s point.) Under the *ie* system, because Akiko took over her mother-in-law’s house, Akiko feels as if she is the inheritor of her mother-in-law’s spirit, in some ways more than her sister-in-law is. The competition with the sister-in-law mirrors Akiko’s competition with her daughter, and anticipates the competition between Hatsuko and the other girls at school for the attention of a popular teacher. In terms of the story as a whole, female competition is highlighted in a way that actively rejects the stereotypes of female camaraderie and cooperation. Rather, what we now know about the science of evolution rings true in Takahashi’s story. Akiko later looks at herself in the mirror and contrasts her appearance, the “gorgeous woman which had been crushed inside of me” (186), with her sister-in-law’s. Akiko is clearly envious of the sister-in-law’s seemingly easy and unburdened life, and is even more envious of her daughter’s growing beauty and usurpation of her mother as the sexual being in the household (again, a scientifically explicable feeling related to sexual competition).

5.) What does Hatsuko do at school that so disturbs her mother? Why is Akiko “hurt deeply” (179) by this incident? In what way(s) might this subvert the reader’s expectations for parental behavior (and in what way does this contribute to the psychologist realist social critique)?

Hatsuko becomes so caught up in a gaggle of girls bent on catching up with a popular young female instructor (the flip side of female competition?) that she purposefully trips a “lame girl” who is holding up the group. Then, she coldly and “unnaturally” denies her part in the incident and blames it on Sayoko. The description of Akiko’s automatic, bodily response (“Something like a midwinter chill ran over my spine” (177)) to her daughter’s cruel action and duplicity initially sounds like the ‘natural’ (I think Takahashi is playing with the meaning of this word) response of any parent: horror at the child’s independent will and capacity for cruelty. But it isn’t until after Akiko begins retelling the story of the day on the boat that we as readers understand the true reason for her emotions: she experienced something very similar as a child (cruelly blaming Yoshiko for her own mistake). Is Akiko’s horror because of her daughter’s treatment of a marginalized young girl and her subsequent denial of responsibility for

wrongdoing? Or is it rather that Hatsuko's action forces her "to be reminded so vividly of things that had happened" (179) in her own childhood? Perhaps it is a mixture of both, but because Akiko hardly seems to shrink from her own violent feelings towards her daughter—even though they are 'only' thoughts—I suspect that the horror is less 'moral' in nature and more elemental, primitive: it is, once again, the horror at seeing herself made manifest in another person who is still a separate entity from her. As a psychological realist writer, Takahashi explores the unspoken, taboo feelings of a parent who seems utterly unconcerned with disciplining her child for misbehavior—perhaps a critique of the model of parenthood as unassailable judge. Takahashi is more interested in plumbing the depths of flawed humanity.

6.) Explain the significance of smell to the meaning of the story as a whole. Catalogue as many references as you can to smell.

During Akiko's musings on her "early years of [...] marriage," she notes the "peculiar smell" of the house (180). The smell "made [her] think that the generation preceding [her] and the generation before that must have lived and died smelling the same smell": interestingly, this is one of many references in the story to the similar experiences of subsequent generations. In some ways, none of our experiences are completely unique: they have been lived already. In addition, the traditional *ie* family system dictates that Akiko enters her husband's house as a stranger (as her own mother-in-law once did): "When I came to the house, my sister-in-law was already married and only my mother-in-law and my husband were living here" (181). This explains, in part, Akiko's possessiveness over the 'young woman smell' that she had once brought into the house, and which her daughter is now exhibiting herself. This reference to the smell of the house during Akiko's reminiscence reminds the reader that Hatsuko also wrote about the smell of the house in her letter: "The soil which retains the familiar smell" even though she had been away from the house for six years. Perhaps also interesting is the fact that Hatsuko interrupts her own sentence here to interject that her mother is "standing on [the soil] as if to prevent [her] from feeling nostalgic" (170). (She feels the weight of her mother's feelings of possessiveness and insecurity, as well as the broader psychic link between the two.) We know that smell is the sense most closely associated with memory: both mother and daughter feel this instinctively. Akiko goes on to think about not just the smells of the house, but also the smells of the people in the house: Hatsuko, in her adolescence, begins to "resemble [Akiko] even in her smell" (181). She instinctually feels that Hatsuko must be close to sexual maturation, and she's right: "A month later, Hatsuko had her first period." The uncanny feeling that her smell is "outside of [herself]" (182) is haunting and interesting. I'm reminded of stories of people describing out-of-body experiences. As a reader of Oliver Sacks and other neurologists, I'm intrigued by the scientific basis for such sensations, but just as intrigued by the idea that parents experience this eeriness just by dint of being parents. What happens to your concept of self when you see it so vividly in another? Do you cease to exist in the same way? This eerie feeling returns when Akiko is sick in bed with a cold and feels that "while [she] is lying here like this another me is walking around" (183).

7.) What does Akiko do to the strands of hair (hers and Hatsuko's) and why does she do it?

Akiko remembers that "during the war [she] used to distinguish silk fiber from rayon staple fiber, which looked the same, by examining the way they shrank and their smell when burned" (182). She performs the same experiment on the strands of hair in order to try to force some sort of distinction between herself and her daughter, but she finds that the strands are identical. The

metaphor of the silk fiber versus the rayon fiber is further interesting because it suggests the idea of something that's 'real' versus something that's a 'counterfeit' or copy. Akiko feels as if she is the primary or real entity and her daughter is the copy, but of course, Akiko's mother likely felt the same way about her.

8.) Which character makes reference to the title of the story? What is this character's function or role in the story as a whole? Does Takahashi access a basic archetype with her use of this character? Explain.

The old woman Akiko and Hatsuko meet on a walk home one day tells Akiko that "The figures are the same even from the back" (185): these are the "congruent figures" to which the title refers. Akiko and Hatsuko cannot be distinguished from each other in a fundamental way. The "crazy old woman" who "frequently upset people by saying strange things" (185) functions as a kind of prophet: she's the Jungian Wise Old Woman or Crone. She tells Akiko that "It's better that two similar ones do not stay together" (185), and ultimately, Hatsuko does leave home for a very long time and distance herself from her mother. Akiko recognizes the old woman's wisdom: "I felt that that ugly, shrunken body contained an ominous power to see through the mind of others" (186). As readers, we get the sense that the old woman who says strange things that upset people is a sort of conduit for the exploration of taboo thoughts that Takahashi undertakes as a psychological realist writer: people actively resist painful truths, but certain wise voices feel compelled to bring these truths to light. Is there also something to the description of the old woman in Akiko's dream as "look[ing] from the back like she was walking with three legs" (190)? Not only is it a reference to the old woman's words about Akiko and Hatsuko: it is also reminiscent of the riddle of the Sphinx. Is the old woman the Tiresias character? Clearly, there are 'Electra' overtones to the story. Or, is the old woman appearing as if walking on three legs a reminder of mortality? Of the final usurpation that will occur when Akiko is no longer alive and her daughter fully comes into her own as a vital being (only to be usurped by *her* daughter)?

9.) Describe the author's use of point of view from pages 188-9. To what end does Takahashi play with perspective here? And what in the story prompts this departure?

Akiko imaginatively inhabiting the perspective of her daughter is emotionally anticipated by her earlier admission that the young master of the bakery "induced a coquettish feeling in [her]" (187). The glimmer of hope that Akiko can resurrect "the gorgeous woman which had been crushed inside of [her]" (186) is itself crushed once Akiko senses the "erotic atmosphere of which [Hatsuko] herself was unaware" (188). Akiko wiping off her lipstick symbolizes her realization that Hatsuko has completely usurped her as a sexual being. This is what sets the stage for Akiko imagining herself into the date between the young master and Hatsuko. Halfway through the paragraph, Akiko slips from discussing Hatsuko in the third-person to inhabiting the first-person perspective *as* Hatsuko: "But the lower part of Hatsuko's body has already fallen into the water. I remain still, for I feel it pleasant to have my body in the water. I look up at his eyes while he holds my arm" (189). The focus on the sensual in this paragraph is significant, as is the becoming of Hatsuko by Akiko: having been overtaken by her daughter (who now represents the sexual competition), it is almost as if Akiko must imagine herself into her daughter's body in order to derive the pleasure she seeks. The passage is also interesting because Akiko had resented the idea of her daughter becoming her: now, Akiko subconsciously embraces the idea of becoming her daughter, of losing her own body in her daughter's. This

reverie is, of course, finally shattered by Akiko's stark realization: "It was not me who went with the man. It was Hatsuko who went with him, leaving me" (189).

10.) What does the old woman tell Takahashi in her dream about "maternal love" (191)? Why is this significant to the meaning of the story as a whole? How does this further contribute to the psychological realist social critique?

After showing Akiko the image of her angry face in a mirror ("the face of mother itself in general" (190)), the old woman cuts the artery of her left wrist and, through the shower of blood, Akiko hears the old woman say that although blood connects women—mothers and daughters—maternal love is "nothing but an illusion manufactured by men" (191). Again, this seems to be Takahashi's own voice as psychological realist writer shining through, critiquing the banality of stereotypes about maternal love. Instead, she explores the gritty reality through the image of blood that suggests mothers and daughters are connected through genetic material and the general female experience, but that the relationship is complicated, fraught, and hardly sanguine.

11.) Explain the symbolic significance of the color red to the meaning of the story as a whole. Think about the archetypal associations with red. Catalogue as many examples as you can to support your answer.

There are, to begin with, many references to blood: 1.) the blood of ancestry that Akiko first mentions at the beginning of the story, which returns when Akiko dreams about the old woman (see above); quite literally, "the same blood" (180) runs through the veins of Akiko and Hatsuko, which connects them, but also provides the basis for conflict 2.) menstrual blood, which is a source of anxiety, not for Hatsuko, but for Akiko, who feels that it represents the maturation of Hatsuko that will complete the usurpation of her, especially as a sexual being 3.) the blood that "drained from [Akiko's] head" (176) when confronted with the realization that Hatsuko is like her mother even in the darkest and most horrifying ways. Akiko is *appalled* at the idea of her doppelganger; it is as if she has seen a ghost (and this isn't the only reference to ghosts in the story, either: Akiko is the ghost in the house when she is sick with a cold, as Hatsuko walks around vital and corporeal). 4.) the blood that Akiko imagines coming from the "wide-open mouth" of the shark that she subconsciously desires to consume Hatsuko 5.) the sky at the end of the story, which looks as if it "had a deep wound at one end from which blood was seeping to cover the whole sky" (192). Does this perhaps represent the primal wound of motherhood?

The red lipstick appears throughout the story to represent passion and sexuality, the biological plumage that women wear to attract men (scientifically, the subconscious signal of ovulation, etc.). Of course, the red lipstick of her sister-in-law annoys Akiko, but she later dons it herself in an effort to resurrect her other "face buried under the dark layers and layers of life" (186), to appear once again as a sexual being. Interestingly, the lipstick is covered in a layer of white mold (another white/ghostly/death reference: when Akiko meets the old woman again, on a "damp, cold day in early spring [...] the bare branches of the deciduous trees appeared white like bones" (185)): just as her youthful face is buried under layers and layers of life, so too is the lipstick covered, decaying. Ultimately, Akiko in her shame wipes off the lipstick after her realization that "the charming woman with lipstick I had seen in the mirror" (188) is not herself, but her daughter.

Similarly, the picture Akiko sees of her daughter when she is sick in bed is one that is illuminated by the red of the setting sun, but the “striking and vigorous” figure of Hatsuko is heightened “not by the setting sun but by the life inside her” (184). (And Akiko herself *is* that setting sun.)

The fire that Akiko uses to burn the hairs: perhaps the crucible for the test that Akiko attempts to distinguish her daughter from herself?

Finally, the red persimmon fruit and the leaves of the persimmon trees appear at the beginning and the end of the story. At the beginning of the story, it is autumn, and Akiko notes that the red leaves “were so vivid as to appear to have taken on color even after falling to the ground” (168). At the end of the story (October 24th, the day of Hatsuko’s visit), all of the leaves “had fallen off because of the typhoon a few days before” and “only the red persimmon fruit was clinging” (191). The traditional symbolism of the persimmon as representative of good fortune and joy (Seaton 40-1) or the Buddhist meanings related to the “three times (past, present, and future)” or the “‘fruits of the tree of plenty’ (abundance, maturity, and ripeness)” (Beer) all seem to apply to this story. Akiko picks persimmons—which are, perhaps, clinging to the tree as she is clinging to joy and youth—simply to “kill time” (JR 96/192): the irony there is staggering. Time is slipping away from Akiko, while Hatsuko has reached the pinnacle of maturity and ripeness (new motherhood). Autumn here means what it always means: transition, loss, and “what to make of a diminished thing” (Frost). Also present is the Buddhist idea of the impermanence or mutability of all things (Alvis).

12.) How does water function symbolically in the story?

Water is used as a symbol for the appearance of relative tranquility above and the true turbulence below (similar to the Noh mask). From the swamp that is occasionally disrupted by the bubbles of latent, detestable, taboo feelings, to the sharks that “may be” (178) swimming below the surface, ready to violently consummate Akiko’s darkest feelings, water has, in the story, the appearance that Akiko presents to the world, while also containing the deeper and more disturbing feelings that lie beneath the surface.

Elsewhere, the river in Akiko’s daydream about Hatsuko’s date seems to represent languid pleasure and, in this case, almost a positive out-of-body experience that previously discomfited Akiko.

13.) Why does Akiko choose to wear a kimono on the day of Hatsuko’s visit?

Ironically, Akiko deliberately wears a kimono because she “did not want to look like Hatsuko” (191) (usually, she wears dresses); however, Hatsuko arrives in a kimono (significantly with a “very red *obi* sash” (192)).

14.) How does the story end? How would you describe the overall structure of the story and how it shapes meaning as a whole?

The story ends with Akiko being “forced to take that heavy, damp, warm thing,” Hatsuko’s baby girl, in her arms. The diction here conveys Akiko’s palpable discomfort, and almost disgust: she even refers to the child by her “whine” and “carp-like mouth” (193). But the end of the story really solidifies the idea of the continuity of life (the structure of the story shapes this idea by

beginning and ending at roughly the same time, with the rest of the story composed of flashbacks): Akiko realizes that Hatsuko will struggle with the same conflict surrounding being a mother and having a daughter. For the first time, Akiko's anxiety seems to be more existential and less selfish (if that's possible). She no longer seems worried about being usurped by her daughter, since that has already happened: rather, she has the eerier feeling that she "will continue to expand limitlessly into the dark space of the future" (193) by continuing to exist through Hatsuko and her granddaughter, even after her death. A terrifying thought, indeed, which harkens back to the early part of the story and Akiko's imagined "swamp" filled with "corpses of [mothers'] ancestors" (171). Rather than deriving comfort from the idea of continuity or a kind of immortality through children, Takahashi's character sees the dark side of this, again subverting our assumptions as readers.

15.) Psychological realist authors embrace taboos and reject virtuous stereotypes. Overall, how does Takahashi reject stereotypes? Which ones? What taboo subjects does she address and how?

Takahashi allows Akiko to embrace violent thoughts about her daughter; she explores the idea that maternal love may be "nothing but an illusion manufactured by men"; the story features the image of an old woman bathing in the "red-black sticky secretion" of the "blood of women" (191), and Hatsuko's menstruation is almost an obsessive focus; Akiko sees and analyzes her daughter as an erotic object; she fantasizes about and figuratively acts out shooting her own daughter; she detests the feel of her own grandchild in her arms; etc. Overall, Takahashi develops a character who happens to be a mother, but has made no effort to see her daughter in many years, and whose musings on the past, on her daughter's childhood, are not the rose-tinted memories one would expect: rather, they focus almost exclusively on how her daughter makes *her* feel, and how her identity is threatened by this creature who looks, smells, and acts like her. That's what makes the story so compelling: Takahashi bravely gives us a main character with whom readers are unlikely to sympathize at first glance; but, if they are honest with themselves, they must ultimately acknowledge a kind of demented kinship with her. We are all subject to these dark feelings—the desire to annihilate a child or parent, uncomfortable sexual feelings, realizations about our own mortality—and this is a story that unflinchingly explores them.

Development of Lesson Objectives/Activities:

DAY ONE:

- 1.) Motivating Activity/Do Now: How would you describe your basic assumptions about how parents feel about their children (or how parents are *supposed to feel* about their children)? You could point to your own experiences, or examples from history, contemporary/pop culture, etc. (10-min. writing prompt)
- 2.) Elicit student responses and discuss. (10-15 min.)
- 3.) Introduce students to modern psychological realism in Japan, the traditional Japanese *ie* family structure, and a brief bio of Takahashi: lecture/PowerPoint. Highlight the fact that they are about to read a story in which certain basic assumptions about human relationships may be

upturned. Encourage them to think about which assumptions are upturned in the story and why Takahashi might be challenging these assumptions. (15-20 min.)

4.) Students will read the story for homework (I would likely assign this on a Friday so that they would have several nights to read and do the writing associated with the reading guide). (See Appendices A, B, and C for reading guide: essentially, modified dialectical responses.)

DAY TWO:

1.) Do Now: Turn and talk to a partner about one or two of the quotes you chose and your rationale for choosing them. (5-8 min.)

2.) Elicit student responses on imagery, symbolism, and archetypes first and begin a whole-class discussion on the text, using the discussion questions to guide a seminar-style exploration of the story. (20-5 min.) **NOTE: If the students overtake the discussion and you like where it is going, add one day to this lesson!

3.) Transition to a discussion of the question of Akiko's character. Conduct a poll of the class in response to the question outlined in Appendix B: Is Akiko a sympathetic character? (Teachers may decide to use Google Classroom technology to facilitate this poll. This could be a very quick, informal poll, or it could take the form of a "four corners" activity (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) to allow for subtleties of opinion.) (5 min.)

4.) Briefly introduce the debate and the purpose of the debate: to explore not only our personal responses to the text, but also the complexity of Akiko's character, as well as Takahashi's intentions as a psychological realist writer and the cultural context for the story. (2-3 min.)

DAY THREE:

1.) Do Now: Anticipate the counterargument to your argument at this point: What might someone say to contradict the opinion you hold at this point about Akiko based on your initial reading of the text? How would you respond to that person and defend your position? (10-min. writing prompt) Tell students that this warm-up activity is designed to get them thinking about both sides of this question, since they will be randomly assigned to a team and may be forced to play devil's advocate.

2.) Divide the class in half, e.g. by counting off. (Note: this will depend on the number of students in class. I have done whole-class debates successfully when there are no more than 8-10 students on each side. In a 40-minute class period, this gives time for each student in the class to participate orally in the debate.) (5 min.)

3.) Explain the structure and requirements of the modified Lincoln-Douglas debate (see Appendix C). Briefly discuss this kind of debate as an exploration of a moral/ethical question, since ultimately I'm interested in engaging students with the question of Akiko's character, as well as Takahashi's exploration of taboos and readers' explorations of their own feelings about maternal love and child as competitor with parent, etc. (5-8 min.)

4.) The rest of the class period should be spent in preparation for the debate, which will be conducted on the fifth day of the lesson.

DAY FOUR:

1.) Debate prep: each team must submit a polished thesis statement (essentially, the prepared introduction to the team's position) at the end of the class period. Additionally, each individual student must submit the two to three points that s/he plans/hopes to make during the debate. This must include a quote from the text that supports the point. Teams should spend time planning and practicing their presentations. (40 min.)

DAY FIVE:

1.) Facilitate the (roughly 40-minute) debate. Structure and timing below (teacher will act as timekeeper). For specific guidelines for students, see Appendix D:

- I. **Introduction/Thesis:** Affirmative (2 min.)
- II. **Introduction/Thesis:** Negative (2 min.)
- III. **Supporting Evidence:** Affirmative (10 min.)
- IV. **Supporting Evidence:** Negative (10 min.)
- (Break for rebuttal prep: 3 min.)
- V. **Rebuttal:** Affirmative (3 min.)
- VI. **Rebuttal:** Negative (3 min.)
- VII. **Conclusion:** Affirmative (2 min.)
- VIII. **Conclusion:** Negative (2 min.)

2.) Homework/Reflection Assignment: Give students perhaps several days to reflect upon the debate and their takeaways from the story, and ask them to complete a 300-400 word written reflection (modeled after the IB English HL Written Assignment Reflective Statement) (see Appendix E).

Connections to Other Literary Works:

There are several texts already on our IB English HL Year One book list that could be connected to "Congruent Figures" thematically: *Frankenstein* and *Medea* are perhaps more obvious connections, but I also see how *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is an interesting pairing. We spend a lot of time during our study of *Frankenstein* discussing the relationships between parents and children (and reading and analyzing portions of *Paradise Lost* to establish Shelley's inspiration for her creator/creation relationship): in fact, I would probably plan on teaching "Congruent Figures" directly after reading and studying *Frankenstein*. Freud's ideas on the uncanny, doppelgangers, and taboo (which I already teach as they relate to *Frankenstein*) figure significantly in this story. As for *Medea*, we spend a lot of time exploring the natural feelings of pity and fear that emerge from the tragedy, but also the embedded critiques of the position of women in Greek society. Yes, *Medea* is morally abhorrent for killing her children, but her early speeches in the play highlight her and other women's powerlessness against men, the physical

and emotional pain of childbirth and child rearing, her status as an outsider, etc. This becomes an interesting conversation with teenagers, who live in a world with many more choices for women. As with *Medea*, we also explore the complicated picture of gender that readers find in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The debate portion of this lesson actually mirrors an activity I already do with Kesey's novel. On their first read, teenagers have strong feelings, and *sometimes*, reductive opinions, about these characters (i.e. Medea is crazy; Nurse Ratched is evil). The debate format (for *Cuckoo's Nest*, the question is: Is Nurse Ratched evil or a misunderstood antagonist?), as well as the fact that I don't let students choose which side they will argue, encourages them to see the complexities inherent in the text. I think this is the thread that connects "Congruent Figures" to texts like *Medea* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*: we can no more reduce Akiko to the stereotype of "bad mother" than we can reduce Medea to "crazy" killer or Ratched to "evil" emasculator.

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Appendix A

Reading Guide for “Congruent Figures” Imagery and Symbolism

Your task: Read and annotate “Congruent Figures” for meaning and for how the author’s use of literary devices/elements shapes meaning. Then, choose **three quotes** from your annotations that feature a striking image. Analyze each quote that you’ve highlighted in your text in the space below. Why is it striking? How does the image contribute to meaning or mood? Is the image part of a symbolic pattern in the story? If so, what does the object represent? And why might it be important to the meaning of the story as a whole?

1.)

2.)

3.)

Appendix B

Reading Guide for “Congruent Figures” Characterization

Your task: Choose **three quotes** from the text that you think best support your answer to this question. Analyze each quote that you’ve highlighted in your text in the space below:

***Is Akiko a sympathetic character? Why or why not?**

1.)

2.)

3.)

Appendix C

Reading Guide for “Congruent Figures” Archetypes

Your task: Identify as many archetypes in the text as you can and list them below. Catalogue several examples of the archetype, and also include a statement about how the archetype shapes meaning in the story.

Appendix D

Debate Guidelines

Structure:

- I. **Introduction/Thesis:** Affirmative (2 min.)
- II. **Introduction/Thesis:** Negative (2 min.)
- III. **Supporting Evidence:** Affirmative (10 min.)
- IV. **Supporting Evidence:** Negative (10 min.)
- (**Break for rebuttal prep:** 3 min.)
- V. **Rebuttal:** Affirmative (3 min.)
- VI. **Rebuttal:** Negative (3 min.)
- VII. **Conclusion:** Affirmative (2 min.)
- VIII. **Conclusion:** Negative (2 min.)

Requirements/Guiding Questions:

Introduction: Each team should compose a fully developed *thesis statement*, which includes 2-3 fundamental reasons for your group's position (affirmative or negative) and an argument about why that answer is significant to the *meaning of the story as a whole*. i.e. Why is it important that Akiko is either sympathetic or unsympathetic? How does that shape meaning in the story? How does your team's reading of the text support an understanding of what Takahashi is doing as a psychologist realist writer? AND/OR How might your team's position illuminate or relate to something about the traditional Japanese *ie* family structure? (Questions to think about: Is Takahashi asking us to sympathize with a flawed main character? Does she subvert our assumptions to the extent that we shouldn't feel as if we have to sympathize with our main character? What feelings does this story force readers to examine in their own lives? Are taboo thoughts morally acceptable as long as they aren't accompanied by action? Do parents need to be perfect? Are children inherently guiltless? Etc.)

Supporting Evidence: Each team member should present one quote from the text to support your team's position (you should choose to reserve certain quotes for the rebuttal section of the debate). Be sure to analyze the quotes you choose. At least one quote must address a symbol that is fundamental to the text and which helps your group defend its position in either the affirmative or negative. At least one quote must address the way in which Takahashi's use of point of view shapes the reader's view of Akiko as a character.

Rebuttal: Anticipate the counterargument: since some of the group members on either team may still believe in the position they held initially, which may be the opposite side of the debate, this should be easy. It will be harder to actively prove these arguments wrong. Continue to use the text in this section of the debate to support the points your group is making, and to contradict specific points made by the other side.

Conclusion: Briefly restate your thesis in a new way and leave the class with something to think about. Your group may choose to contextualize this argument in a larger social or cultural framework (either specifically Japanese or more universal).

Appendix E

Written Reflection on the Akiko Debate

Your task: In 300-400 words, respond to the following question as specifically as possible. Be sure to show a clear evolution in your thinking, even if your fundamental opinion (affirmative or negative) was relatively unchanged after the debate (though you *should* explore the nuances). You should highlight certain points made in the debate, perhaps ones made by the other side that you had never thought of (as well as anything you picked up during discussion in class after your initial, independent reading of the text) that had an effect on your thinking about the story. Focus on your personal response to the text and feelings about Akiko as a character, as well as your understanding of Takahashi as a psychological realist writer:

*How was your understanding of the cultural and contextual considerations of the text developed through the debate?

Rubric: Fulfilling the requirements of the reflective statement

To what extent does the student show how his or her understanding of cultural and contextual elements was developed through the interactive oral?

Note: The word limit for the reflective statement is 300–400 words. If the word limit is exceeded, 1 mark will be deducted.

Marks

Level Descriptor

0	The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1	Reflection on the interactive oral shows superficial development of the student's understanding of cultural and contextual elements.
2	Reflection on the interactive oral shows some development of the student's understanding of cultural and contextual elements.
3	Reflection on the interactive oral shows development of the student's understanding of cultural and contextual elements.

(IB Language A: Literature Guide)