“Congruent Figures”
by Takahashi Takako

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Grades: 10-12 (approx)
Subject: English Language Arts
Time: ±5 forty minute class periods
Lesson Objectives:
Through the activities in these lessons, student objectives are:

- Understand connections between East Asian history in Japan as they relate to the story
- Demonstrate a general understanding of ‘psychological realism’ in Japanese literary tradition
- Use close reading practices to examine quotes, passages, and other textual evidence
- Explain and analyze textual evidence to build literary interpretations of the story
- Consider how characters compare and contrast with one another
- Trace the development of symbols, characters, and literary elements over the course of the narrative
- Engage in discussion and debate with peers about differing interpretations of characters and events

Summary
“Congruent Figures” by Takako Takahashi tells the story of Akiko Matsuyama and the complicated relationship she has with her daughter, Hatsuko. The story opens with Akiko receiving a letter from Hatsuko saying she will come to visit and bring her recently born daughter (Akiko’s granddaughter). The story then flashes back to tell different anecdotes about Hatsuko’s childhood through her adolescence.

When Hatsuko is a child, Akiko starts to notice similarities between them including their behavior, mannerisms, and physical characteristics. Akiko is increasingly resentful and distant to Hatsuko as she matures, growing more disdainful as Hatsuko becomes a young woman. When a young man (the baker from across the river) woos Hatsuko, Akiko imagines herself in Hatsuko’s place.

While many of Akiko’s reactions and thoughts would seem inappropriate or troubling, there are provocative implications to consider about how her perspective allows for social critique and a critical examination of women’s roles during this time (especially through the psychological realism of the story).

Historical/Literary Context
Takahashi Takako was born in 1932 in Kyoto and died in 2013. She studied French and lived in a convent in France at one point. Takako married another acclaimed writer, Takahashi Kazumi. She later returned to Japan to care for her aging mother. She began by writing essays and was initially self-conscious about her writing and would not allow it to be anthologized. Much of her early work discussed women’s taboo fantasies and frustrated desires; her stories were widely-discussed in Japan (Alvis).

Writing during the latter half of the Showa period (1926-89), her writing used “‘Gothic motifs and dark, surrealist techniques [which] parallel[ed] similar modes of fiction employed by her contemporaries” (Morton). Takahashi and other writers of the time rejected the “prettifying” or idealization of the perspectives and thoughts of her characters. Instead, these characters offer complex and sometimes dark, complicated, less socially acceptable emotions and ideas that nonetheless capture their complex experiences. In this sense, her stories can also function as social critique as they do not simply create a perfect image of characters or society, but demonstrate the frustrations, shortcomings, and restrictions felt by social expectations or norms (Alvis). These characters could further “deconstruct stereotypes of female nature and desire, and thereby unsettle gender categorize themselves” (Mori 207).

Discussion questions and answers
Comprehension questions:
Who are the main characters in the story?
Akiko: the mother, wife, and narrator of the story
Hatsuko: Akiko’s daughter who has startling similarities to her mother that increasingly disturb Akiko
Masao: Akiko’s son
Sister-in-law: the cosmopolitan visitor who serves as a foil for Akiko
Misako: Hatsuko’s infant daughter, Akiko’s granddaughter
Akiko’s husband/Hatsuko’s father
Old woman neighbor who offers comments about Hatsuko & motherhood
What are the similarities between Hatsuko & Akiko?
Similar mannerisms: Hatsuko offers her father a bowl of umeboshi as Akiko might do (172)
Similar features: have similar hands and feet (175)
Similar transgressive choices: they blame something they do wrong on someone else (Hatsuko trips a student on the stairs - 177; Akiko breaks the fishbowl - 179)
Similar possessions: they have the same sharpened pencils (175)
Similar smell: Akiko notices it when she brushes her hair around the time Hatsuko gets her period for the first time (181-182)
Similar figures: the old woman notices they look the same from behind (185)
Similar romantic interests (?!): they both seem to have a crush on the young baker (187)

These discussion questions are replicated as the 'seed cards' in the 'appendix' section of this lesson:

Seed Card #1: What is the significance of the Noh mask in the story? Is it in fact ‘expressionless’ or is it ‘overflowing’ with emotion?

Answers will vary, but the mask seems to be symbolic of how Akiko attempts to conceal her taboo feelings and resentments toward her daughter. It is interesting to consider the mask from both Hatsuko and Akiko’s varying perspectives. Hatsuko seems baffled by the mask and confused by Akiko, suggesting that Akiko may be cold or ‘expressionless’. In contrast, Akiko’s point of view could suggest that she is not ‘expressionless’, but struggles to process and express the complex feelings she has about being a mother.

In her letter, Hatsuko asks her mother, “Have you ever taken a Noh mask in your hands and looked at it? It is very strange. [When you shift it masks it] makes some emotion appear vividly on it. But it soon becomes absorbed into the face and the face returns to its original expressionless state. [...] Sometimes you looked at me with a hard face devoid of emotion, and after that you always looked aside coldly” (169-170).

Akiko recalls “several old Noh masks which I had seen once at the temple of one of my relatives. [...] While the mask looked at 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).

Seed Card #2: How is Akiko’s sister-in-law her foil? How are they similar or different? How does she highlight by contrast and comparison Akiko’s own personality traits and characteristics?

The sister-in-law seems to be the seemingly more sophisticated ‘city mouse’ to Akiko’s more provincial ‘country mouse’. The sister-in-law seems fake and into the latest fads and fashions which seems to shed and revolve through quickly as they come and go. Akiko seems less concerned with these trends but also is resentful of her sister-in-law’s judgement and seeming nonchalance.

“Sometime later, my sister-in-law came to visit me. I used to feel unpleasant over her use of the fact that she had married into a big-city family and was living a urbane life as a weapon to compete with me. [...] I had noticed that each time I saw this sister-in-law after several months, some pretentious new mannerism was added to her expression or gesture or the way she talked” (173).

“When my sister-in-law started like that without restraint, I usually sank into silence. For me, the game is decided by ignoring the opponent, but she seemed to take my silence as defeat” (174).

“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).

Seed Card #3: There are several references to the color red throughout the story. When and where (else) did you notice the color red? What do you think its symbolic significance is in the story?
Answers will vary and there are a lot of options to explore with this question, especially in regards to the presence of blood, lipstick, and other appearances of the color red. (Also see ‘seed card’ image for possible symbolic meanings of red in literary works.)

“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 [of the shark], shining more vividly red than in reality” (180)

“The artery was cut...the spray of blood made a veil between the old woman and me” (191)

“I put [the lipstick] on my lips carefully and thick. My face came to look still fairer because of the red” (186).

“I changed into a kimono which had red stripes” (191).

“[Hatsuko] came walking without noticing me in the tree. A brown kimono [with] a very red obi sash” (192).

Seed Card #4: How much do you think Hatsuko knows or understands about Akiko’s perspective and feelings?

This is open to interpretation and it seems unlikely that Hatsuko fully understands Akiko’s complicated feelings. There are also glimmers of her being aware of Akiko’s distance, but how much she appreciates the nuances of Akiko’s point of view is unclear.

In Hatsuko’s letter, she reflects on her mother’s intense stare: “What were you angry with me about? I wondered. Since you were the same old mother to my brother, I thought for a moment that you were merely maintaining our generations-old family custom of treating boys with respect, but bringing up girls with strict discipline. Sometimes you looked at me with a hard face devoid of emotion, and after that you always looked aside coldly. Since I became disliked by you without any apparent reason, I could not help but move out of the house as soon as I graduated” (170).

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

Seed Card #5: How does “Congruent Figures” explore desires ‘forbidden or frustrated’ by society’? What do Akiko’s experiences suggest about what is ‘possible or permissible’ in Japanese society at this time? How does her character challenge the social norms for women? How is the genre of the story (psychological realism) a means of challenging these boundaries?

Answers can vary, but Akiko’s perspective and its connection to psychological realism demonstrate the taboo thoughts that women may have felt as wives and mothers in the context of the strict expectations of these roles (especially in Japan during this time period).

Takahashi scholar, Maryellen Mori, suggests that, “Fantasy is well-suited to exploring desires that are forbidden or frustrated by society. Many of women’s contemporary women’s fantasy fiction across cultures portrays female characters who envision venturing beyond the limits set by their society’s definitions of the possible and permissible in order to fulfill their desires for power, pleasure, and freedom of (or from) self-definition.”

Seed Card #6: How do Hatsuko & Akiko’s transgressions compare? Which would you judge more critically? Why do Hatsuko’s actions cause a “chill” over Akiko’s spine?

A group of students are competing to rush down the stairs quickly to meet the popular young woman instructor. As a “lame girl” climbs the stairs going up, another student, Sayoko, is tripped to prevent her from
arriving at the bottom of the stairs first. Sayoko falls and the young teacher asks what happened. Akiko noticed that the leg that had hooked around Sayoko to trip her had a bandage. She then seeks bandage on Hatsuko’s leg. Hatsuko blames the lame girl for Sayoko’s fall, but Akiko realizes that it was Hatsuko’s fault, and that Hatsuko falsely blames the lame girl to shirk culpability.

This prompts Akiko to remember her experience as a student when she was tasked with cleaning the fishbowl for an unpopular teacher. Akiko drops the bowl and it shatters with the fish flopping around on the ground. When the teacher appears, Akiko turns on a fellow student, Yoshiko, and blames her for the accident. Yoshiko, like the lame girl, has less social clout and struggles to defend herself against the false accusation. Yoshiko is struck by the teacher as punishment.

Both these incidents demonstrate immature students (Hatsuko and Akiko) picking on those seemingly weaker than them to avoid getting in trouble. Students can compare each incident and decide if they think one is more egregious than the other and what these episodes reveal about Hatsuko and Akiko.

[When Sayoko fell down:] “That girl did it,” a high-pitched voice said, and it was Hatsuko. She was pointing to the lame girl who stood in the middle of the stairway with a worried look [...] Something like a midwinter chill ran over my spine” (177).

“My class teacher was an old man who was disliked by the students because he was cunning [and] he kept a goldfish. [...] one day I cleaned the bowl and] I suddenly felt tired. One shoe slipped on damp moss [...] immediately the sound of glass crashing was heard [...] When the old man appeared, panting, unexpected words came out with a smoothness which could only be called spontaneous. Yoshikko, what did you do? Because you let [the fishbowl] go, Yoshiko, it is your fault” (179).

Seed Card #7: Review the passage on page 189 of Akiko’s vision/hallucination that melds her experiences with Hatsuko’s. Why do you think Takahashi is shifting the perspective here? Why do you think Akiko’s and Hatsuko’s experiences are merging at *this* point in the story?

This is open to interpretation, but it is likely that as Hatsuko reaches sexual maturity, Akiko’s taboo thought transgressions reach their apex in this scene where she imagines herself taking Hatsuko’s place in a romantic tryst. Akiko may feel jealous or resentful of Hatsuko at this moment, or could be trying to recapture her youth in some way through this vision.

“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).

“It was not me who went with the man. It was Hatsuko who went with him, leaving me” (189).

Seed Card #8: Why do you think Takahashi starts and ends the story (like bookends) with this moment? How does your reading of the first scene compare to your reading of the last? (How) have your perceptions of Akiko changed since your first impression?

It is interesting to reread the beginning of the story when we come back to the same moment at the end. Students may have more sympathy for Akiko than they did when they first began the story (or not). Hatsuko’s return after a long absence and estrangement has more meaning once we have read all the flashbacks and experiences recounted in the story. Additionally, Hatsuko returning as a new mother is laden with greater symbolic significance by the story’s end.

The opening of the story describes the persimmon tree: “fallen leaves had been blown to the side of the building [...] The leaves were so vivid as to appear to have taken on color even after falling onto the ground, for they did not impress so much while they were on the trees. I stepped on them carefully. They were too good to step on” (168).
At the story’s end, Akiko climbs “up the ladder halfway to the top of the [persimmon] tree, an expanse of the sky opened dimly. The cloudy heavens became dyed red around the western mountains” (192).

Seed Card #9: Does the story’s end suggest that Hatsuko and Misako are destined to continue a similar fate as Akiko? Why or why not?

This is open to interpretation. (How much are we in control of our own fate? (How) Are our roles and choices determined by our gender and social expectations? Why/not?)

“I was forced to take that heavy, damp, warm thing [the baby] in my arms. Because I happened to bear Hatsuko, my blood ran in her, and since Hatsuko bore Misako, my blood continued to run in even Misako. [...] I imagined future days when gradually from a certain time all of a sudden this face would come to resemble that of Hatsuko. ‘You too bore a girl,’ I said, smiling thinly. I checked the impulse to say that it will begin with you now” (193).

Seed Card #10: In early 20th century Japan, “good wives” were homemakers and mothers who were supported by husbands who worked outside the home (Wilson). How does “Congruent Figures” comment, challenge, or subvert women’s traditional roles or expectations as mothers? Do you sympathize with Akiko and her perspective?

Answers will vary (a really central question to debate for this story!).

“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).

“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).

“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).

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

Activities
Day one:
The first day of this set of lessons can begin by giving students important background information to set up their reading of “Congruent Figures.” Students can learn a brief history of 20th century Japanese history to understand the wider cultural and social context of Takahashi’s writing. Students would also benefit from a brief background in the ‘psychological realist’ writing of Takahashi and her contemporaries. An overview of Takahashi’s personal biography would also be helpful for additional context of the narrative.

Day two:
Read the story with an eye on the discussion questions by focusing on directed annotations. Consider asking students to note (with both the mark AND a written explanation): 1) Write “?” for questions in places that are confusing or make you wonder. 2) Note with an “S” or “NS” places you ‘Sympathize’ or do ‘NOT Sympathize’ with Akiko’s decisions, perspectives, and ideas. 3) Note “R” next to any place that includes the color red. 4) Make note of when the sister-in-law appears in the story and how she compares.

Day three:
In pairs, share out annotations: try to clarify points of confusion and share points of wonder. Briefly note the similarities and differences between where you did or did not sympathize with Akiko. Discuss through comparison the places where you noted the color red. Share together as a whole class a whole class. If time permits, the class could preview the class structure and questions for the ‘seed card’ questions for the next class session.

Day four:
Borrowing this idea from the amazing Cecilia Boyce, this lesson uses a ‘speed dating’ structure to create conversations between pairs of students in inner and outer rotating circles (see Appendix A). Each student can receive one ‘seed card’ discussion question (see Appendix B sample). There are 10 different seed cards created here for “Congruent Figures” (see Appendix C). These could be printed out from this lesson, or recreated on index cards (could possibly be laminated for reuse as well). Seed cards include a visual image for engagement and can also be part of the conversation if desired. Quotes are included as a starting place to examine textual evidence, and students can add their own evidence too. Students can spend 3-5 minutes discussing the question posed on their cards (Mrs. Boyce has students swap cards after the conversation). Inner and outer circles could take turns rotating. If a student comes upon a question they have already seen, they can add to their answer by considering other textual details or other possible interpretations. Depending on logistics and timing for set up, this discussion could continue into a second day if needed. This ‘speed dating’ set up allows for all students in the class to participate.

Day five:
Possible extension: develop a ‘seed question’ into a longer written response.

Citations


“Character Foils: What they are and how to use them.” The Art of the Narrative. artofthenarrative.com.


Goldfish Bowl. It’s a Fish Thing. https://www.itsafishthing.com/bowl/.


Appendix:
Appendix A: Seed card class structure:
Image from Cecelia Boyce.
Appendix B: Sample Seed Card

Seed Cards can take many forms, and they can even be double-sided.

Sample seed card from Cecilia Boyce.

Appendix C: Seed Cards:

Seed Card #1: Smiling, Sad, Angry, Afraid, or Mad: Analyzing the Noh Mask, Emotion, & Character Dissembling

In her letter, Hetsuko asks her mother, "Have you ever taken a Noh mask in your hands and looked at it? It is very strange. When you shift it masks it makes some emotion appear vividly on it. But it soon becomes absorbed into the face and the face returns to its original expressionless state. [...] Sometimes you looked at me with a hard face devoid of emotion, and after that you always looked aside coldly" (69-70).

Akiko recalls "several old Noh masks which I had seen once at the temple of one of my relatives [...] While the mask looked at 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" (71).

What is the significance of the Noh mask in the story? Is it in fact expressionless or is it overflowing with emotion?

"Noh Mask Carving," International Noh Institute, internationalnohstitute.com
Seed Card #2:
Foiled:
Contrasting the Sister-in-law’s Character

"Some time later, my sister-in-law came to visit me. I used to feel unpleasant over her use of the fact that she had married into a big-city family and was living a urbane life as a weapon to compete with me. […] I had noticed that each time I saw this sister-in-law after several months, some pretentious new mannerism was added to her expression or gesture or the way she talked" (173).

"When my sister-in-law started like that without restraint, I usually sank into silence. For me, the game is decided by ignoring the opponent, but she seemed to take my silence as defeat" (174).

"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." (85)

How is Akiko’s sister-in-law her foil? How are they similar or different? How does she highlight by contrast and comparison Akiko’s own personality traits and characteristics?

Seed Card #3:
Blood, Lipstick, & Kimonos:
Tracing Color Meaning & Symbolism

"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" (830)

"The artery was cut, the spray of blood made a veil between the old woman and me" (93)

"I put [the lipstick] on my lips carefully and thick. My face came to look still farther because of the red" (836).

"I changed into a kimono which had red stripes" (91)

"[Hatsuko] came walking without noticing me in the tree. A brown kimono [with] a very red obi sash" (92).

There are several references to the color red throughout the story. When and where else did you notice the color red? What do you think its symbolic significance is in the story?"
Seed Card #4: To the Letter: Determining Hatsuko’s Awareness

In Hatsuko’s letter, she reflects on her mother’s intense stare: ‘What were you angry with me about? I wondered. Since you were the same old mother to my brother, I thought for a moment that you were merely maintaining our generations-old family custom of treating boys with respect, but bringing up girls with strict discipline. Sometimes you looked at me with a hard face devoid of emotion, and after that you always looked aside coldly. Since I became disliked by you without any apparent reason, I could not help but move out of the house as soon as I graduated’ (170).

Additionally, Akiko reflects, ‘I negated her again. I felt secretly that Hatsuko had begun to follow me even in such perceptions’ (176).

How much do you think Hatsuko knows or understands about Akiko’s perspective and feelings?

Seed Card #5: Social aberration or social critique? Connecting Fantasy & Psychological Realism

Takahashi scholar, Maryellen Mori, suggests that, ‘Fantasy is well-suited to exploring desires that are forbidden or frustrated by society. Many of women’s contemporary women’s fantasy fiction across cultures portrays female characters who envision venturing beyond the limits set by their society’s definitions of the possible and permissible in order to fulfill their desires for power, pleasure, and freedom of (or from) self-definition.”

How does ‘Conquering Figures’ explore desires ‘forbidden or frustrated’ by society? What do Akiko’s experiences suggest about what is ‘possible or permissible’ in Japanese society at this time? How does her character challenge the social norms for women? How is the genre of the story (psychological realism) a means of challenging these boundaries?

Seed Card #6: Fishbowls, Staircases, & Scapegoats: Comparing Akiko & Hatsuko's Transgressions

[When Sayoko fell down:] "That girl did it," a high-pitched voice said, and it was Hatsuko. She was pointing to the lame girl who stood in the middle of the stairway with a worried look. [...] Something like a midwinter chill ran over my spine" (177).

"My class teacher was an old man who was disliked by the students because he was cunning, and he kept a goldfish. One day I cleaned the bowl and suddenly felt tired. One shoe slipped on damp moss [...] immediately the sound of glass crashing was heard [...] When the old man appeared, panting, unexpected words came out with a smoothness which could only be called spontaneous. Yoshikko, what did you do? Because you let [the fishbowl] go. Yoshikko, it is your fault" (179).

How do Hatsuko & Akiko’s transgressions compare? Which would you judge more critically? Why do Hatsuko’s actions cause a 'chill' over Akiko’s spine?

Seed Card #7: A Matter of Perspective: Unpacking Akiko’s Vision at the River

"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).

"It was not me who went with the man. It was Hatsuko who went with him, leaving me" (189).

Review the passage on page 189 of Akiko’s vision/hallucination that melds her experiences with Hatsuko’s. Why do you think Takahashi is shifting the perspective here? Why do you think Akiko’s and Hatsuko’s experiences are merging at *this* point in the story?

The opening of the story describes the persimmon tree: ‘Fallen leaves had been blown to the side of the building [...] The leaves were so vivid as to appear to have taken on color even after falling onto the ground, for they did not impress so much while they were on the trees. I stepped on them carefully. They were too good to step on’ (68).

At the story’s end, Akiko climbs ‘up the ladder halfway to the top of the [persimmon] tree, an expanse of the sky opened dimly. The cloudy heavens became dyed red around the western mountains’ (193).

Why do you think Takahashi starts and ends the story (like bookends) with this moment? How does your reading of the first scene compare to your reading of the last? (How) have your perceptions of Akiko changed since your first impression?


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"It will begin with you now.": Dissecting Fate, the Future, and the Story’s End

'I was forced to take that heavy, damp, warm thing [the baby] in my arms. Because I happened to bear Hatsuko, my blood ran in her, and since Hatsuko bore Misako, my blood continued to run in even Misako. [...] I imagined future days when gradually from a certain time all of a sudden this face would come to resemble that of Hatsuko. "You too bore a girl," I said, smiling thinly. I checked the impulse to say that it will begin with you now’ (193).

Does the story’s end suggest that Hatsuko and Misako are destined to continue a similar fate of Akiko? Why or why not?
Seed Card #10:
Maternal Instinct:
Examining Motherhood, Gender Roles, & Akiko

"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).

"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).

"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).

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

In early 20th century Japan, "good wives" were homemakers and mothers who were supported by husbands who worked outside the home (Wilson). How does "Conquering Figures" comment, challenge, or subvert women's traditional roles or expectations as mothers? Do you sympathize with Akiko and her perspective?