

## **“Congruent Figures”**

TAKAHASHI Takako      Japan 1971

### **SUMMARY:**

A woman reflects on “motherhood” as she shrinks from a relationship with her sensitive daughter and questions her own motivations.

### **ACTIVITIES:**

#### **Pre-reading:**

**A** Each student should fill out the attached Pre-reading Survey which will take approximately 10 minutes.

**B** Unless your students are very familiar with the Harvey Daniels discussion role sheets, Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom (1994), hand out one role sheet to each member of each group (pages A1 – A8). You may wish to adjust or combine roles in accordance with the number of students in your class or their respective strengths. For this discussion, the following roles are important enough to have one student per role in each group: Discussion Director, Literary Luminary, Connector, Summarizer, and Investigator. The following roles could easily be combined in a fashion to suit your group numbers: Illustrator, Vocabulary Enricher, and Travel Tracer.

**Reading Activities:** During the reading the students have two tasks to fulfill: prepare for their roles in the literary circle discussion and fill out the Reading Log – each student will need six (6) copies of the Reading Log handout. Collect reading logs prior to discussions and scan them for class reactions, difficulties, or as preparation for discussions.

### **Post-reading:**

**A** Students conduct small group discussion using the role sheets and their reading logs. Circulate to help where necessary.

**B** Whole class discussion – in a circle is helpful. It is sensible to discuss Akiko in view of the way she sees herself since it is a first person narrative and events are filtered through her perceptions. Write the three underlined nouns on the board. Students support or deny the truth of the descriptor with evidence from the text. One can start the discussions within the small groups and then form the circle to hear the consensus of each group, but if they have been diligent in previous activities it is more efficient to start this discussion in the circle.

### **CONTENT:**

**Akiko as victim.** She views her in-laws as competitive and overbearing. The sister-in-law is “living an urbane life as a weapon to compete with me.” Akiko has had to manage her household “according to the instructions of my mother-in-law” which she counteracted after the woman’s death by having “tamed every visible and invisible thing which I inherited from my mother-in-law.” Given the status of a daughter-in-law entering the husband’s family, paranoia may be a somewhat justified view, although it appears that many wives acquiesced to tradition and forged a place for themselves within the new family setting. Akiko, however, takes her sense of oppression too far when she projects it onto her daughter. Her role, as she envisions it, is “usurped,” and her “self” was “taken away by Hatsuko,” the daughter. Akiko cites multiple instances of this displacement / appropriation: penmanship like hers performed by pushing on the paper as though the writing instrument “were a thumb tack”; the hand that, had it been enlarged, “would have become the same hand as mine”; Hatsuko appearing for the visit in

traditional kimono which Akiko had chosen in order to be different from daughter. As well, Akiko cites the similar opening of packages, sharpening pencils, rushing to get a seat on the bus, and carrying a vase. The animosity heightens when Hatsuko appears in her daydreams and the two become so intertwined that Akiko momentarily has difficulty distinguishing whether she or her daughter has the imaginary interlude with the “young master of the bakery across the river,” realizing finally that it “was Hatsuko who went with him, leaving me.” Akiko feels attacked, misused, abandoned, “worried about facing Hatsuko one to one” if she arrived before the husband or brother.

**Akiko as traitor.** She has distanced herself from the daughter in recent years by not writing or visiting her. But this is only the completion of a pattern settled into early on. Hatsuko, as early as fifth grade, “became aware of that face of yours...like that of a Noh mask,” a face that viewed from an angle may contain emotion, but when confronted directly appears to have no emotion. Her uneasiness with Hatsuko is intensified as the motif of doubleness continues. Akiko recognizes that as children they both betrayed a person to save face – Akiko in the goldfish incident and Hatsuko in the stairway episode. In both cases a frail scapegoat is accused by each of them in order to evade blame. Although Akiko says there are some differences between them, she continues to dwell on the similarities between herself and her daughter. Akiko sees Hatsuko as a mirror image of herself – hands, feet, dishonorable behavior, and resents the reminder. Akiko only gets a clear vision of herself through the intermediary of the old woman’s mirror which reflects the reality of her situation since “the face which revealed itself contained anger.”

**Akiko as coward.** She hides her thoughts behind the fictive Noh mask which has only driven her secrets deeper, but not eradicated them. The old woman’s mirror reveals the depth of Akiko’s discomfort with her daughter. She projects Hatsuko as an agent of displacement in

rivalry for both husband and suitor, as indictment of her own inability to be a sensitive mother, as the replication of her own moral failings. Akiko has withdrawn behind the mask because "... Hatsuko had stolen from me the woman whom although longing for I had locked up ...". She places her daughter in the frame of a competitor for youth, sexuality, freedom, and refuses to speak openly with Hatsuko who feels that she "was disliked by her mother without knowing why." Despite the girl's evident sensitivity to the feelings and wishes of others, she can find no way past the mask. Akiko has even hidden from herself behind a façade. It is only through the reflection of a mirror that awareness is forced. An oblique look in the old woman's mirror where the anger is evidenced shocks Akiko. Her only explanation comes from the crone who assures her that this indeed is "the face of mother in general." Maternal love is "nothing but an illusion manufactured by men." Each woman's essence is diluted to infinity by succeeding generations without her permission. Akiko seems frightened by this and restrains her impulse to inform Hatsuko, who is so pleased that her own daughter resembles her, that she too will feel what Akiko has felt. The question posed is Hatsuko's ability, or anyone's, to come to grips with an eternal conundrum. Akiko is alienated from her self, her daughter, and her society. She seeks her salvation not in rebellion, but in estrangement. Her only attempt at acting on her perceptions is to point a "gun" (pencil) in a silent threat, all the while silently begging her daughter to flee the mother who might destroy her.

**STYLE:**

**Dichotomy:** The dichotomy of Akiko's predicament is to accept the face of anger silently or embrace willingly the dissemination of her essence to female progeny. Even the similarities that bind the two women reflect duality. Their penmanship begins in rigid, precise shapes "of the

letters written with unfailingly careful strokes,” but toward the end of each line, as though suddenly unfettered, the style becomes “wild and carefree.” Nature itself repeats the dual pattern. As early as sentence two, the voice of the forest is either “weeping” in sorrow, or “panting hard” in jubilation. Both figures symbolize the mother – daughter relationship and the sensual undertones of the opening passages. Warring emotions pierce Akiko’s perception of nature. On her way to the mailbox, Akiko is moved by the vivid tones of fallen leaves on the sidewalk, feeling “they were too good to step on.” Yet her return to the house, having received the letter from Hatsuko, reveals the anger and agitation that lurks just below the surface. Bruising the persimmon leaves no longer monopolizes her as they “did not impress me as vividly as they had before.” Her reaction to the leaves is parallel to her reaction to the letter and to her daughter. Pondering past events she is attuned to her unmotherly resentments. She acknowledges that she should “have rejoiced in the sensitivity that a daughter of only nine had just displayed,” but instead she is uncomfortable that there is a “miniature me beside me.” Pointing the “gun” pencil at her daughter in a menacing gesture is belied by her inward pleading to the girl to move away, “quickly retreat.” Akiko herself is distressed and torn by the raging duality of her situation – be the loving mother, or fear and resent the daughter. Akiko layers on the lipstick and then removes it; as a result her face first announces “the gorgeous woman which had been crushed inside of me,” and subsequent to the removal, returns “to its usual hard state.” She is caught between what is and what she imagines might have been. This inability to reconcile the past and present brings forth the dreamlike sequences, night dreams or daydreams, erotic or metaphysical. The old women, purveyors of wisdom and truth, reinforce her feeling that there is danger in having a double. Akiko is warned that it “will be better for you to walk alone.” “... It’s better that two similar ones do not stay together. It’s inviting trouble.” The

ominous advice is reinforced by a daydream in which she and Hatsuko are mixed interchangeably during an erotic river encounter with “uncle”, and Akiko melts “drop by drop.” Akiko is trapped between opposites and knows not whether to assume it is a normal aspect of motherhood or to blame herself for a personality disorder. Sister-in-law pronounces that she doesn’t “look like anyone else,” and Akiko says the “face of mother” that depicts her “was not my mother’s.” These characters deny it, but the case is made that this is the way of the world – each mother resembles her mother and envies her daughter. Students in psychology classes may wish to refer to Jung and Freud.

**Technique:** The montage of momentary flashbacks is linked by Akiko’s first person “I”. The reader sees through her eyes the growth of her disquieting concern. Akiko’s daydream melange, the baker, Hatsuko, and herself, typifies the sensual, erotic language throughout – the warmth, flowing melting, the feel of riverbank pebbles, a strong wind, the blue-black water. The emphasis on Akiko’s unflinching awareness of smells, sounds, colors – even skin tone, shows her to be a highly visceral person despite her standoffish spectator-like behavior that does not allow her to participate in the “tempura” game with the children. For her, winning the game “is decided by ignoring the opponent.” She feels deeply, erotically, but hides behind the karatachi hedge.

The repetition of blood – menstrual, life source, birth, sacrifice, lineage – is a powerful symbol that propels the story beyond a mere questioning of a mother’s duty and invokes a reflection on the psychological in regard to motherhood and the subconscious.

The story is framed beginning and end by Akiko’s thoughts and sympathy toward nature. In the opening the autumn wind blows and stirs “the deep layers of darkness.” Akiko is entranced by the “intricate combinations of yellow and red colors” of the leaves. At the conclusion of the

story, Akiko is distracted by the thought of her (red) blood diluted in Misako as “ominous,” despite her daughter’s enthusiasm for motherhood. Akiko hears and appreciates “the talk and laughter in the house which swelled, gay, noisy, and with the smell of life;” yet she remains in an “air pocket” reflecting as the “coldness arose, creeping up from the surface of the ground.” Multiple flashbacks and dream sequences inform the reader of motivations along with the use of an intermediary or seer in the guise of old women who have mystical knowledge.

### **Post-discussion Activities:**

#### **INDIVIDUALS:**

- # In the course of discussions or after, these reading log prompts may be added to the reading log which will be graded.
  - \* Can you win the game by “ignoring the opponent”?
  - \* Why is the husband never named?
  - \* In what ways does the title seem appropriate to the story?
  - \* Become one of the characters: Akiko, Hatsuko, Masao, husband, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, baker, or Misako. Imagine that you have died, and now you are looking back and commenting on an aspect of your past. What will you say?

Activities for an Interactive Classroom, Jeffrey M. Golub, 1984. 69

- # Set up a Venn diagram comparing Akiko and Hatsuko. Think of both visible and non-visible attributes.

**GROUP: (VOLUNTEERS)**

Organize the group(s) at the beginning of work on the story so that they can collect evidence as they go along. Schedule debates at least three days after completion of all class discussions in order for them to organize roles, information, and do any necessary research. Most students at this level will know the procedures for a debate, but a quick review might help the whole class. They should use the story as well as current events, experiences, and observation to validate their argument.

**Two Topics**

It is necessary for parents to become involved with their children's lives.

External resemblances between two people indicate internal resemblances.

**READING GROUP:**

# On a piece of butcher paper three feet long each group will provide illustrations of the story. They may be realistic or symbolic. Include people, places, events, emotions. This should not be a simple retelling of the plot. Prepare to present and explain your poster to the class.

# Each group will be assigned one phrase or word. Find and interpret all references to that prompt. Prepare for a class presentation of your findings. Keep in mind our whole class discussions.

*karatachi* hedge

blood

old woman

persimmon (nature) ?

congruent figures

## Noh drama / mask

To keep track of references set up a chart which contains: page number, line number, the quote, the interpretation. Make it large enough for the whole class to see it easily.

# Peruse the text searching for individual words – noun, verb, adjective, adverb – that carry emotive baggage. The group will pick a favorite and present it to the class with an explanation as to impact.

**example:** “I said, smiling thinly.” adverb p. 195

**explanation:** thin = skinny; thin = not full or lush; see-through or opaque; falsely or nervously; not real; they have not seen each other for four years – the relationship is thin, not full; Akiko is smiling falsely, can be seen through; Hatsuko knows that her mother is not sincere.

**RELATED READINGS: (See attached handouts)**

**LUCILLE CLIFTON**                      **NEXT** 1987                      **GOOD WOMAN** 1987

Motherhood is a topic often explored, but almost always by daughters reacting to their own mothers. Takahashi introduces an important element when she looks at this through the mother's eyes. The African-American poet Lucille Clifton reflects upon, invokes, and evaluates as a daughter also, but as well, she has produced several poems on being a mother; many reflect the ambivalence and confusion of Akiko. Clifton's simple diction conceals complicated relationships. It is useful to mix genres so that students recognize similar conventions and can discuss the genres side by side.

**Next**

“grown daughter”      p. 31

Mother does daily household work with daughter commenting on the girl's difference; she “peels in the opposite direction” and promises a “different soup.” The speaker, as mother, gazes at the grown daughter “learning to love her,” but wondering “who is she.”

“here is another bone to pick with you”      p.32

Clifton, caught between generations, as we all are, seeks answers (“whose bones I worry for scraps”) and rails that she was not warned – neither that the daughters would bewitch her into believing they are her in a new body, not that they harbor secret selves much different from surface appearances. Akiko could use this information.

“morning mirror”      p.43

The mirror reflects the surface resemblances of Clifton and her mother, but the image does not hold; it vanishes as each one reclaims her individual nature.

## Good Woman

“last note to my girls” p.124

Her four daughters are her “almost me,” but really “more than me.” Clifton relates the energy with which the girls came forth, and now go forth, “reaching for the door.” They are to “make for the high ground” and exceed their mother’s achievements.

“she understands me” p. 137

The “miracle of birth” presented in an unconventional light repeats the motif that “she has made herself again.” Interesting imagery for students about to become sexually active.

“the thirty eighth year” p. 158 – 9

Caught between the images of her mother and her daughters Clifton reflects on the beautiful, wise woman who was her mother, on the “blessedness” of having produced daughters of great promise, but feeling that she has yet to be herself. She must come “into my own.” That may mean accepting being an “ordinary woman” or it may mean making more effort to be her own person.

“lucy and her girls” p. 165

Reiterates the reciprocal price of identity. She “feeds” her daughters’ identities and is in turn “extended” by them. Every parent becomes the extension of the child who fulfills the parents’ role.

**DRAMAS OF MATERIAL STRIFE:**

Any of these would be a good cross-reference to look at the feelings of the mother.

OEDIPUS REX

GLASS MENAGERIE

MEDEA

**WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:**

**Essay** handout attached.

**HANDOUT #1**

**PRE-READING SURVEY**

**“CONGRUENT FIGURES”**

This is a survey; there are not right or wrong answers. We are going to read a short story about a mother and her reaction to motherhood. This will be the basis of discussions. Mark the appropriate code for each response.

SD = strongly disagree      D = disagree

SA = strongly agree      A = agree

**A GOOD MOM:**

should love me no matter what. \_\_\_\_\_

should have firm discipline. \_\_\_\_\_

should know all my friends. \_\_\_\_\_

should be my best friend. \_\_\_\_\_

should help me make the right choices. \_\_\_\_\_

should not have secrets from me. \_\_\_\_\_

should be able to contact me any time. \_\_\_\_\_

should get an education. \_\_\_\_\_

should speak to my teachers at least once a month. \_\_\_\_\_

should check my room regularly. \_\_\_\_\_

should listen to me. \_\_\_\_\_

should have a school-night curfew. \_\_\_\_\_

should tell me what she is thinking about. \_\_\_\_\_

should give me all the freedom I want. \_\_\_\_\_

should check my homework every day to be sure it's done. \_\_\_\_\_

should choose the activities I participate in.

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should like my boy / girl friend.

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**ON THE BACK:**

List five things that show a mother cares about her child.

List five things that show a mother doesn't care.

## HANDOUT #2

### READING LOGS / TASKS

During your reading of “Congruent Figures” you have two tasks to complete.

#### 1. **Role assignments**

Prepare to fulfill the duties of discussion director, literary luminary, connector, summarizer, investigator, illustrator, vocabulary enricher, or travel tracer depending upon which role you are assigned prior to reading the story.

#### 2. **Reading Log**

Six entries are required during the reading. Additional entries will be assigned during our discussions. Each entry during reading should contain:

1. A summary of **no more** than two (2) sentences with a personal definition of any words noted on the assignment list. Pay attention to the word’s use in context.
2. A reaction to the segment.
3. Questions / concerns / confusions regarding the segment.

PAGE #'S	ENDING WITH ...	WORDS TO DEFINE	PAGE
168-171	“... feeling I had in the boat.”	congruent	168
		Noh	168
171-175	“... behavior began to attract my attention further.”	tempura	172
175-179	“... things that had happened more than ten years ago.”		
179-186	“... afraid of anything having to do with that power.”		
186-189	“... which had been taken away by Hatsuko.”	usurped	187
		ambiguously	188
189-193	end of story	garrulously	193
		ominous	193

**HANDOUT #3**

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

**READING LOG**

Page #'s for this segment

**“Congruent Figures”**

**Summary:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Definitions:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Reaction:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Questions/Concerns/Confusions:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**PREDICTIONS????**

## HANDOUT #4

### ESSAY: “CONGRUENT FIGURES”

Choose **one** of the following topics for an in-depth essay on the story. Be specific and concrete. Use the text, your knowledge, observation, and current events as support. Use the writing process. The final paper must be typed and submitted on \_\_\_\_\_.

- \* Does Akiko evoke in the reader sympathy, empathy, or antipathy?
- \* To what purpose is sensory language used in the story? Cite passages that you interpret and evaluate. Be sure that you have a strong thesis.
- \* Define and explain motherhood or fatherhood as it fits into your future. What will you do to prepare for it? Consider all areas that affect parenting: society’s demands, freedom of the individual, income, values, duties, goals. Refer to specifics in the story.
- \* Review definition 2 of “modernism” on the Boyce handout. Using the Matthew Arnold quotation, consider how this is or is not reflected in the story. Be attentive to the communication between mother and daughter that appears to be crippled.
- \* Compare and contrast views of motherhood in this story with those in “Xiaoxiao,” SHEN Congwen (1929), China. Consider any differences based on years of publication or countries of origin.

## HANDOUT #5

NEXT

Lucille Clifton

### grown daughter

someone is helping me with the onions  
who peels in the opposite direction  
without tears and promises  
different soup. i sit with her  
watching her learning to love her but  
who is she who is she who

31

here is another bone to pick with you  
o mother whose bones i worry for scraps  
nobody warned me about daughters;  
how they bewitch you into believing  
you have thrown off a pot that is yourself  
then one night you creep into their rooms and  
their faces have hardened into odd flowers  
their voices are choosing in foreign elections and  
their legs are open to strange unwieldy men.

32

### morning mirror

my mother her sad eyes worn as bark  
faces me in the mirror. my mother  
whose only sin was dying, whose only  
enemy was time, frowns in the glass.  
once again she has surprised me  
in an echo of her life but  
my mother refuses to be reflected;  
thelma whose only strength was love,  
warns away the glint of likeness,  
the woman is loosened in the mirror and  
thelma lucille begins her day.

43

**HANDOUT #6**

**GOOD WOMAN**

**Lucille Clifton**

**last note to my girls**

*for sid, rica, gilly and neen*

my girls  
my girls  
my almost me  
mellowed in a brown bag  
held tight and straining  
at the top  
like a good lunch  
until the bag turned weak and wet  
and burst in our honeymoon rooms.  
we wiped the mess and  
dressed you in our name and  
here you are  
my girls  
my girls  
forty quick fingers  
reaching for the door.

i command you to be  
good runners  
to go with grace  
to well in the dark and  
make for high ground  
my dearest girls  
my girls  
my more than me.

124

**she understands me**

it is all blood and breaking  
blood and breaking. the thing  
drops out of its box squalling  
into the light. they are both squalling,  
animal and cage. her bars lie wet, open  
and empty and she has made herself again  
out of flesh out of dictionaries,  
she is always emptying and it is all  
the same wound the same blood the same breaking.

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## HANDOUT #7

## GOOD WOMAN

Lucille Clifton

the thirty eighth year  
of my life,  
plain as brad  
round as cake  
an ordinary woman.

an ordinary woman.

i had expected to be  
smaller than this,  
more beautiful,  
wiser in afrikan ways,  
more confident,  
i had expected  
more than this.

i will be forty soon.  
my mother once was forty.

my mother died at forty four,  
a woman of sad countenance  
leaving behind a girl  
awkward as a stork.  
my mother was thick,  
her hair was a jungle and  
she was very wise  
and beautiful  
and sad.

i have dreamed dreams  
for you mama  
more than once.  
i have wrapped me  
in your skin  
and made you live again

158

## lucy and her girls

lucy is the ocean  
extended by  
her girls  
are the river  
fed by  
lucy  
is the sun  
reflected through  
her girls  
are the moon  
lighted by  
lucy  
is the history of  
her girls  
are the place where  
lucy  
was going

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“CONGRUENT FIGURES”

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