“Congruent Figures”
Takahashi Takako

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Grade 12
AP English Literature & Composition
Lesson length: 2-3 days
1. Summary

The first person narrator, Mrs. Akiko Matsuyama, receives a letter from her adult daughter, Hatsuko, who she hasn’t seen in more than four years. The letter reveals that Hatsuko now has a three-month-old child and that she plans to visit them with the baby the following week. The letter also reveals that Hatsuko has always wondered why Akiko seemed to dislike her; she perceived, throughout her childhood, a coldness from her mother that she never understood. After reading the letter, the narrator indirectly acknowledges the truth of what her daughter perceived and goes on to assert that all mothers experience these feelings toward their daughters.

Following this introduction, the story takes us through a series of flashbacks as Akiko revisits the growth of these emotions during her daughter’s childhood. The first incident occurs when Hatsuko is only a third-grader, during a family dinner, she speaks and acts toward her father just as Akiko imagines she would have herself. Next, during a visit from Akiko’s sister-in-law, Hatsuko again acts just as Akiko was intending to, kicking and crushing a moth with her shoe. As time goes on, Akiko continues to see Hatsuko behaving so much like her that she asks Hatsuko if she is imitating her, and Hatsuko says she wasn’t even aware that she was mimicking her mother’s behaviors.

As Akiko continues to flash back to these incidents in their relationship, she recalls an experience at Hatsuko’s school when she witnesses Hatsuko place the blame for a classmate’s injury on another student, when she was in fact at fault. After a day at the ocean a few days later, when Akiko acknowledges that Hatsuko has seemed to have usurped her position in the family, Akiko reveals why the incident at Hatsuko’s school bothered her so much: she had done something very similar in her own childhood. Akiko’s resentment of her daughter grows and she even imagines her daughter falling into the ocean and being swallowed by a shark.

Akiko’s perception of her daughter’s similarity to her soon extends to a scent that Akiko notices that reminds her of when she was young, and we learn that a month later Hatsuko has her first period. And when a local baker visits their house, Hatsuko seems to fully take over the role of woman of the house, leaving Akiko on the sidelines. Hatsuko goes fishing with the baker a few days later, and Akiko imagines a sort of tryst between the two, even blurring the lines between herself and her daughter in this fantasy.

When the story returns from the flashbacks to the present day, Akiko is preparing for her daughter’s visit. When her daughter arrives, Akiko meets her grandchild: a girl named Misako. It is in meeting her granddaughter and seeing her daughter that she realizes her daughter will, in a few years, experience what she did.

2. Historical/Literary Context

Takahashi Takako was born in 1932 in Kyoto. She earned a degree in French literature from Kyoto University, and after graduating, she married Takahashi Kazumi. Her husband was not only a well-known writer, but he would also make a name for himself as
an “ideological leader” of the Japanese student protests of the 1960s. After Kazumi’s death from cancer in 1971, Takako published a collection of her short stories, and she would go on to win many awards for her work. She converted to Catholicism in 1975 and entered a Paris convent in 1986. Her fiction often focuses on questions of motherhood, as well as “women alone who engage in dream world fantasies that often take a violent turn” (Mostow 226).

Takahashi Takako’s work can be situated among the Showa period’s psychological realism. This post-World War II literature offers social critique through the technique of psychological realism, which rejects “idealization” and “stylization” in favor of a more realistic portrayal of characters’ thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, psychological realism is characterized by an emphasis on individualism and a rejection of the Confucian worldview that insisted upon conformity to expected social roles and the choice of duty over emotion (Alvis).

Of particular importance to the reading of “Congruent Figures” is an understanding of the views toward motherhood in modern Japan. As part of the significant modernization of Japanese culture and society during the Meiji period (1868-1912), views toward motherhood began to shift in a way that placed more emphasis on the mother as solely responsible for properly raising her children. While Confucian ideals had always placed women squarely in the home as wife and mother, earlier views toward child-rearing put less emphasis on the mother as sole caretaker of the children; it was acceptable—and often expected—that others, such as family members and servants, would play a significant role in helping to raise children. But during the Meiji period, as Megan McKinlay explains, “a new conception of mothers as nurturers and educators was actively promoted by government and scholars alike, partly in response to the increasing influence of Western ideologies.” As part of this shift, the slogan ryōsai kenbo (good wife, good mother) first appeared in the 1890s. The government during the Meiji period promoted the notion that mothers were ultimately responsible for the success of the country, as it was their duty to raise children who would be productive citizens. The Taishō period of the 1920s saw a significant rise in the number of magazines devoted to the topic of motherhood and, most importantly, the rise of the idea of bosei homō, or “maternal instinct.” The growth of this idea gave credence to the belief that women were first and foremost meant to be mothers. It also placed on women the expectation that, even beyond having children, they should be nurturing in everything that they do (McKinlay). Noriko Mizuta Lippit and Kyoko Iriye Selden assert that this emphasis on the maternal instinct is so pervasive in Japanese culture that it has had “a great impact on women’s imagination and concept of themselves” (xv). New York Times reporter Susan Chira explains it best:

Japanese women grow up in a society that rigidly defines, and usually limits, their roles to that of wives and mothers. Most popular portrayals of women stick to a few, familiar portraits and themes: serene, smiling women always seem to be wearing aprons and brandishing feather dusters, or they stoically endure suffering, protecting and inspiring their families.
3. Discussion Questions

Plot-based questions
*Note: These questions would be best suited for use as a “reading check” quiz.*

1). In the letter, what does the daughter compare her mother’s face to?
   A Noh mask.

2). What does the mother, Akiko, admit to doing in an incident at school when she was a child?
   Placing the blame on a classmate when she drops the teacher’s goldfish bowl.

3). What does Akiko imagine happening to Hatsuko when Hatsuko falls into the ocean?
   She imagines a shark swallowing her.

4). Who takes Hatsuko fishing?
   The young master of the local bakery who had visited the house a few days earlier.

5). When her daughter arrives at the end of the story, what does Akiko throw at her?
   A persimmon that she has just picked.

Questions for discussion

1). List the ways in which Hatsuko seems similar to Akiko throughout the story.
   --During dinner, Hatsuko reaches out for a small bowl to offer her father just as Akiko would; Akiko notices “her hand was exactly like mine in shape and color”; Hatsuko expresses concern for her father in a comment that was just as Akiko intended; Akiko notices that all of Hatsuko’s facial features are like hers (Japan Reader 86).
   --During the visit with Akiko’s sister-in-law, Hatsuko stands up and kicks a moth just as Akiko was going to (87).
   --Next, Akiko randomly observes a number of similarities: how she opens packages and sharpens her pencils; the fact that she throws her handkerchief into the washing machine even if she hasn’t used it; how she rushes to an empty seat on trains or buses; how she kills moths; how she places a vase (87-8).
   --Hatsuko places the blame for an accident she caused on a classmate (88-9), and we learn later that Akiko had done something similar when she was young (89-90).
   --Akiko recognizes that Hatsuko smells like she did as a young girl (90).
   --The old woman they encounter notices that their “figures are the same even from the back” (92).
   --During the baker’s visit, Hatsuko uses the fan Akiko had intended to use, and Hatsuko serves the guest in a way that, as Akiko acknowledges, usurps her role (93-4).
2). Discuss the effect of the first-person point of view and the “frame” structure of the story.

Possible answers: Beginning the story with the mother in the present day—combined with her first-person point of view throughout the story—establishes a more sympathetic link with her, which is especially important in light of the unsympathetic and even shocking thoughts she has about her daughter. Through the first-person point of view, Akiko honestly acknowledges her daughter’s accusations about hating her, and the flashback offers a sort of “defense” for an emotion we might otherwise fail to sympathize with. The first-person point of view is also an important element when we consider this story within the context of psychological realism. As this story offers a stinging critique of the conception of motherhood, focusing on Akiko’s experience through her distinct perspective in a way that creates a sympathetic bond with her is a key means of achieving this purpose. Finally, the “frame” structure—the story of Akiko’s experience with her daughter nested within the frame of the present day—creates an important level of suspense, establishing for the reader the question of why she would hate her daughter and allowing the tension to build incrementally as the resentment she feels toward her daughter increases.

3). What is the significance of the references to Noh masks?

See Appendix B for background information about and images of Noh masks.

Noh masks are first referenced in Hatsuko’s letter to Akiko (84). The reference is introduced abruptly in the letter’s second paragraph, when Hatsuko asks her mother, “Have you ever taken a Noh mask in your hands and looked at it?” and implying a relationship between the Noh mask and her mother’s face. After describing the distinct characteristics of the traditional Noh mask—its general expressionlessness, with a design that does allow for emotion when shifted to different angles—Hatsuko goes on in the third paragraph to make the explicit comparison of her mother’s face to a Noh mask, recounting the specific incident when she fell in to the ocean. In fact, she implies that her reaction to her mother’s face caused her to stand up and subsequently fall in to the ocean.

The Noh mask is also referenced as Akiko reflects on her daughter’s accusations in this letter (85). Akiko recounts a memory of seeing Noh masks that associates them with darkness, dust and mold. She specifically mentions the Shakumi mask, which is used to represent a middle-aged woman character in Noh drama. This comment on the contradictory nature of this mask: while it could appear to have expressions, it was essentially expressionless because it had to be, as “it contained overflowing emotions inside” (85).

Possible answers: At the most basic level, the Noh mask offers effective visual imagery, conveying the mask-like, expressionless face Hatsuko encountered when she looked at her mother. The Noh masks also offer symbolic possibilities. For one, a mask does, by design, hide the “truth,” just as Akiko found it necessary to suppress her negative feelings toward her daughter and found the only solution to be a lack of expression or emotion. An additional symbolic possibility arises when we consider
the particular reference to Noh drama, which is steeped in tradition and establishes very specific roles for the players, just as Akiko is struggling against the tradition of motherhood and the role she is expected to play. By extension, it is also significant that Akiko associates Noh masks with darkness, dust and mold, suggesting a disdain for the outdated and decaying traditions of motherhood and family.

4). What is the role of the references to nature and trees in the story?
The author uses nature to establish the setting and tone in the opening of the story. The yellow and red leaves of the three old persimmon trees along their property are nearly covering the path Akiko must travel to retrieve the mail. Through her first-person narration, Akiko expresses a reverence for the fallen leaves, noting that each leaf appears to have its own distinct shape, in contrast to the “congruent figures” of the story’s title we will soon learn about. Furthermore, the design of the color on the leaves is “intricate” and she notes that the leaves seem to have become even more vivid after falling to the ground, suggesting that to age is really to improve and become more distinct. She expresses such reverence for the leaves that she is reluctant to step on them, even noting that she “felt they were too good to step on” (84).

An understanding of nature’s power is also acknowledged in the second paragraph of the story. We learn that the wind blew all night, and the forest behind the house is personified with a voice “as if weeping or panting hard,” stirring “the deep layers of darkness.” Nature in the form of insects continually intrudes on her house, and she fights a constant battle to kill them. We see here the cycle of nature’s power, much like the cycle of the female experience that Akiko will come to acknowledge by the end of the story. It is a force that cannot be changed but only recognized and appreciated, as Akiko does in the story’s last paragraph.

The specific choice of the persimmon tree is important to consider, as the tree appears beyond the story’s opening (see Appendix B for background on the tree). For example, just before Akiko has her first negative experience with her daughter (85), we learn that it is spring—typically a time associated with youth and renewal—and that “the three persimmon trees had spread their new green leaves alongside the karatachi hedge and the air around seemed to be tinted green” (86). This imagery contrasts strongly with the cold autumn of the story’s opening, when Akiko is faced with the collected negativity of her experiences with her daughter over the course of many years. As the story progresses, the march of time and the continued deterioration of Akiko’s feelings toward her daughter are marked when the persimmon trees appear again, bare of leaves due to a typhoon (again, nature’s power), but still filled with still-ripening fruit (95).

Finally, the persimmon tree reappears at the end of the story, emphasizing the story’s frame structure and offering additional symbolic possibilities. When Akiko is waiting for Hatsuko to arrive, she decides to “kill time” picking persimmons from one of the trees at her house (96). When she is on the ladder surrounded by the tree, she describes the effect “as if the sky had a deep wound at one end from which blood was
seeping to cover the whole sky.” This ominous imagery not only continues the symbolism of red/blood from earlier in the story (see question 5), but it sets a negative tone for the impending visit from her daughter. And yet it is, ironically, the persimmon fruit that ultimately lightens the mood when her daughter does arrive: the first thing Akiko does when Hatsuko arrives is toss her a persimmon, which Hatuko deftly catches, laughing. What is perhaps most significant here for Akiko’s character development is that she notices that Hatsuko catches the persimmon just as she had, but for the first time, “it did not evoke any feeling in me now.” Here, finally, Akiko is at peace, accepting the cyclical nature of life that caused her such pain to begin with. Furthermore, it is almost as if the persimmon represents this maternal curse that all mothers must endure, and Akiko is passing it on to Hatsuko in the form of this piece of fruit.

5). Identify and explain possible symbols in the story.
   Possibilities: persimmon trees/leaves, the color red, the lipstick, the peacock fan

   --Persimmon trees/leaves
   see answer to question #4 for possibilities

   --The color red
   - The vivid red (coupled with yellow) of the persimmon tree leaves in the opening of the story (84)
   - The red of Hatsuko’s bloody body in Akiko’s vision of her being swallowed by a shark (90)
   - Hatsuko’s vivid red sweater, particularly in contrast to the dullness of Akiko’s illness (92)
   - The red of the lipstick Akiko puts on when the baker is visiting (93)
   - The red background of the peacock fan that Akiko intended to use but Hatsuko uses instead (93)
   - The red of the blood in the hallucinatory dream Akiko has about the old woman cutting herself and identifying the blood as “the blood of women” (95)
   - The red of the persimmon fruit on the trees when the adult Hatsuko is about to arrive (95)
   - The red stripes on the kimono Akiko wears for Hatsuko’s arrival (95)
   - The red of the sky when Akiko is picking persimmons (96)
   - The red obi sash Hatsuko is wearing when she arrives (96)
   - The reference to blood when Akiko recognizes that her blood runs in her daughter as well as her granddaughter (96)

Students could likely offer many interpretative possibilities here. One possibility is that the color red represents femininity. There is the obvious connection to menstruation, but it also seems important that the color red is most often associated with Hatsuko’s maturation and her youthful femininity. Even when Akiko attempts to "use" the color red, in a sense, when she puts on the lipstick for the baker’s arrival, both she and her daughter realize she looks absurd. When Akiko meets her adult daughter, who is herself now a mother, they both wear red, perhaps a symbol at this
point of their equality and a recognition that Hatsuko is about to experience with her own daughter what Akiko experienced with her.

- The lipstick:
The tube of red lipstick that Akiko uses when the baker is going to visit is, significantly, not only hidden away in a drawer, but also has a slightly rusty case and something white on the surface that Akiko describes as similar to mold (93). As her daughter has continued to usurp Akiko’s feminine role in the household, Akiko has abandoned this tube of lipstick, which seems to represent youth, beauty, and femininity. Putting on the lipstick makes her momentarily happy when she sits in front of the mirror; it isn’t until she comes face to face with her daughter that she remembers she is wearing the lipstick and realizes, in looking at this younger “mirror” of herself, the absurdity of her attempt to seem youthful. So she goes back to her room and wipes off the lipstick, a gesture that symbolizes defeat in this battle with her daughter’s femininity. After wiping off the lipstick, Akiko describes her own face as having “returned to its usual hard state,” much like the Noh mask that symbolically hides her true feelings. And on page 94, Akiko even recognizes that “Hatsuko had stolen from me the woman whom although longing for I had locked up, the woman who applied lipstick but later wiped it off.”

- The peacock fan:
This fan seems to be the proverbial “last straw” for Akiko, symbolizing her role as the woman of the house being completely usurped. After wiping off the lipstick, Akiko goes to retrieve her own fan, decorated with “a peacock drawn with golden powder on a red background” (93). The red of the fan continues to potentially symbolize youthful femininity, while the peacock evokes its own sense of ornamental beauty, its own “fan” a means of attracting the opposite sex. Yet her fan is gone, and she is surprised to see her daughter with her peacock fan, using it to fan the young baker who is their guest. Later during this episode, Hatsuko uses the peacock fan to fan herself, and Akiko notices that “the fluttering red background and golden design made either the red or the gold more vivid than the other according to the angle of the fan” (94). Much like the Noh mask, the fan is different depending on how you look at it and who is using it, and here her daughter is using it to look “charming” in a way Akiko would not be capable of.

6). What quotes/excerpts are evidence of the psychological realism of this work?
--The letter from Hatsuko very honestly reveals the central (and disturbing) conflict of the story: Akiko’s negative feelings toward her daughter (84).
--“Was it something that I felt about Hatsuko? Was my feeling about her abnormal? No, I don’t think so. It was an emotion which all the mothers of this world must have felt about their daughters” (85).
--“I should have rejoiced in the sensitivity that a daughter of only nine had just displayed. But instead, some unexplainable feeling of minding it stayed in my mind” (86).
--“This time, too, I should have felt proud of Hatsuko’s response to my sister-in-law. Yet instead I felt the existence of a woman beside me, a woman who felt and acted
exactly the same as I did. Because of this, my irritation over my sister-in-law disappeared, but a new irritation came over me” (87).

--“Before me there was a picture of happiness framed by the melting lights of the sky and sea. Since it was before me, it did not include me. What kept me away was Hatsuko” (89).

--“I looked far away, taking my eyes off Hatsuko. Stretched waves marked the few stripes on the surface of the sea. They were constantly moving, but as a whole the same striped shapes remained all the time. As I looked at it vacantly, the sea appeared immobile, as if it were a shining steel sheet. The vision of a shark springing up to break that surface crossed my sight bewitchingly. 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” (90).

--“I who was disliked by mother without knowing why,’ Hatsuko had written. She could not have known the reason, for I made it my task to hide it from her. Since Hatsuko was sensitive like me, I had to be perfect in hiding it from her. Poor Hatsuko. But I was trying as hard as I could. As hard as I could? Trying hard not to climb up the numbers of plus but to run down the numbers of minus—what does it mean to try hard for something which leaves only a sterile wasteland inside me?” (90).

--“Hatsuko, move away quickly. If you don’t, mother will shoot you. Hatsuko did not move. I held the pencil still. Quickly retreat to some place where mother cannot see you. The pencil in my hand felt heavy and hateful. When Hatsuko’s figure moved slowly from my sight and disappeared, I felt relieved and at the same time tired” (92).

--“Yet I did think about the gorgeous woman which had been crushed inside of me. If given a chance it could have bloomed into a large flower spreading wide its pink petals and wafting around a sweet fragrance. Such a flower which could not bloom existed inside of me. It existed inside of me without shrinking or withering, no, containing a still richer fragrance precisely because it could not bloom fully” (93).

--“This is what irritated me. It would have been nothing if a completely different woman had been there. But 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” (94).

--“[W]here can you find maternal love? It is nothing but an illusion manufactured by men” (95).

--“You too bore a girl,’ I said, smiling thinly. I checked my impulse to say that it will begin with you now” (96).

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

Through the psychological realism, the story conveys one modern mother’s complex and deeply honest feelings about motherhood that fly in the face of traditional Japanese ideas (see section on historical context). Not only is Akiko anything but nurturing to her daughter, putting on a mask of indifference, but her thoughts reveal outright hostility toward her daughter as she matures into a woman herself. The Japanese belief in *bosei honnō*, or the maternal instinct, seems to suggest women are innately nurturing and would therefore not even be capable of the sort of feelings Akiko experiences. What is important, however, is not just that the story presents these ideas about motherhood that contradict tradition, but that they are presented
through a first-person narrator we sympathize with, so that we are more likely to sympathize with her views. And while Akiko seems at peace with her experience by the end of the story, the return of the daughter and the introduction of the granddaughter suggest this is a destructive cycle that goes beyond Akiko’s particular situation, and that traditional notions of motherhood are not adequate when faced with the reality of motherhood.

8). Ultimately, what statements does this story seem to make about the nature of motherhood for Japanese women?

One possible interpretation is that in its rejection of traditional Japanese views of motherhood, and in its brutally honest portrayal of one fictional mother’s experience, Takahashi presents the idea that society’s expectations of motherhood are largely unrealistic. Mothers should not be expected to shed their own identity, as we see that Hatsuko’s gradual takeover of Akiko’s personality and identity ultimately causes both great emotional pain. The story also suggests that it is unrealistic to expect mothers to live up to this traditional ideal; no one with normal emotions can realistically spend a lifetime behind a mask of indifference. Furthermore, the fact that Akiko never reveals her thoughts and emotions to anyone around her, and in fact feels compelled to actively hide them, suggests many mothers may be experiencing these emotions but are unable to share them. The story vividly offers the potential consequences of continuing to conform to such unrealistic views of motherhood.

4. Activities

1). Pre-reading/introduction (about 1 class period)

(a) “Chalk talk” on words we usually associate with the word “mother:” write the word “mother” on the board and tell students to go to the board as they wish, one at a time, to write words or phrases we generally associate with motherhood. They may build off of other students’ comments as well. Once this “silent discussion” seems to end on its own, have an actual discussion of the ideas they generated and discuss the genesis of these ideas in our society, whether ideas about motherhood have changed, and so on (Boyce).

(b) After explaining that the story they will be reading and analyzing next addresses the issue of motherhood in Japan, give a brief explanation of the Japanese view of motherhood (see information in Historical/Literary Context section) while showing them traditional Japanese images of motherhood (see Appendix A). If there is time, it would be worthwhile to discuss their impressions of how motherhood is portrayed in these images.

(c) As it will be pertinent to the story, explain Noh masks and tell them what a persimmon tree is like, paired with images (see Appendix B).

(d) Distribute the story. They will read the story (over one or two evenings) and complete a dialectical journal (see Appendix C for directions).

2). Discussion (about 1-2 days)
--In my classroom, this lesson will occur mid-year when students are experienced with discussion of literature. Ideally, use the students’ dialectical journals to generate whole-class discussion of the story’s literary elements and meaning.

Discussion options:
- With more confident students, you can give students a moment to review the ideas in their dialectical journal and write down a few possible discussion questions for the class period. You can either have students propose their questions throughout the class period, or you can start the discussion by having students silently write their questions one at a time on the board, making sure not to repeat any, in the style of the “Chalk Talk” activity from day one.
- With classes that often have a hard time getting discussion started, give students a few moments to review their dialectical journals. Distribute two pieces of scrap paper to each student. They must write their names at the top and a possible discussion question on each to turn in to the teacher. The teacher can then either (a) choose from the proposed questions to begin discussion, or (b) randomly distribute the pieces of paper around the room. Have each student choose one of the questions, write their name on it under the question and take about 5 minutes to write ideas for how they would answer it. Then take volunteers to offer one of these questions to the rest of the class, as students who lack confidence or are shy are often more comfortable proposing someone else’s question to the class, especially when they have had a few moments to think about it. These slips of paper can even be collected at the end of class for a formative assessment.
- To extend the story to a second day, have students brainstorm possible symbols from the story as a class, split in to groups, take one symbol per group and develop an argument about what it might symbolize, citing evidence. They must then informally present their ideas to the class. (See discussion question 5 above for possibilities.)
Citations


APPENDIX A--Japanese images of motherhood

APPENDIX B—Noh masks, persimmon trees

Noh drama & Noh masks
--Noh drama developed in Japan in the 14th century.
--A focus on singing and dancing with historical or classical subjects.
--Very structured and stylized performances.
--Earliest Noh drama had 60 different masks available; more are used now.
--Most of the actors wear masks, but the main actor wears the most beautiful mask.
--Dozens of specific types of masks exist and are usually designated for specific roles.
--Most Noh masks are designed to appear to have fairly neutral expressions. The actor can use small movements to manipulate the mask: for example, tilting it upward usually results in the appearance of a smile, while tilting it downward usually results in the appearance of a frown.
(Source: “Masks”)

Male Noh Mask

Old Man Noh Mask

Fierce Deity Noh Mask

Vengeful Spirit Noh Mask
Shakumi Noh Mask (denoting a middle-aged female)


**Persimmon trees**

--Persimmon trees are native to Asia.
--The tree flowers in July and August.
--Persimmon trees need 2-6 years to begin bearing fruit, and 25-50 years to reach its full capacity for fruit. The persimmon tree can live hundreds of years.
--The persimmon fruit (technically a berry) is typically cultivated in September or October and can have a very bitter taste if not allowed to ripen fully.
(Source: Kitsteiner)
Japanese persimmon tree in the fall

Japanese persimmon fruit


APPENDIX C—Dialectical Journal

Dialectical Journal: A written conversation with yourself about a piece of literature.

Format:
♦ The dialectical journal should be kept on lined, loose-leaf paper and written in ink. You may write on the front and back.
♦ Fold each paper in half, “hot dog” style.
♦ Label the left side “Text” and the right side “Comments.”
♦ The “Text” side should be used for notes from the text, such as phrases, direct quotes, summaries, lists, images, etc., always accompanied by page numbers.
♦ The “Comments” side is where you record your corresponding comments. Record your interpretations, reactions, ideas, comments, inferences, questions, etc.

Content: when should you write things down?
♦ You notice something significant about such issues as diction, syntax, character, point of view, tone, setting, symbolism, theme, and figurative language.
♦ You recognize a pattern (overlapping images, repetitions of idea, details, etc.)
♦ You see a possible theme developing.
♦ You have an epiphany.
♦ You find an interesting or potentially significant quote.
♦ You notice something important or relevant about the writer’s style.
♦ You have a question or prediction about the text.
♦ And so on.

Dialectical Journal Grading Rubric

Strong  Avg. Weak  The dialectical journal…

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ cites meaningful passages, details and quote selections from the text in the “Text” half of the journal.

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ includes detailed and thoughtful interpretation and commentary about the text in the “Comments” section.

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ includes thoughtful comments about a wide variety of interpretive issues and literary elements, as well as how these elements contribute to the meaning of the text.

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ includes thought-provoking, insightful questions and meaningful predictions and hypotheses about the text and its meaning.

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ covers the text completely and consistently.