

Collated Questions

Gender

- To what extent is Sakiko meant to contrast with the old woman? To what extent are there continuities between them (outsiders, cheerfulness at the thought of death)? Why would this be significant? Why is the old woman’s identification with tradition so explicit, when she lives in a untraditional way (without family or connections)?
- Why are both Sakiko and the old woman so obsessed with the fires? Is this related to why Sakiko is always so thirsty in the story? (“It was because it hasn’t rained for fifty-two days. When the air gets so dry that even your throat is parched, it’s no wonder if suddenly something just bursts into flame” [5]) Why fire in the first place? What does it signify?
- Why does Sakiko make her date wait for her while she observes him from afar (26)? If Sakiko is bored (7) and lonely (11, 18), why does she stand up her date? What is the connection here to the fires (and the rest of the story), since this seems like a random episode? Why does she feel as if people are judging her in the coffee shop, observing her like the investigator? Is she just angry at men, and, if so, what does this have to do with the fires? What does this episode suggest about power differentials between men and women and/or gender norms?
 - Suddenly Sakiko was seized by a strange notion. She felt as if the reproving stares being directed at her by the young couple who had happened to sit down across from her were actually being directed at her by the man with whom she had a date. That man had taken possession of the eyes of the couple in front of her and was now glowering at Sakiko. And another image was superimposed on that one: the menacing looks that investigator had given her (27).

Characterization, Setting, and Detail

- Why does the story begin with a moan that gradually merges with the sirens of the approaching fire engines? Why is the moan described as “like something being squeezed out, from some obscure place deep inside her body” (1)? Later this moan is described in the following manner: “The moan hadn’t sounded as if it could be coming from her, but rather as if some dark beast were emitting it. But when she awoke, in the daylight there was no beast in sight” (7). Why is conceived as external to herself? Why a beast? Still later the moan is described in this way: “She stood in a daze, savoring the vague sensation that it was the arsonist who was moaning” (16). Why is it now identified with the criminal and how does it connect to the earlier references?
- Sakiko describes herself as “bored” (7), and she does seem to lose focus quickly: being entranced by the fire next door (2), then abruptly tiring of it and going to sleep (3); shifting focus suddenly from the neighbors to the school (13); and admitting that she would soon tire of toying with men by standing them up (26). Even the fire initially seems to bore her, as she can’t work up enough interest to react to the danger in a more rational manner (2). What is the significance of all of this?
- Why is the old woman’s voice perceived as shrill by Sakiko? Why does the old woman normally have excellent hearing (12) but have difficulty hearing Sakiko (20)?

**“Lonely Woman”
By Takako Takahashi**

- What is the significance of the “Lonely Woman” article, since it’s obviously important to the story (even providing the title)?
- What is the significance of the fact that Sakiko rents a room, or that she and the old woman both live alone?
- Why is there such careful attention paid to the number of days without rain? Why is the weather always described as beautiful?
- Why does Sakiko seemingly get so much joy from imagining the deaths of the children in the elementary school (12-14, 18-19, 23, 27)?
- In the conversation with the man, why is Sakiko so indifferent to the people seeking inoculations for smallpox (25)? Why does she connect this with an indifference to her own life (26)?
- Is the mynah bird (a voice trapped in a cage) meant to signify the old woman? Sakiko?

The Fires

- Is the narrator involved in setting the fires? Is she involved without actually realizing it?
- Why does she feel as if she might be partly responsible for the spread of fire at her landlord’s residence (2)?
- The fires are linked with death in Sakiko’s mind. The burned out gym is compared to a skull (8), and Sakiko imagines the fire in terms of the deaths it could cause (12-14, 18-19, 23, 27). Is Sakiko obsessed with fire or obsessed with death?
- If she’s not responsible, why does she seem to want to take blame for the fires, even coming close to confessing to the inspector (24) or planting “evidence” that she did it (28)? Does she feel guilty about something and believes she must be punished?
- Why does Sakiko act so suspiciously with the inspector? Even if she did set the fires, why does she seemingly go to such lengths to incriminate herself by her behavior (both at the scene of the crime and later in the police station)? Why does Sakiko, in effect, keep leading the direction of the investigation? Why does the inspector keep questioning her, if he seems to be getting nothing of value from her?
- Why does Sakiko go from seeming indifference to the fires (to the point of being unconcerned with her own safety) (3, 11), to great interest (to the point of empathizing with the arsonist)?
- Is the old woman involved in setting the fires? Is her certainty in regards to details of the fires and seeming delight in imagining them (5) a clue that she committed the crimes? Or is she truly “mad” (29)? Is the fact that the old woman’s birds have died (20) circumstantial evidence that she is somehow involved with the crimes?
- What about the landlord? Did he start the fires?
- Assuming neither woman set the fires, why would both seem to want to be found guilty of arson? Do they have something to feel guilty about (and want to be punished)? Why would both women identify with the arsonist, and why would they both go “mad” (29) in the same way? What do they have in common when Takahashi is at pains to stress their differences?
- What is the point of the biblical reference on page 6 (“tongues of fire spurting from everyone’s mouth”)? It is obviously related to previous statement on page 5 (“When the air gets so dry that even your throat is parched, it’s no wonder if suddenly something just bursts into flame”), but what is the connection?