

# THOMAS COMMA

A Film by Ken Kimmelman

## Study Guide for Teachers

**THOMAS COMMA** [24 min], based on a story by poet Martha Baird, is the charming, humorous, and sophisticated adventure of a lonely comma looking for his place in the world. The author said the idea for this story came from a phrase by Eli Siegel, founder of the education Aesthetic Realism: “as lonely as a comma without a sentence.” This 2D animated film is for children and adults alike. “We’re all of us like commas,” wrote Martha Baird, “looking for the right sentence.”

About the making of the film and its meaning, Mr. Kimmelman says:

*“When I first heard a dramatic reading of Martha Baird’s story, I was delighted and also deeply moved. It’s the story of a small punctuation mark—a comma—that has wide, universal meaning. The author shows in a beautiful literary style—with humor, insight, and subtlety—the trials and tribulations of Thomas.*

*“With surprising imagination, she makes vivid the largest fight in every person, which Aesthetic Realism explains. It’s the fight between respect for the world—the hope to see meaning and beauty in it, be in a good relation with it, which is our deepest desire—and contempt, the hope to be superior, look down on people and things. Contempt is what makes a person mean, unfeeling and also deeply ashamed. Through Thomas I felt my own life described.”*

The story of *Thomas Comma* is an important teaching resource for students from age 8 through high school—and beyond—in relation to both literature and life itself. As part of the ELA curriculum, the film can be used in teaching about several aspects of the study of literature:

- 1) what makes an effective narrative,
- 2) the understanding of characterization in literature,
- 3) the qualities of good writing.

Further, it is tremendously valuable in the field of character education. Through the surprising and delightful way the author and filmmaker give life and feelings to a punctuation mark, the story provides a means of understanding an unjust way of seeing people that causes unhappiness, prejudice, and loneliness.

### GUIDED VIEWING

Below are some questions teachers can ask students to think about before viewing the film.

1. The film is about how Thomas sees what is different from him, including commas and other punctuation marks. What is his attitude toward them? How does it change as his journey goes on?
2. As you observe the things Thomas says and does, can you think about how people in ordinary life may act as he does?
3. What do you respect most in Thomas?
4. What mistakes do you think he makes along his journey?
5. What can we learn about ourselves from Thomas?

### VOCABULARY

NOTE: The words below are defined according to the way they are used in the film. In each case, the sentence in which the word is used has been included.

#### All grades:

**forlorn** (adj): unhappy or miserable; lonely and sad

“It was the most forlorn and lonely comma in the world.”

**distinct** (adj): clearly different

“A name will show I’m a separate and distinct and individual comma.”

**designate** (v): to give somebody or something a formal name or description

“So from now on, Thomas Comma will be so designated in this, the history of his wanderings.”

**prey** (n): one that is helpless or unable to resist attack

“Thomas was no longer easy prey for any casually beckoning sentence.”

**desolate** (adj): having the feeling of being abandoned by friends or by hope; forlorn

“He was the most desolate and utterly wretched object in the whole world.”

**periodical** (n): a magazine or other journal that is issued at regularly recurring intervals

“There was a chance—a very slight chance, but still a chance—of the right sentence appearing in the periodical field.”

**cross** (adj): angry and annoyed; ill-humored

“Some of [the writers]...yelled and were very cross with other people.”

**ambition** (n): desire for success; a goal that somebody is trying to achieve

“Oh, why did I have to be given ambition in the first place?”

**contemporary** (adj): related to the present time; modern

“He spoke scornfully whenever he could of everything contemporary, and he spoke with especial scorn of all modern literature.”

**weary** (adj): fatigued; tired

“And he would look inexpressibly weary, and turn away.”

**impressive** (adj): having the ability to impress the mind; arousing admiration

“Then Thomas would walk away, feeling he’d been impressive, but feeling bad just the same.”

**squint** (v): to look with the eyes partly closed

“Then he sort of squinted, and looked around, and he started to be mad.”

**significance** (n): importance; great meaning

“It seems to me your life story has a significance which goes beyond mere comma experience.”

#### High School:

**heretofore** (adv): up until now

“His heretofore almost constant feeling of depression left him; he even felt less lonely.”

**design** (n): an underlying sense of purpose or plan

“He decided there must a Design in all this.”

**scornfully** (adv): contemptuously

“He just wandered around, and spoke scornfully whenever he could of everything contemporary.”

**destiny** (n): something that predetermines events; the apparently predetermined series of events that happen to somebody

“And soon Thomas became angry with what he called Destiny, for making everything so hard for him.”

**decisive** (adj): showing an ability to make decisions quickly, firmly, and clearly [decisively (adv)]

“And he thumped the table when he said it; and he nodded his head decisively.”

**lot** (n): a group of people or things of a particular kind

“We commas are a pretty good lot.”

**finality** (n): the quality or state of being concluded, permitting no further progress

“Periods are useful, of course; but there’s so much finality to a period.”

**subservience** (n): the state of being too submissive or eager to follow the wishes of others

“I wish I could communicate to all other commas the pride and joy they might feel if only they could throw off the shackles of unquestioning subservience to whatever sentence comes along, the way I have.”

**abject** (adj): miserable; allowing no hope of improvement or relief

“Why should he have spent all those homeless, wandering, abject years when all the other commas in the world were being snapped up right and left...?”

**grimace** (v): to have a twisted facial expression showing disgust or pain

“They grimaced and rubbed their foreheads, and some of them...yelled and were very cross with other people.”

**inexpressible** (adj): impossible to be put into words [inexpressibly (adv)]

“And he would look inexpressibly weary, and turn away.”

**propel** (v): to push somebody or something forward

“If he drifted into a gutter, he’d stay there until something propelled him somewhere else.”

**perseverance** (n): steady and continued action or belief, especially despite difficulties or setbacks

**vicissitudes** (n): unexpected changes, especially in somebody’s luck or fortunes

“I think your battle, your perseverance—with vicissitudes—can serve as both a warning and an inspiration to commas and people who come after you.”

## QUESTIONS FOR RESPONSE— DISCUSSION AND WRITING

Questions marked with an asterisk (\*) are most appropriate for older students.

1. The narrator asks, “How would you feel if you were a comma just wandering around in space, not belonging any where?” Students can answer this question. What is Thomas hoping to feel? (He’d like to feel he is in a good relation to everything else, not just separate. This, in fact, is the purpose of a comma: to separate and also to join parts of a sentence.)

2. Why does Thomas feel it would be good for him to have a name?

3. How does getting a name change Thomas—in both good and bad ways? How does it change the way he sees himself and others?

4. Thomas says, “I’d rather be a comma than any other kind of punctuation in the world.” How do you think Thomas sees the other punctuation marks? Do you think he is right or wrong? Explain.

5. Why do you think Thomas begins to feel not so good? What is it about the way he has been thinking that makes him feel bad or ashamed? (The narrator says it’s because he had been bragging.) Did you ever do anything like this? How did it make you feel?

6. The narrator says “If you go around being independent that way, you’ll feel bad too.” How would you describe the way Thomas was trying to be independent? What do you think is wrong with it? What do you think is a good way of being independent?

7. \* Thomas’s list of requirements for the sentence he is looking for is:

1. *No trash*

2. *No sentimentality [maybe discuss denotation/connotation]*

3. *No falsehoods*

4. *No bad grammar*

5. *No hypocrisy*

6. *No e e cummings*

7. *Right sentence must be in English, must be a complete sentence, must say something I like, and must make me feel at home.*

Later he added:

8. *Writer of sentence must feel good about it!*

Do you respect him for these requirements?

8. \* Number 8 on Thomas’s list is, “Writer of sentence must feel good about it!” What do you think would make a writer *truly* feel good about what he or she has written?

9. At a certain point along his journey Thomas says, “Why does it have to be so difficult for *me*?” Thomas was feeling sorry for himself. Do you think he was right? Why or why not?

10. After Thomas had been in the gutter for several days, he woke up one morning and he was angry. But then, he felt better. What do you think made him feel better?

11. Thomas says of his struggle: “I came through it a stronger, better, more courageous comma.” What do you think Thomas learned that made him stronger, better, and more courageous?

12. A turning point in the story comes when Thomas says, “If I can’t find the right sentence by myself, I’ll ask somebody to *help* me.” Do you think Thomas is smart and strong when he decides to ask for help? Can you give an example from your own life when you were proud of asking someone for help?

13. \* The narrator says, “Your battle, your perseverance with vicissitudes, can serve as both a warning and an inspiration to commas and to people who come after you.” How does Thomas’s experience serve as a warning? As an inspiration?

## RELATED TOPICS ARISING FROM THE FILM

**Prejudice:** Thomas shows his prejudice against other punctuation marks, as we can see in Question 4 above. Aesthetic Realism teaches that prejudice begins with an attitude of dislike and scorn for the world different from ourselves, which shows in how we see any particular thing. Thomas’s attitude can be used to understand prejudice of all kinds. How is his attitude to the other punctuation marks like the way people see other cultures, nationalities, races, religions, ages, etc., in relation to their own?

For example: A common instance of prejudice occurs in cafeterias or schoolyards where students sit at separate tables or play only with others of their own ethnicity, nationality, or clique—and exclude anyone else who wants to join them. Have you ever been in such a situation, either excluding others or being excluded yourself? If so, how did you feel? Imagine what would happen to writing if Thomas Comma’s prejudice were shared by all commas and other punctuation marks.

**Loneliness:** The story of Thomas Comma arose from Eli Siegel’s phrase “as lonely as a comma without a sentence.” Opposites that are in a painful relation in loneliness are *separation* and *junction*. That is, a person feels separate from other people, and does not feel any real junction with or relation to them. Thomas would like to be in a beautiful relation with the other words in a sentence—to find his place in the world—but there are things in him that stand in the way of this. He wants to be superior, both to other commas and to other punctuation marks.

The fight that Thomas has, people have too. We can inaccurately think we are only separate or different from others. Even though this may be painful, there is at the same time a secret pleasure in feeling superior: “I’m the only one who feels this way. Nobody understands me.” This way of thinking comes from contempt, defined by Aesthetic Realism as the “false importance or glory from the lessening of” other people and things.

Meanwhile, there is greater pleasure in honestly respecting things different from ourselves, feeling we need them in order to be ourselves. Thomas comes to feel this, and he is so much happier!

We are *always* related to other people—we are both like *and* different from them, separate from *and* joined to them in many ways. These are the very same opposites that work together well when a comma does its job: it accurately separates and joins the parts of a sentence. Students can give examples of how they are separate from and related to, different from and like, other people—their classmates, their family members, their neighbors. When we see our relation to other people, we don’t feel lonely.

“*Thomas Comma* illustrates a central idea of Aesthetic Realism: There is a fight going on in every person, between our deepest desire—which is to like the world honestly—and our desire to have contempt, to make ourselves important by disliking and looking down on things and people. In *Thomas*, the ability to like the world wins at last! And Ms. Baird, through what she was learning, saw that it could in everyone.”

LEILA ROSEN (English) and SALLY ROSS (Science), who prepared this Study Guide, each taught in New York City high schools for nearly 30 years using the Aesthetic Realism Teaching Method.