

# Character Sketch:

## The Marionettes of Alma W. Thomas

Join Alma W. Thomas and her students at Shaw Junior High School in Washington, D.C. as they prepare for a staged production of *Alice in Wonderland*. Learn about two of the marionettes they created before designing your own fictional character. We can't wait to see what you imagine!

### LESSON OBJECTIVES:

- Students will observe and analyze two marionettes by the artist Alma W. Thomas and her students at Shaw Junior High School in Washington, D.C.
- Students will develop a unique, fictional character.
- Students will participate in collaborative discussions.
- Students will compare and contrast information presented in diverse media.

**SUGGESTED GRADE LEVELS:** 6th -12th

### NATIONAL STANDARDS:

**VA:Cr1.2.7a** Develop criteria to guide making a work of art or design to meet an identified goal.

**VA:Cr3.1.6a** Reflect on whether personal artwork conveys the intended meaning and revise accordingly.

**VA:Re8.1.6a** Interpret art by distinguishing between relevant and non-relevant contextual information and analyzing subject matter, characteristics of form and structure, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed. (Also VA:Re8.1.7a, VA:Re8.1.8a, VA:Re8.1.1a, VA:Re8.1.11a)

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2** Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY/ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Walz, J. F. (2021). "So Much Depends: Alma Thomas's Marionettes" in S. Feman & J. F. Walz *Alma W. Thomas: Everything is Beautiful* (pp. 122-127). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Walz, J. F. (2019). "Alma W Thomas: 'The Marionette Show as a Correlating Activity in the Public Schools.'" *Living Objects: African American Puppetry Essays*, 17. <https://opencommens.uconn.edu/ballinst/catalogues/17/>
- Thomas, A. W. (1934). *The Marionette Show as a Correlating Activity in the Public Schools*. [Master's thesis, Columbia University]. (**Not available online**)
- *Miss Alma Thomas: A Life in Color* <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/almathomas>
- "The Gifts of Tony Sarg" <https://www.pbs.org/video/gifts-tony-sarg-american-experience-pbs/>
- Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*

## GUIDED PRACTICE: CLOSE LOOKING

This lesson looks closely at two marionettes produced in association with the artist Alma W. Thomas's 1934 master's thesis, "The Marionette Show as a Correlating Activity in the Public Schools." The "correlating activity" to which the title refers took place from October 1933 to June 1934, and involved the students of Shaw Junior High School in Washington, D.C. in an original marionette production of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (Figure 1).

In her thesis, Thomas wrote about the student's inspiration for selecting *Alice in Wonderland* as the production's narrative, as well as the research – color theory, history of puppetry, lighting design, etc. – they undertook and the processes they employed in staging this production. From costume and stage design to marketing, the students at Shaw Junior High did it all! Furthermore, the production engaged most, if not all, of the schools' curricular areas including English, shop, and an "Art in the Home" class.

What is a marionette? A marionette is a puppet controlled from above by a series of strings or wires that are attached to each limb. A puppeteer manipulates the strings making the marionette sit, walk, jump, and run. (Educators: Visit <https://www.pbs.org/video/artquest-making-marionette-brian-hull/> to watch the creation of a simple marionette.)

In describing the process of making marionettes, Thomas (1934) noted that, "one should always aim to make their appearance indicate their characters" (p. 3). And that, "the facial expression is quite important, therefore, the features must be emphasized and the expression of the eyes particularly stressed" (Thomas, 1934, p. 3).

- What do you think Thomas means by the statement: "appearance" should "indicate ... character"? Why might this be important?
- Visual artists often use physical attributes, like body type and dress, as a kind of visual shorthand to convey information about a character's personality. What are some flaws in this storytelling device? Take a moment to think about all the things you are unable to tell about a person just by looking at them.

Taking Thomas's notes as an invitation to look, let's look closely at each marionette (Figures 2-5).

- How is each character dressed?
- What props, if any, accompany each character?
- What do each marionette's facial features tell you about how they are feeling? Why is this important to know?
- Based on these elements, what can you infer about their role in the story?
- What do you imagine each character sounds like? What do you see that makes you say that?

**Additional information:** "The *Alice in Wonderland* puppets—each about twelve inches in height ... were meant to withstand manipulation from beginners. They are very sturdily constructed. Tweedle-Dee and The Mad Hatter are both quite heavy, with lead weights in the feet, limbs, and torsos. The blocky heads and hands are carved and painted solid wood. Both sport hand-made clothing complete with snap fasteners at various points. Their original strings have been lost" (Walz, 2019, p. 5).



**Figure 1.** Unknown photographer, Alma Thomas's students performing *Alice in Wonderland*, c. 1934, Black and white photograph in paper mount, mount: 11 1/4 x 13 3/8 in., Alma W. Thomas Papers, The Columbus Museum



**Figure 2.** Alma W. Thomas (1891-1978) and her 1933-34 students, *Mad Hatter*, 1934, Fabric, wood, lead, tin, paper, artificial hair, metal snaps, and paint, 11 1/4 x 4 3/4 x 2 in., Gift of Miss John Maurice Thomas in memory of her parents, John H. and Amelia W. Cantey Thomas and her sister Alma Woodsey Thomas, The Columbus Museum (G.1994.20.14)

Figure 3. *Mad Hatter*



Figure 4. *Tweedledee*





**Figure 5.** Alma W. Thomas (1891-1978) and her 1933-34 students, *Tweedledee*, 1934, Fabric, wood, lead, mother-of-pearl buttons, and paint, 10 x 6 x 1 ½ in., Gift of Miss John Maurice Thomas in memory of her parents, John H. and Amelia W. Cantey Thomas and her sister Alma Woodsey Thomas, The Columbus Museum (G.1994.20.14)

Now that you have looked closely, read the following passages from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*.

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## TWEEDLEDEE

They were standing under a tree, each with an arm round the other's neck, and Alice knew which was which in a moment, because one of them had "DUM" embroidered on his collar, and the other "DEE". 'I suppose they've each got "TWEEDLE" round at the back of the collar,' she said to herself.

They stood so still that she quite forgot they were alive, and she was just going round to see if the word "TWEEDLE" was written at the back of each collar, when she was startled by a voice coming from the one marked "DUM":

'If you think we're wax-works,' he said, 'you ought to pay, you know. Wax-works weren't made to be looked at for nothing. Nohow!'

'Contrariwise,' added the one marked "DEE", 'if you think we're alive, you ought to speak.'



But the fat little men only looked at each other and grinned.

They looked so exactly like a couple of great schoolboys, that Alice couldn't help pointing her finger at Tweedledum, and saying 'First Boy!'

'Nohow!' Tweedledum cried out briskly, and shut his mouth up again with a snap.

'Next Boy!' said Alice, passing on to Tweedledee, though she felt quite certain he would only shout out 'Contrariwise!' and so he did.

'You've begun wrong!' cried Tweedledum. 'The first thing in a visit is to say "How d'ye do?" and shake hands!' And here the two brothers gave each other a hug, and then they held out the two hands that were free, to shake hands with her.

Alice did not like shaking hands with either of them first, for fear of hurting the other one's feelings;



'Selfish things!' thought Alice, and she was just going to say 'Good-night' and leave them, when Tweedledum sprang out from under the umbrella, and seized her by the wrist.

'Do you see *that*?' he said, in a voice choking with passion, and his eyes grew large and yellow all in a moment, as he pointed with a trembling finger at a small white thing lying under the tree.

'It's only a rattle,' Alice said, after a careful examination of the little white thing. 'Not a rattle-*snake*, you know,' she added hastily, thinking that he was frightened: 'only an old rattle—quite old and broken.'

'I knew it was!' cried Tweedledum, beginning to stamp about wildly and tear his hair. 'It's spoilt, of course!' Here he looked at Tweedledee, who immediately sat down on the ground, and tried to hide himself under the umbrella.

Alice laid her hand upon his arm and said, in a soothing tone, 'You needn't be so angry about an old rattle! 'But it *isn't* old!' Tweedledum cried, in a greater fury than ever. 'It's *new*, I tell you—I bought it yesterday—my nice NEW RATTLE!' and his voice rose to a perfect scream.

All this time Tweedledee was trying his best to fold up the umbrella, with himself in it: which was such an extraordinary thing to do, that it quite took off Alice's attention from the angry brother. But he couldn't quite succeed, and it ended in his rolling over, bundling up in the umbrella, with only his head out: and there he lay, opening and shutting his mouth and his large eyes—'looking more like a fish than anything else,' Alice thought.

## THE MAD HATTER

'Your hair wants cutting,' said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first speech.

'You shouldn't make personal remarks,' Alice said with some severity; 'it's very rude!'

The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this; but all he said was, 'Why is a raven like a writing-desk?'



The Hatter was the first to break the silence. 'What day of the month is it?' he said, turning to Alice; he had taken his watch out of his pocket, and was looking at it uneasily, shaking it every now and then, and holding it to his ear.

Alice considered a little, and then said, 'The fourth!'

'Two days wrong!' sighed the Hatter. 'I told you butter wouldn't suit the works!' he added, looking angrily at the March Hare.



'Really, now you ask me,' said Alice, very much confused, 'I don't think -'

'Then you shouldn't talk,' said the Hatter.

This piece of rudeness was more than Alice could bear; she got up in great disgust, and walked off ...'



Take off your hat,' the King said to the Hatter.

'It isn't mine,' said the Hatter.

'Stolen!' the King exclaimed, turning to the jury, who instantly made a memorandum of the fact.

'I keep them to sell,' the Hatter added as an explanation; 'I've none of my own. I'm a Hatter!'

Here the Queen put on her spectacles, and began staring at the Hatter, who turned pale and fidgeted.

'Give your evidence,' said the King; 'and don't be nervous, or I'll have you executed on the spot!'

This did not seem to encourage the witness at all; he kept shifting from one foot to the other, looking uneasily at the Queen, and in his confusion he bit a large piece out of his teacup instead of the bread-and-butter.

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Identify 2-3 passages that reveal each character's personality, beliefs, motivations, or physical appearance. Then, compare and contrast Carroll's description of each character (Tweedle-Dee and the Hatter) with the marionettes you just observed.

- What is similar?
- What is different?
- What aspects of each character did Thomas's students choose to amplify? How?
- In your opinion, were the students successful in creating an accurate representation of each character as described by Carroll? Why or why not?
- What might you have done differently?

# INDEPENDENT PRACTICE: CHARACTER SKETCH

Now it's your turn! Imagine that your school is staging an original production. From the script to the stage design, you and your peers are in charge of it all. It is your job to create a unique character for the play. Consider the following questions before filling out a vital statistics report for your character.

**EDUCATORS:** To help your students begin, provide (or decide as a class!) an overarching theme, setting, and/or plot line for the play.

- What makes your character interesting?
- What are their defining physical characteristics and personality traits?
- What are their likes and dislikes?
- What kinds of adventures do they have?
- Choose three adjectives to describe your character.
- What is important in terms of their appearance?
- What is important to them?
- What is important for others to know about them?

After completing a vital statistics report, create a detailed sketch of your character to be used by the marionette fabricators. Consider how the traits and beliefs you described might be expressed through your character's facial expressions, body language, and clothing.

Then share your creation with the class!

**EDUCATORS:** After completing their character sketches, have your students reflect on the activity using the following questions.

- In one sentence, summarize your character's role in the play. How is this role visually relayed to the audience?
- How well does your final design align with your intended goal? What revisions might need to take place to better align design and vision?
- Alma W. Thomas and her students drew from an existing narrative for their production while you and your peers created characters for an original storyline. Consider both approaches. What are the pros and cons of each?
- If you were going to recreate a character from a well-known story, who or what would it be? What aspects of their personality or appearance would you emphasize in order for them to be easily recognizable?

# Vital Statistics Report\*

\*Adapted from The Kennedy Center

## SPEECH:

What are some things my character might say?

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## THOUGHTS:

What are some things my character might think?

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## PHYSICAL DESCRIPTIONS AND ACTIONS:

What does my character look like? What are some things my character might do?

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## EMOTIONS:

What are some things my character might feel?

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