

AARON'S GIFT

Myron Levoy

Aaron Kandel had come to Tompkins Square Park to roller-skate, for the streets near Second Avenue were always too crowded with children and peddlers and old ladies and baby buggies. Though few children had bicycles in those days, almost every child owned a pair of roller skates. And Aaron was, it must be said, a Class A, triple-fantastic roller skater. **A**

Aaron skated back and forth on the wide walkway of the park, pretending he was an aviator in an air race zooming around pylons,¹ which were actually two lampposts. During his third lap around the racecourse, he noticed a pigeon on the grass, behaving very strangely.
10 Aaron skated to the line of benches, then climbed over onto the lawn.

The pigeon was trying to fly, but all it could manage was to flutter and turn round and round in a large circle, as if it were performing a **frenzied** dance. The left wing was only half open and was beating in a clumsy, jerking fashion; it was clearly broken.

Luckily, Aaron hadn't eaten the cookies he'd stuffed into his pocket before he'd gone clacking down the three flights of stairs from his apartment, his skates already on. He broke a cookie into small crumbs and tossed some toward the pigeon. "Here pidge, here pidge," he called. The pigeon spotted the cookie crumbs and, after a moment, stopped
20 thrashing about. It folded its wings as best it could, but the broken wing still stuck half out. Then it strutted over to the crumbs, its head bobbing forth-back, forth-back, as if it were marching a little in front of the rest of the body—perfectly normal, except for that half-open wing which seemed to make the bird stagger sideways every so often.

A CHARACTER

What do you learn about the main character in the first paragraph?

frenzied (frĕn'zēd) *adj.*
wildly excited; frantic

ANALYZE VISUALS

Examine the painting. What can you **infer** about the people and their location?

1. **pylons** (pī'lōnz'): towers marking turning points for airplanes in a race.

Detail of *The Rockefeller Center, New York* (1941), Israel Litwak. Oil on canvas. © Museum of the City of New York/Bridgeman Art Library.



where they didn't exist, by squeezing and tearing pieces of her breakfast roll when his mother wasn't looking.

Aaron didn't really understand his grandmother, for he often saw her by the window having long conversations with the birds, telling them about her days as a little girl in the Ukraine. And once he saw her take her mirror from her handbag and hold it out toward the birds. She told Aaron that she wanted them to see how beautiful they were. Very strange. But
70 Aaron did know that she would love Pidge, because she loved everything.

To his surprise, his mother said he could keep the pigeon, temporarily, because it was sick, and we were all strangers in the land of Egypt,³ and it might not be bad for Aaron to have a pet. *Temporarily.*

The wing was surprisingly easy to fix, for the break showed clearly and Pidge was remarkably patient and still, as if he knew he was being helped. Or perhaps he was just exhausted from all the thrashing about he had done. Two Popsicle sticks served as splints, and strips from an old undershirt were used to tie them in place. Another strip held the wing to the bird's body. **C**

80 Aaron's father arrived home and stared at the pigeon. Aaron waited for the expected storm. But instead, Mr. Kandel asked, "Who *did* this?"

"Me," said Aaron. "And Noreen Callahan."

"Sophie!" he called to his wife. "Did you see this! Ten years old and it's better than Dr. Belasco could do. He's a genius!"

As the days passed, Aaron began training Pidge to be a carrier pigeon. He tied a little cardboard tube to Pidge's left leg and stuck tiny rolled-up sheets of paper with secret messages into it: The Enemy Is Attacking at Dawn. Or: The Guns Are Hidden in the Trunk of the Car. Or: Vincent DeMarco Is a British Spy. Then Aaron would set Pidge down
90 at one end of the living room and put some popcorn at the other end. And Pidge would waddle slowly across the room, cooing softly, while the ends of his bandages trailed along the floor.

At the other end of the room, one of Aaron's friends would take out the message, stick a new one in, turn Pidge around, and aim him at the popcorn that Aaron put down on his side of the room.

And Pidge grew fat and contented on all the popcorn and crumbs and corn and crackers and Aaron's grandmother's breakfast rolls.

Aaron had told all the children about Pidge, but he only let his very best friends come up and play carrier pigeon with him. But telling
100 everyone had been a mistake. A group of older boys from down the block

SOcial STUDIES CONNECTION



Now a country in eastern Europe, Ukraine was under the rule of Russia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

C CONNECT

Think of a time you saw an animal in need. Why do you think Aaron decides to help Pidge?

3. **we were all . . . Egypt:** a Bible reference: "Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19).

had a club—Aaron’s mother called it a gang—and Aaron had longed to join as he had never longed for anything else. To be with them and share their secrets, the secrets of older boys. To be able to enter their clubhouse shack on the empty lot on the next street. To know the password and swear the secret oath. To belong. **D**

About a month after Aaron had brought the pigeon home, Carl, the gang leader, walked over to Aaron in the street and told him he could be a member if he’d bring the pigeon down to be the club mascot. Aaron couldn’t believe it; he immediately raced home to get Pidge. But his mother told Aaron to stay away from those boys, or else. And Aaron, miserable, argued with his mother and pleaded and cried and coaxed. It was no use. Not with those boys. No. **E**

Aaron’s mother tried to change the subject. She told him that it would soon be his grandmother’s sixtieth birthday, a very special birthday indeed, and all the family from Brooklyn and the East Side would be coming to their apartment for a dinner and celebration. Would Aaron try to build something or make something for Grandma? A present made with his own hands would be nice. A decorated box for her hairpins or a crayon picture for her room or anything he liked.

In a flash Aaron knew what to give her: Pidge! Pidge would be her present! Pidge with his wing healed, who might be able to carry messages for her to the doctor or his Aunt Rachel or other people his grandmother seemed to go to a lot. It would be a surprise for everyone. And Pidge would make up for what had happened to Grandma when she’d been a little girl in the Ukraine, wherever that was.

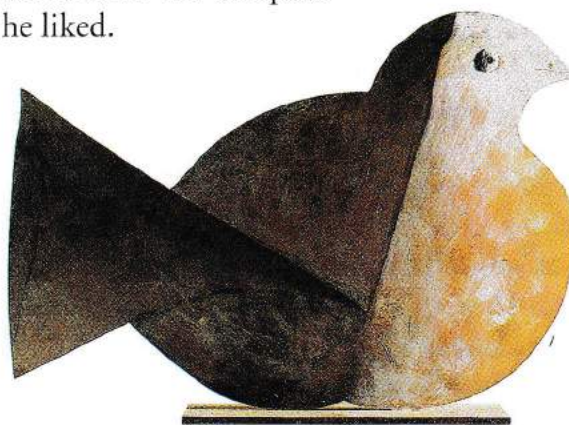
Often, in the evening, Aaron’s grandmother would talk about the old days long ago in the Ukraine, in the same way that she talked to the birds on the back fire escape. She had lived in a village near a place called Kishinev⁴ with hundreds of other poor peasant families like her own. Things hadn’t been too bad under someone called Czar Alexander the Second,⁵ whom Aaron always pictured as a tall handsome man in a gold uniform. But Alexander

D CHARACTER

Reread lines 98–105. What do you learn about Aaron?

E CONNECT

Reread lines 106–112. Think about why Aaron is so upset. What connection can you make that helps you understand his reaction?



La Colombe, Pablo Picasso. Embossed, cut out and painted copper, pencil strokes, 15¾" × 10¾". © 2008 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

4. **Kishinev** (kīsh'ē-nēf'): a city that is now the capital of the country of Moldova and is known today as Chisinau.

5. **Czar (zār) Alexander the Second**: emperor of Russia from 1855 to 1881.

the Second was **assassinated**, and Alexander the Third,⁶ whom Aaron pictured as an ugly man in a black cape, became the czar. And the Jewish people of the Ukraine had no peace anymore.

140 One day, a thundering of horses was heard coming toward the village from the direction of Kishinev. “The Cossacks! The Cossacks!” someone had shouted. The czar’s horsemen! Quickly, quickly, everyone in Aaron’s grandmother’s family had climbed down to the cellar through a little trap door hidden under a mat in the big central room of their shack. But his grandmother’s pet goat, whom she’d loved as much as Aaron loved Pidge and more, had to be left above, because if it had made a sound in the cellar, they would never have lived to see the next morning. They all hid under the wood in the woodbin and waited, hardly breathing.

150 Suddenly, from above, they heard shouts and calls and screams at a distance. And then the noise was in their house. Boots pounding on the floor, and everything breaking and crashing overhead. The smell of smoke and the shouts of a dozen men.

The terror went on for an hour, and then the sound of horses’ hooves faded into the distance. They waited another hour to make sure, and then the father went up out of the cellar and the rest of the family followed. The door to the house had been torn from its hinges, and every piece of furniture was broken. Every window, every dish, every stitch of clothing was totally destroyed, and one wall had been completely bashed in. And on the floor was the goat, lying quietly. Aaron’s grandmother, who was
160 just a little girl of eight at the time, had wept over the goat all day and all night and could not be consoled.

But they had been lucky. For other houses had been burned to the ground. And everywhere, not goats alone, nor sheep, but men and women and children lay quietly on the ground. The word for this sort of **massacre**, Aaron had learned, was *pogrom*. It had been a pogrom. And the men on the horses were Cossacks. Hated word. Cossacks. **F**

And so Pidge would replace that goat of long ago. A pigeon on Second Avenue where no one needed trap doors or secret escape passages or woodpiles to hide under. A pigeon for his grandmother’s sixtieth
170 birthday. *Oh wing, heal quickly so my grandmother can send you flying to everywhere she wants!*

But a few days later, Aaron met Carl in the street again. And Carl told Aaron that there was going to be a meeting that afternoon in which a map was going to be drawn up to show where a secret treasure lay buried on

assassinate
(ə-sās’ə-nāt’) v.
to murder by
surprise attack for
political reasons

massacre (mäs’ə-kər)
n. the act of killing a
number of helpless
humans or animals

F CHARACTER
What does
Aaron’s interest
in his grandmother’s
childhood tell you
about him?

6. **Alexander the Third**: emperor of Russia from 1881 to 1894.



Head with a Bird II (1971), Pablo Picasso. Oil on canvas, 55 cm × 46 cm. Private collection.
© Bridgeman Art Library © 2008 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

the empty lot. “Bring the pigeon and you can come into the shack. We got a badge for you. A new kinda membership badge with a secret code on the back.”

Aaron ran home, his heart pounding almost as fast as the pigeon’s. He took Pidge in his hands and carried him out the door while his
180 mother was busy in the kitchen making stuffed cabbage, his father’s favorite dish. And by the time he reached the street, Aaron had decided to take the bandages off. Pidge would look like a real pigeon again, and none of the older boys would laugh or call him a bundle of rags. **G**

ANALYZE VISUALS
Compare this painting to your mental picture of Aaron and Pidge.

G CHARACTER
Reread lines 167–183. What does Aaron’s choice to join the boys tell you about him?

Gently, gently he removed the bandages and the splints and put them in his pocket in case he should need them again. But Pidge seemed to hold his wing properly in place.

When he reached the empty lot, Aaron walked up to the shack, then hesitated. Four bigger boys were there. After a moment, Carl came out and commanded Aaron to hand Pidge over.

190 “Be careful,” said Aaron. “I just took the bandages off.”

“Oh sure, don’t worry,” said Carl. By now Pidge was used to people holding him, and he remained calm in Carl’s hands.

“OK,” said Carl. “Give him the badge.” And one of the older boys handed Aaron his badge with the code on the back. “Now light the fire,” said Carl.

“What . . . what fire?” asked Aaron.

“The fire. You’ll see,” Carl answered.

“You didn’t say nothing about a fire,” said Aaron. “You didn’t say nothing to—”

200 “Hey!” said Carl. “I’m the leader here. And you don’t talk unless I tell you that you have p’mission. Light the fire, Al.”

The boy named Al went out to the side of the shack, where some wood and cardboard and old newspapers had been piled into a huge mound. He struck a match and held it to the newspapers.

“OK,” said Carl. “Let’s get ’er good and hot. Blow on it. Everybody blow.”

Aaron’s eyes stung from the smoke, but he blew alongside the others, going from side to side as the smoke shifted toward them and away.

“Let’s fan it,” said Al.

In a few minutes, the fire was crackling and glowing with a bright yellow-orange flame.

210 “Get me the rope,” said Carl.

One of the boys brought Carl some cord and Carl, without a word, wound it twice around the pigeon, so that its wings were tight against its body.

“What . . . what are you *doing!*” shouted Aaron. “You’re hurting his wing!”

“Don’t worry about his wing,” said Carl. “We’re gonna throw him into the fire. And when we do, we’re gonna swear an oath of loyalty to—”

“No! *No!*” shouted Aaron, moving toward Carl. **H**

“Grab him!” called Carl. “Don’t let him get the pigeon!”

220 But Aaron had leaped right across the fire at Carl, taking him completely by surprise. He threw Carl back against the shack and hit out at his face with both fists. Carl slid down to the ground, and the pigeon rolled out of his hands. Aaron scooped up the pigeon and ran, pretending he was on roller skates so that he would go faster and faster. And as he ran across the lot he

H CHARACTER

Reread lines 211–218.

What does Aaron’s reaction to the boys’ plan reveal about him?

pulled the cord off Pidge and tried to find a place, *any* place, to hide him. But the boys were on top of him, and the pigeon slipped from Aaron's hands.

"Get him!" shouted Carl.

Aaron thought of the worst, the most horrible thing he could shout at the boys. "Cossacks!" he screamed. "You're all Cossacks!"

230 Two boys held Aaron back while the others tried to catch the pigeon. Pidge fluttered along the ground just out of reach, skittering one way and then the other. Then the boys came at him from two directions. But suddenly Pidge beat his wings in rhythm, and rose up, up, over the roof of the nearest tenement, up over Second Avenue toward the park.

With the pigeon gone, the boys turned toward Aaron and tackled him to the ground and punched him and tore his clothes and punched him some more. Aaron twisted and turned and kicked and punched back, shouting "Cossacks! Cossacks!" And somehow the word gave him the strength to tear away from them.

240 **W**hen Aaron reached home, he tried to go past the kitchen quickly so his mother wouldn't see his bloody face and torn clothing. But it was no use; his father was home from work early that night and was seated in the living room. In a moment Aaron was surrounded by his mother, father, and grandmother, and in another moment he had told them everything that had happened, the words tumbling out between his broken sobs. Told them of the present he had planned, of the pigeon for a goat, of the gang, of the badge with the secret code on the back, of the shack, and the fire, and the pigeon's flight over the tenement roof.

And Aaron's grandmother kissed him and thanked him for his present
250 which was even better than the pigeon.

"What present?" asked Aaron, trying to stop the series of sobs.

And his grandmother opened her pocketbook and handed Aaron her mirror and asked him to look. But all Aaron saw was his dirty, bruised face and his torn shirt.

Aaron thought he understood, and then, again, he thought he didn't. How could she be so happy when there really was no present? And why pretend that there was?

Later that night, just before he fell asleep, Aaron tried to imagine what his grandmother might have done with the pigeon. She would have fed
260 it, and she certainly would have talked to it, as she did to all the birds, and . . . and then she would have let it go free. Yes, of course Pidge's flight to freedom must have been the gift that had made his grandmother so happy. Her goat has escaped from the Cossacks at last, Aaron thought, half dreaming. And he fell asleep with a smile. ☺

Comprehension

1. **Recall** What is Aaron doing when he finds the wounded pigeon?
2. **Recall** How do Aaron’s mother and father react when he brings the pigeon home?
3. **Summarize** What happens when Aaron goes to the shack?



READING STANDARD
2.6.07 Determine what characters are like

Literary Analysis

4. **Describe the Main Character** Through his thoughts, feelings, and actions, what have you learned about Aaron’s values and personality traits?
5. **Examine Motivation** What is Aaron’s motivation, or reason, for giving Pidge to his grandmother as a gift?
6. **Analyze Flashback** The story of Aaron’s grandmother’s past is a flashback—a description of a conversation or event that took place before the beginning of the story. How is the flashback important to your understanding of Aaron’s family—and of the events in the story?
7. **Interpret** Reread lines 65–70. In this passage, Aaron tells us that his grandmother would hold a mirror toward birds so that they could see how beautiful they were. Why, at the end of the story, does she hold a mirror out for Aaron?

Comparing Characters

Now that you have read about Aaron, finish filling in your chart. Add the final question and answer it.

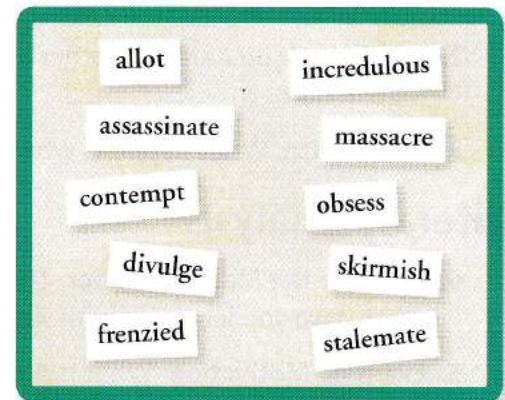
	Jerry	Aaron
What are the character’s traits?		
What problems does he face?	whether to spend his money on his father’s present or buy cards	to join the club or obey his mother
What choices does he make?	to sell the card to Rollie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to fix the bird’s wing • to join the boys’ club
In what ways are the characters similar and different?		

Vocabulary in Context

VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Synonyms are two or more words that have the same meaning. **Antonyms** are words that have opposite meanings. Decide whether the words in each pair are synonyms or antonyms.

1. skirmish/battle
2. massacre/slaughter
3. stalemate/progress
4. incredulous/believing
5. frenzied/calm
6. divulge/expose
7. contempt/admiration
8. allot/dispense
9. assassinate/kill
10. obsess/worry



VOCABULARY IN WRITING

Think about someone you know who is similar to either Jerry or Aaron. Describe the person using three or more vocabulary words from the list. You could start this way.

EXAMPLE SENTENCE

Just like Jerry, my friend Andre will **obsess** over things like trading cards.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: CONTEXT CLUES

Context clues may be found in the words, sentences, and paragraphs that surround an unknown word. These clues can help you interpret unfamiliar words and ideas in stories that you read. **Examples** are one type of context clue. In "Aaron's Gift," for instance, you can figure out the meaning of *frenzied* from the other descriptions of the bird's movements. Example clues are introduced by signal words like *such as*, *especially*, *including*, *like*, and *for example*.

PRACTICE Use the example clue to help you define each boldfaced word.

1. Look for a **periodical**, such as a weekly or monthly magazine.
2. He was guilty of many **peccadillos**, including letting the screen door slam shut.
3. She was fond of quoting **maxims** like "Haste makes waste."
4. Elena loves **crudités**, especially celery sticks and baby carrots.



ILLINOIS OBJECTIVES

READING STANDARD

1.6.03 Determine the meaning of a word using word, sentence, and cross-sentence clues



VOCABULARY PRACTICE

For more practice, go to the Vocabulary Center at ClassZone.com.

Writing for Assessment

1. READ THE PROMPT

You've just read two stories about boys making difficult choices. In writing assessments, you will often be asked to compare and contrast two works that are similar in some way, such as two short stories with similar characters.

PROMPT

In three paragraphs, compare Jerry in "President Cleveland, Where Are You?" to Aaron in "Aaron's Gift." Consider each character's traits, the conflicts he faces, and the choice or choices he has to make. Use details from each of the two stories to support your response.

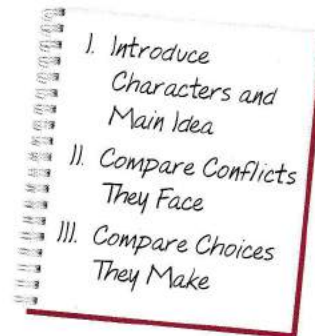
STRATEGIES IN ACTION

1. I need to identify the **similarities and differences** between the two boys.
2. I should include **examples** from the stories about the boys' **personal qualities, problems, and choices** to support my ideas.

2. PLAN YOUR WRITING

Using the chart you filled in as you read, identify the ways in which the characters are alike and different. Then think about how to present these similarities and differences.

- Decide on a main idea for your response.
- Review the stories to find details that support your ideas.
- Create an outline to organize your response. This sample outline shows one way to organize your paragraphs.



3. DRAFT YOUR RESPONSE

Paragraph 1 Include the title and author of each story. Introduce each main character and summarize his traits. Also include your main idea.

Paragraph 2 Explain the problems that each character faces, using examples from the stories. Include your position on whether the boys' conflicts are similar or different.

Paragraph 3 Explain the choices each character makes. Then explain how the boys are similar and different based on the choices they make.

Revision Make sure it's always clear which boy you are writing about by using names when appropriate and not overusing the pronoun *he*.