“Eleven”
BY SANDRA CISNEROS

OVERVIEW

RATIONALE
In the poignant story “Eleven,” written by Sandra Cisneros, a young girl named Rachel recounts the devastation she feels when her birthday is ruined by an insensitive teacher. Using first-person narration, Cisneros's protagonist is a complex character; at once childish as well as wise beyond her years, Rachel's vacillation between little girl and sage young lady highlights how age encompasses more than a number. Students will enjoy the way Cisneros captures a young voice, and many will identify with Rachel's “coming of age” experience and understand her complicated feelings about growing older. The story provides teachers an accessible and compelling text to teach students point of view and help them examine rich figurative language.

SUGGESTIONS FOR USE
A fairly short work, “Eleven” can be read aloud as a class, with partners, or independently by the students. The text study questions move through the short story paragraph by paragraph and help students comprehend plot (and its five parts), characterization, point of view, figurative language, and theme. The teacher can lead the close reading of the text and elicit student responses as a class activity. Alternatively, students can work with partners or in small groups, responding to the questions while the teacher provides additional support by circulating the room and working with individual students. Two different performance assessments are included after the questions, each targeting a different Common Core State Standard (CCSS) writing standard. Teachers can include this story—and the text study’s lesson reviewing in literary elements and plot components—in a larger short story and/or poetry unit with a focus on creative writing. “Eleven” would also fit well into a thematic unit exploring the trials and tribulations of growing up (paired with an anchor novel such as Peter Pan).
COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

(a) Focus Standards

Students will practice the following standards through the analysis of the text and the completion of the performance assessment.

RL.6.3 Describe how a particular story’s or drama’s plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.

RL.6.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

RL.6.6 Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.

W.6.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

W.6.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

VOCABULARY

The story’s vocabulary will not present a challenge to most students. There may be a few unfamiliar words; these have been identified below and should be discussed before reading the story. In addition, some of the text study’s questions include teaching terminology that should be explained before students provide their responses (these terms are also included below). Finally, teachers should consider reviewing a story’s basic plot line (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution) as well as certain literary elements (point of view and figurative language).

Academic Vocabulary

- rattling
- raggedy
- nonsense
- sensitivity
- authentic
- complex
- perceptiveness
- recount
- distressing
- recollection
- exaggerate
- indisputable
- transfer

Teaching Terminology

- exposition
- rising action
- climax
- falling action
- resolution
- protagonist
- syntax
- figurative language
- metaphor
- simile
- first-person point of view
Note to teachers: The following questions move through the text paragraph by paragraph. The questions are also grouped according to what part of the story they represent (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution).

1. In the story’s opening sentence, Rachel, the protagonist, starts off by saying, “What they don’t understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you’re eleven, you’re also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one.” Who is “they” in the above sentence? Who is “you”? Why don’t they “understand” and “never tell” what is true about birthdays? What is true about birthdays, according to Rachel?
   - “They” is a pronoun referring to adults.
   - “You” is a pronoun referring to children.
   - Adults do not share the truth about what it is like to get older because they may have forgotten how it feels for a child.
   - When a child becomes a year older, she is still the other ages she has been (which Rachel includes in a list counting backwards from age eleven). She might be considered older, but the other years of her life—and how she was defined during those years—still make up who she is. From Rachel’s perspective, she might be eleven, but experiences she has an eleven-year-old girl might elicit a reaction from a younger version of herself.

2. Rachel describes the disappointment she faces upon waking up on the morning of her birthday. She states, “You open your eyes and everything’s just like yesterday, only it’s today.” What might she have expected to feel upon opening her eyes?
   - For a young child, the idea of growing older is somewhat magical. A child sees how age changes people and confers more privileges and respect upon them. When Rachel opens her eyes, she expects to see herself differently. Instead, she opens her eyes to what is real and factual; she is not different at all. She is the same as “yesterday.” The magic of what a birthday represents is no longer as powerful as it once was.

3. What does Rachel mean when she says she feels like she is still ten “underneath the year that makes [her] eleven”?
   - “Underneath” suggests that the age before eleven—ten—is just beneath the surface of who Rachel is. When something is underneath something else, it still can affect what lies on top. Using the word “underneath” lets the reader know that Rachel’s other ages—the other Rachels she has been throughout her short life—continue to impact how she feels and behaves.

4. Rachel explains what it is like to have all these ages “underneath” her skin by describing how on certain days, she can behave and feel like a much younger Rachel. She notices that her mother also still “feels” these other parts of herself, such as the part of her mother who is “[feeling] three” when “she’s sad and needs to cry.” What does this insight about her mother’s inner three-year-old tell you about Rachel’s sensitivity and intelligence?
   - Rachel might be turning eleven, but her ability to understand how her mother feels—and put it into words—far surpasses what a typical eleven-year-old can do. By comforting her mother and offering advice, she is acting as if she is older. Again, a number cannot accurately define Rachel’s age.
Rachel's voice is similar to that of a young girl. Looking at the first two paragraphs, what words does Rachel use that show you she is not an adult? Next, look at some of the sentences in these paragraphs. Many begin with the conjunction “and.” How does Cisneros use this type of syntax to make Rachel’s voice sound authentic?

- Rachel uses words that are identifiable as childlike: like, mama, okay, stupid, maybe. These words help Rachel sound real to her readers; these are words that an eleven-year-old would use when speaking.
- Beginning sentences with the conjunction “and” sounds like Rachel is thinking aloud to herself, sharing whatever thought comes into her mind. She speaks the way young people talk, stringing ideas together without worrying about grammar rules.

In the third paragraph, Rachel sets up a series of similes that are both simple and complex in their comparison to growing up. Explain the meaning of each simile. What do these similes suggest about Rachel's perceptiveness?

- All three items (the onion, the tree rings, and the wooden dolls) consist of layers. The onion's skins are layered, the tree rings encircle each other with every passing year, and each wooden doll fits inside the next largest one. All compare to a child who is the sum of all the years she has lived; in a sense, each previous age is still a part of her makeup.
- Like her ability to understand her mother’s feelings, Rachel can process her situation with unusual clarity and maturity. She chooses items for comparison that she knows (such as her wooden dolls) or is familiar with (she probably has learned about tree rings in school), but how she connects these known items to an abstract concept (growing up) demonstrates her keen insight.

When Rachel talks about her age, or past ages, she uses the verb “feel” to explain what it is like being a certain age. She states, “And you don't feel smart eleven, not until you're almost twelve.” What is the difference between being eleven and feeling eleven?

- Being eleven is a fact. A child becomes a new age when he or she has a birthday. Feeling a certain age is more complicated, for it reflects the way a person sees how he or she measures up to a certain age's expectations. Rachel says feeling your age “takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say eleven when they ask you.” Rachel knows that being older and feeling older do not happen simultaneously; being older happens automatically whereas feeling older depends on your experiences.

Rachel recounts the distressing incident that happens at school on the day of her birthday. She begins her recollection by saying, “Only today I wish I didn't have only eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin Band-Aid box.” How does Rachel's choice of the words “rattling,” “pennies,” and “tin” indicate to the reader that she is uncomfortable?

- Rachel is confronted with a situation that makes her wish she were not a child. Her inability to address her teacher in a confident way makes her feel inadequate and helpless. She equates the number of years a person has with the amount of power a person has. She “would have known what to say when Mrs. Price put the sweater on [her] desk” if she had been older.
- Rattling means producing short, sharp sounds; pennies in a tin box would make such a sound, especially if the box were shaken. Rachel equates her insubstantial years as pennies (money that has the least value); she feels her age works against her because it leaves her feeling powerless. The sound imagery produced by the simile emphasizes her discomfort at being the focus of Mrs. Price's negativity. She has the spotlight on her, unlike her classmates, who are nameless and part of the group called “everybody.”
What about the sweater bothers Rachel? How and why does she exaggerate its negative qualities?

- Rachel fixates on how the sweater is ugly, cheap, and old, highlighting the sweater’s “plastic buttons,” “stretched out” sleeves, and “raggedy” condition. She also describes it as “a big red mountain.”
- She exaggerates what the sweater looks like by suggesting it is “maybe a thousand years old” and could be used “for a jump rope.” She exaggerates these details because she wants to put distance between herself and the sweater; something that old and ugly could never be hers, which she stresses when she says, “Even if it did belong to me I wouldn’t say so.”
- Comparing the sweater to a “big red mountain” exaggerates its size; in Rachel’s eyes, it is enormous. The sweater stands in the way of Rachel standing up and advocating for herself; she does not feel mature in the long shadow this “mountain” casts over her birthday. No matter how much she moves her chair away from it or how far she pushes it away with her ruler, it still marks her by lying on her desk. Its color makes it even more noticeable; like Rachel’s embarrassment and shame, the sweater’s red color makes it stand out and capture everyone’s attention.

When her classmate Sylvia Saldivar suggests to the teacher that Rachel is the owner of the sweater, how does Rachel react? What insight about Rachel does this reaction provide?

- To feel better about herself, Rachel says in her mind what she cannot say aloud; she calls Sylvia Saldivar “stupid.” Her use of alliteration (the repetition of the same first letter in a series of words) emphasizes how strongly she feels about being wronged (and possibly being picked on by this particular girl).
- Rachel assumes that Sylvia does not like her without providing any logical proof. Rachel feels that “maybe” Sylvia suggests her name to Mrs. Price because she is “skinny” (and therefore easy to pick on). Rachel’s use of the word “maybe” lets the reader know that she really is guessing what motivates Sylvia. Her reaction reveals how insecure she feels when she is connected to the “raggedy” sweater. Sylvia’s comment has touched a nerve.

Throughout the story, Rachel matter-of-factly summarizes what to her seem the indisputable facts of life. For example, she ends her thoughts with sentences such as, “That’s the way it is,” or “That’s how being eleven years old is.” What makes Rachel conclude that “because [Mrs. Price] is older and the teacher, she’s right and I’m not”?

- Rachel instinctively knows that an adult’s version of reality will always trump a child’s. Even though Rachel knows that the sweater is not hers, the truth does not matter if her teacher disagrees with her. When Rachel shares that she wishes she were 102 years old, this desire showcases Rachel’s understanding that power comes with age. Being eleven, she has none.
- These matter-of-fact declarations seem like something Rachel has heard her parents say to justify difficult decisions or explain illogical events. Perhaps Rachel has been told that “because Mrs. Price is older and the teacher,” Rachel cannot argue back or challenge her.

After Mrs. Price places the sweater on Rachel’s desk, Rachel repeats in her head the phrase, “Not mine, not mine, not mine.” What does this phrase reveal about Rachel’s state of mind? Why might Rachel keep silently repeating the phrase?

- The phrase “not mine, not mine, not mine” mimics what a three-year-old might say. Rachel even acknowledges this when she says, “the part of me that’s three wants to come out of my eyes” as she sits at her desk staring at the red sweater.
- She repeats the phrase almost as if she is wishing the sweater away. She squeezes her eyes “shut tight” and retreats in her mind to a happy place by repeating to herself, “I am eleven, eleven” and by thinking about how her mama and papa will make a cake and sing for her. But when she opens her eyes, the sweater is still there.
- She again repeats the “not mine” series of phrases, but this time she physically moves herself and her things as far away as possible from the offending clothing, as if distance might sever the connection between Rachel and the sweater. Again, this action is a childlike and futile wish to control reality.
Since her wish is not coming true and the sweater is still seen as hers, she transfers her anger from Mrs. Price to the sweater itself. What does she imagine doing to the sweater? Why might these thoughts help her keep her emotions in check so that she does not cry?

- She pictures throwing the sweater “over the schoolyard fence” or “bunch[ing] it up into a little ball and toss[ing] it in the alley.”
- She needs to transfer her anger from her teacher to the sweater because she believes she is not allowed to be angry with an adult. She cannot articulate her feelings to Mrs. Price, which leaves her feeling powerless. Therefore, it is less painful to feel angry toward the sweater than insecure about herself.

For a second time, Rachel admits “I wish I wasn’t eleven” and says that “all the years inside of me—ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one—are pushing at the back of my eyes.” What does the list of numbers sound like to you (note that there is no “and” this time separating each number from the next)? What is happening that causes Rachel to fall apart?

- The list of numbers sounds like a countdown. It is the signal that Rachel can no longer hold back her tears.
- Rachel falls apart in this paragraph because not only is she unable to distance herself from the sweater, she is now forced to wear the sweater. After putting it on, she “[stands] there with [her] arms apart” as “if the sweater hurts [her] and it does.” Now she wears the sweater and with it her visible shame and embarrassment; these emotions are what hurt Rachel.

When Rachel begins crying in front of everyone, she admits, “I wish I was invisible but I’m not.” In the next sentence, she says, “I’m eleven and it’s my birthday today and I’m crying like I’m three in front of everybody.” What has Rachel learned about herself because of the incident with the sweater?

- Wishing for things to be true does not guarantee anything. Rachel has wished before for certain things: she has wished to be 102 years old so the right words will come out of her mouth when she needs to defend herself, and now she wishes she could disappear so that the hurt will stop. But she cannot close her eyes anymore and hope the sweater disappears. She cannot escape a painful situation, so instead, she states the sad facts: her birthday has been ruined because she has been publicly shamed. Growing up means accepting, rather than avoiding, reality.

When she “finally lets go,” Rachel’s description comes out as a giant run-on sentence seemingly full of grammatical mistakes: “My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth because I can’t stop the little animal noises from coming out of me, until there aren’t any more tears left in my eyes, and it’s just my body shaking like when you have the hiccups, and my whole head hurts like when you drink milk too fast.” How does the run-on sentence mirror how Rachel is feeling?

- The run-on sentence is missing verbs, commas, and periods; it does not follow grammatical rules. Similarly, Rachel’s outburst does not follow the rules of how eleven-year-old young ladies should behave. The structure of the sentence mirrors her emotional catharsis, containing all the feelings that Rachel has been holding back. Once she can no longer fight the emotions “pushing at the back of her eyes,” she cannot control the way the words pour out of her and fill several lines of text.
17 After Phyllis Lopez admits that the sweater is hers; Mrs. Price does not apologize to Rachel for being wrong, but instead “pretends like everything’s okay.” After everything else that has happened, why would Mrs. Price’s lack of an apology be considered the “worst part” of Rachel’s day?

- When Mrs. Price refuses to acknowledge that she was wrong—and Rachel was right—she prevents Rachel from reclaiming her birthday. Rachel feels degraded when Mrs. Price makes her take false ownership of the sweater, and she is shamed by her public outburst; by not apologizing, Mrs. Price never gives Rachel the chance to regain her dignity.

18 When Rachel says, “it’s too late” in the second to last paragraph, what does she mean? Is it too late?

- It is too late for Rachel to have a “happy” birthday.
- Rachel will still have a party later that night, and there will be people (her mama and papa) who will most likely shower her with all types of love (like a homemade cake and “candles and presents”). But Rachel has altered her expectations of what her birthday will be like; this birthday will always be associated with feeling diminished, having a “little voice,” and feeling “stupid” in front of her teacher and classmates.

19 Why does Rachel wish to be 102 years old at the end of the story? How would being 102 feel “far away like a runaway balloon”?

- Rachel wants to be 102 at the end of the story because she wants this birthday—and the humiliating experience she has endured—to be in her very distant past.
- Being 102 would feel “far away like a runaway balloon” because she would not be able to feel the shame and embarrassment overshadowing her eleventh birthday. At 102, age eleven (and the emotional turmoil associated with this birthday) would be buried very deeply underneath all her other ages. By being “far away like a runaway balloon,” Rachel will finally create the distance she craves between herself and the red sweater.
- A “runaway balloon” is a perfect simile for describing Rachel’s complicated desires: she wants to escape from the incident at school; she wishes to feel eleven and no longer controlled by her other ages (especially age three); and she desires simultaneously to be “invisible.” (The last paragraph’s countdown of Rachel’s past ages seems to emphasize this desire for invisibility; after one, what is there? She chooses 102, an age most people do not realistically reach.) All of these wishes and desires are captured by the image of a balloon becoming a tinier and tinier speck in the sky.

GRAMMAR

Students should review run-on sentences and how to correct them. For example, they should be directed to the sentence found near the end of the story, which begins “My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth…” Students can come up with different versions to correct the run-on’s punctuation. Finally, teachers can discuss why an author might choose to use a run-on sentence and when a writer should avoid using one.
PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT ONE

Note to teachers: Working with a partner, students will complete a pre-writing activity in preparation for the performance assessment. This activity will ask students to analyze how the plot of “Eleven” builds toward a resolution, as well as to track how the protagonist responds and changes as the story progresses.

Pre-writing prompt: The plot of a story can be described as resembling a mountain. As the story’s rising action builds and builds, the climax (or highest point of the story) is finally reached when the protagonist’s struggle is at its “peak,” or most intense. In order to better conceptualize what this “plot mountain” resembles in “Eleven,” answer the following questions with a partner. Either respond to each question in separate paragraphs or complete a graphic organizer that creates this “mountain” with textual evidence.

1. What do we know about Rachel and her situation as the story begins?
2. What major problems or conflicts does Rachel face and how does she try to solve her problems?
3. What is the emotional high point (or the turning point) of the story?
4. How does Rachel resolve her conflicts? Are there any issues that are unresolved by the end of the story?

ESSAY PROMPT

By the conclusion to the story, does Rachel resolve her conflicts? Does her birthday wish to feel eleven come true? Your essay response should:

- Identify and explain Rachel’s main struggles in the story.
- Identify and explain the conflicts developed in the story’s rising action.
- Identify and explain the conflicts addressed in the story’s climax.
- Identify and explain the resolution of the struggles or conflicts by the end of the story.

ALTERNATIVE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

Sandra Cisneros’s use of powerful similes and striking details helps the reader understand how Rachel thinks and imagine how Rachel feels. Similes, such as describing the sweater as a “big red mountain,” showcase Rachel’s ability to grasp sophisticated ideas while also capturing her childlike perspective.

After analyzing how Cisneros uses similes and details to create a character, you will practice using figurative language in your own writing. Your task is to compose a personal narrative describing your most embarrassing moment or a time when you felt ashamed or humiliated. (You can substitute another person—such as a parent, friend or completely fictional person—for yourself, but please use first-person point of view for the story’s narration.) In the story, include all five components of plot (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution). Also, include at least three similes or metaphors that help convey how the main character is feeling.
“Eleven” by Sandra Cisneros

To get you started, consider the following questions:

- Where does the story begin?
- Who are the main characters in the story?
- What causes the embarrassing/humiliating event to occur?
- How does the main character deal with this event? What about the other characters?
- Why does the event cause the main character to feel ashamed?
- How is the problem resolved?
- Does the story have a sad or happy ending? A funny ending?

Note to teachers: If this performance assessment is chosen, students will benefit if teachers initially review and map the plot components of “Eleven” as a class activity.