At a Glance

**Approximate Grade Range:** 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

**Genre:** Fiction

**Topic:** An embarrassing moment on her eleventh birthday causes Rachel to reflect on growing up.

**Author:** Sandra Cisneros

**Source:** Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories (1991)

**Special Note:** used on MCAS 2004 retest

**Difficulty Index:** Considerate . . . . . . . . . . . . Challenging

**Structure:**

**Purpose:**

**Richness:**

**Relationships:**

**Vocabulary:**

**Style:**

**Fountas & Pinnell Rating:** Z

**Lexile Measure:** 900L

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Sometimes even the most special kind of day can be ruined by something unexpected. Read the following story in which Sandra Cisneros describes such a day in the life of a girl named Rachel.

**Eleven**

by Sandra Cisneros

1 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. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today. And you don't feel eleven at all. You feel like you're still ten. And you are—underneath the year that makes you eleven.

2 Like some days you might say something stupid, and that's the part of you that's still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mama's lap because you're scared, and that's the part of you that's five. And maybe one day when you're all grown up maybe you will need to cry like you're three, and that's okay. That's what I tell Mama when she's sad and needs to cry. Maybe she's feeling three.

3 Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. That's how being eleven years old is.

4 You don't feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say Eleven when they ask you. And you don't feel smart eleven, not until you're almost twelve. That's the way it is.

5 Only today I wish I didn't have only eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin Band-Aid box. Today I wish I was one hundred and two instead of eleven because if I was one hundred and two I’d have known what to say when Mrs. Price put the red sweater on my desk. I would’ve known how to tell her it wasn’t mine instead of just sitting there with that look on my face and nothing coming out of my mouth.

6 “Whose is this?” Mrs. Price says, and she holds the red sweater up in the air for all the class to see. “Whose? It’s been sitting in the coatroom for a month.”

Continued on next page
“Not mine,” says everybody. “Not me.”

“It has to belong to somebody,” Mrs. Price keeps saying, but nobody can remember. It’s an ugly sweater with red plastic buttons and a collar and sleeves all stretched out like you could use it for a jump rope. It’s maybe a thousand years old and even if it belonged to me I wouldn’t say so.

Maybe because I’m skinny, maybe because she doesn’t like me, that stupid Sylvia Saldívar says, “I think it belongs to Rachel.” An ugly sweater like that, all raggedy and old, but Mrs. Price believes her. Mrs. Price takes the sweater and puts it right on my desk, but when I open my mouth nothing comes out.

“That’s not, I don’t, you’re not…Not mine,” I finally say in a little voice that was maybe me when I was four.

“Of course it’s yours,” Mrs. Price says. “I remember you wearing it once.” Because she’s older and the teacher, she’s right and I’m not.

Not mine, not mine, not mine, but Mrs. Price is already turning to page thirty-two, and math problem number four. I don’t know why but all of a sudden I’m feeling sick inside, like the part of me that’s three wants to come out of my eyes, only I squeeze them shut tight and bite down on my teeth real hard and try to remember that today I am eleven, eleven. Mama is making a cake for me tonight, and when Papa comes home everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you.

But when the sick feeling goes away and I open my eyes, the red sweater’s still sitting there like a big red mountain. I move the red sweater to the corner of my desk with my ruler. I move my pencil and books and eraser as far from it as possible. I even move my chair a little to the right. Not mine, not mine, not mine.

In my head I’m thinking how long till lunchtime, how long till I can take the red sweater and throw it over the schoolyard fence, or leave it hanging on a parking meter, or bunch it up into a little ball and toss it across the alley. Except when math period ends Mrs. Price says loud and in front of everybody, “Now, Rachel, that’s enough,” because she sees that I’ve shoved the red sweater to the tippy-tip corner of my desk and it’s hanging all over the edge like a waterfall, but I don’t care.

“Rachel,” Mrs. Price says. She says it like she’s getting mad. “You put that sweater on right now and no more nonsense.”

“But it’s not—“

“Now!” Mrs. Price says.

This is when I wish I wasn’t eleven, because 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 when I put one arm through one sleeve of the sweater that smells like cottage cheese, and then the other arm through the other and stand there with my arms apart like if the sweater hurts me and it does, all itchy and full of germs that aren’t even mine.
That’s when everything I’ve been holding in since this morning, since when Mrs. Price put the sweater on my desk, finally lets go, and all of a sudden I’m crying in front of everybody. I wish I was invisible but I’m not. I’m eleven and it’s my birthday today and I’m crying like I’m three in front of everybody. I put my head down on the desk and bury my face in my stupid clown-sweater arms. 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.

But the worst part is right before the bell rings for lunch. That stupid Phyllis Lopez, who is even dumber than Sylvia Saldivar, says she remembers the red sweater is hers! I take it off right away and give to her, only Mrs. Price pretends like everything’s okay.

Today I’m eleven. There’s a cake Mama’s making for tonight, and when Papa comes home from work we’ll eat it. There’ll be candles and presents and everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you, Rachel, only it’s too late.

I’m eleven today. I’m eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one, but I wish I was one hundred and two. I wish I was anything but eleven, because I want today to be far away already, far away like a runaway balloon, like a tiny o in the sky, so tiny-tiny you have to close your eyes to see it.

**Spotlight On: Sandra Cisneros**

Sandra Cisneros was born in 1954 and raised in Chicago’s South Side, the only daughter in a family with six sons. The family traveled often between Chicago and her father’s hometown in Mexico. While studying writing at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop in 1978, Cisneros realized that her perspectives as a Chicana (Mexican-American woman) were not represented in mainstream American literature. She explores the cultural conflicts, challenges of growing up poor, and sense of alienation she experienced in her first and most popular book, *The House on Mango Street*.

**Structure:** The narration of the embarassing incident with the sweater lasts from ¶5 to ¶20; the passage then takes a step back and connects to the ideas from the beginning. The framing–narrating–reframing structure of this passage could make it an excellent choice for a craft mini-lesson on developing a scene with vivid details.

**Open Response Prompt:**

1. Explain what Rachel means by this statement from ¶3: “Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one.” Use relevant and specific information from the story to support your answer.

2. Write an essay describing your most embarassing moment. Use vivid details to bring your experience to life for the reader.

3. Write a story from the point of view of someone who is at least five years younger than you.

4. Take Rachel’s story and turn it into a poem.

5. Continue the story, describing what happened when Rachel returned home at the end of her school day.
**Teacher Guide for FAST-R Passage: Eleven**

**Fiction**

The annotated answer key below highlights common reasons students might choose each answer, and the sidebar gives more insight into the question types, to help you understand patterns of student responses. Always make time to follow up with students in conferences or small groups to probe their thinking, teach in response to patterns, and help them apply effective reading and thinking strategies to their everyday reading.

**Note:** You may find it helpful to refer to the “Types and Levels of Questions on FAST-R” sheet from your teacher resource folder as you examine your students’ responses. The icon in the right-hand column, below, corresponds to that sheet’s more detailed explanations of the kinds of thinking each type of question asks of readers.

1. In the story, Rachel thinks of herself as being ages ten, nine, eight, and so on. What does this suggest to the reader about Rachel?
   - A. She makes excuses for her poor behavior. (OOB)
   - B. She is the product of everything that has happened to her. **✓**
   - C. She distracts herself when she feels unhappy. (OOP2 ¶1-2)
   - D. She knows why birthdays are such joyful occasions. (OOB)

   **MI1:** Determine implicit meaning from ideas in context

2. According to Rachel, "the part of you that's five" sometimes needs to
   - A. feel smart. (OOP2 ¶4) **✓**
   - B. sit on your mama’s lap.
   - C. feel sad and cry. (OOP1 ¶2)
   - D. suck your thumb. (OOB)

   **FE1:** Identify evidence explicitly stated in the text

3. In paragraph 5, why does Rachel say that she wishes she was "one hundred and two instead of eleven"?
   - A. She does not want to go to school anymore. (OOB)
   - B. She wants to be a teacher when she grows up. (OOP2 ¶11)
   - C. She is not allowed to do things that adults can do. (OOB) **✓**
   - D. She wishes she had more life experience.

   **MI1:** Determine implicit meaning from phrases in context

4. Rachel compares "growing old" to
   - A. a tin Band-Aid box. (OOP2 ¶5) **✓**
   - B. a red sweater. (OOP2 ¶5)
   - C. a big red mountain. (OOP2 13)
   - D. rings inside a tree trunk.

   **FE1:** Identify evidence explicitly stated in the text

5. Rachel’s words in paragraph 10 contain an ellipsis (…). What is the author probably trying to show?
   - A. Rachel has some doubt about whether the sweater is hers. (OOP1 ¶10)
   - B. Rachel is waiting for someone to claim the sweater. (OOP2)
   - C. Rachel is remembering something that happened long ago. (OOB)
   - D. Rachel is unable to express herself to Mrs. Price. **✓**

   **MI5:** Determine meaning by incorporating an understanding of literary concepts

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FAST-R: Formative Assessments of Student Thinking in Reading. The passage text by Sandra Cisneros is from Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories. Copyright © 1991 by Sandra Cisneros. Some questions were drawn or adapted from the G10 MCAS Retest 2004 test. All other materials are Copyright 2007 by the Boston Plan for Excellence.
### Grades 6-9 • Fiction • “Eleven”

6. Read the sentence from paragraph 13 in the box below.

   But when the sick feeling goes away and I open my eyes, the red sweater's still sitting there like a big red mountain.

What does Rachel most likely mean by this statement?

- A. The sweater is too large for her to wear. (OOP1)
- B. She sees the situation with the sweater as an exciting challenge. (OOB)
- ✓ C. The situation with the sweater makes her feel small and powerless. (OOP2 ¶13)
- D. All of her thoughts focus on how special the sweater is to her.

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7. In paragraph 19, Rachel starts to cry because she is overwhelmed by feelings of

- ✓ A. embarrassment. (OOP2)
- B. anger. (OOP2)
- C. sadness. (OOP1 ¶19)
- D. joy. (OOB)

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8. For Rachel, the worst part of her day is when

- ✓ A. Mrs. Price puts the sweater on her desk. (OOP2 ¶19)
- B. Mrs. Price makes her wear the sweater. (OOP1 ¶18)
- C. The bell rings for lunch. (OOP2 ¶20)
- D. Mrs. Price pretends like everything is okay.

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9. What effect do sensory details and figurative language have on the story?

- A. They add suspense to the story. (OOB)
- ✓ B. They help the reader understand Rachel's feelings. (OOP2 ¶19)
- C. They warn the reader not to believe everything Rachel says. (OOB)
- D. They give the story a lighthearted and casual tone. (OOP2 ¶19)

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10. Which of the following lines expresses the story's irony?

- ✓ A. “And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don’t.” (¶1)
- B. “I even move my chair a little to the right.” (¶13) (OOP2)
- C. “… it's like hanging all over the edge like a waterfall, but I don't care.” (¶14) (OOP1)
- D. “... I put one arm through one sleeve of the sweater that smells like cottage cheese …” (¶18) (OOP2)
Sometimes even the most special kind of day can be ruined by something unexpected. Read the following story in which Sandra Cisneros describes such a day in the life of a girl named Rachel.

Eleven

From WOMAN HOLLERING CREEK by Sandra Cisneros

1 What they don’t understand about birth-
days 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,
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wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect
to feel eleven, but you don’t. You open your
eyes and everything’s just like yesterday, only
it’s today. And you don’t feel eleven at all. You
feel like you’re still ten. And you are—under-
neath the year that makes you eleven.

2 Like some days you might say something
stupid, and that’s the part of you that’s still
ten. Or maybe some days you might need to
sit on your mama’s lap because you’re scared,
and that’s the part of you that’s five. And
maybe one day when you’re all grown up
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Chicago’s South Side, the only daughter in a family with
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challenges of growing up poor, and issues of alienation
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The story continues on the next page.
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### FAST-R Answer Sheet

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Completely fill the circle for the correct answer.

Write your answer to the open response prompt in the lined space below. If your teacher directs you to do so.

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OPEN RESPONSE: 1 2 3 4