What makes something PRICELESS?

Perhaps you’ve heard a painting or antique described as priceless. In many cases, this means that the item is worth so much money that the amount can’t be guessed at. But sometimes an object is priceless because it is worth more than money to the person who owns it. The anecdote you are about to read is a short account of a priceless object turning up in an unexpected place.

QUICKWRITE  Describe your most prized possession and tell why it is special to you. Then consider if there are any circumstances under which you might give away or sell this object.
LITERARY ANALYSIS: SYMBOL
When you see an American flag, you probably think of more than the fabric it’s made of and its pattern of stars and stripes. The flag represents something much bigger—the United States of America. When a person, place, or thing stands for something beyond itself, it is called a symbol. For example, a sunrise can symbolize a new beginning.

The technique of using symbols in writing is called symbolism. When a writer often relies on symbolism in his or her works, symbolism can be considered a defining element of the writer’s style. It is, for example, a defining element of Sandra Cisneros’s style.

To recognize and interpret the symbol Cisneros uses in “Gil’s Furniture Bought & Sold,” ask yourself these questions:

- What object appears repeatedly or is described more fully than other objects?
- How do the characters react to this object?
- What big ideas does the story address, and how might this object relate to them?

READING SKILL: MAKE INFERENCES
Skilled readers know they must “read between the lines” to make logical guesses about what a writer means but does not say directly. This process is called making inferences, and it can help you to understand the characters in a story. Follow these steps to make an inference:

- Gather details or evidence from the story.
- Consider your own experience and knowledge.
- Form an opinion based on both.

As you read, use a chart like the one shown to make inferences about the three characters in the selection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details from Story</th>
<th>What I Know</th>
<th>Inference About Character</th>
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Meet the Author

Sandra Cisneros
born 1954

A Bilingual Beginning
Sandra Cisneros grew up in Chicago, the only daughter in a Mexican-American family with seven children. She spoke English to her mother and Spanish to her father, and she even thought the two languages were the same when she was very young. She was fascinated with the sound of words, especially those found in fairy tales and fantasy stories, such as Alice in Wonderland. The strange and fancy words in the pages of these books were quite different from those she heard every day at home and in her poor neighborhood. Cisneros dreamed of escaping her neighborhood and becoming a writer. She credits her mother with helping her achieve this goal.

“I’ve Followed My Gut and My Heart”
In order to earn a living, Cisneros decided she should work as an English teacher and write in her free time. The poetry and short fiction she produced revealed her unique voice, created from the influences of Latino and American culture. Her first novel, The House on Mango Street, was published in 1984 and helped make her a best-selling author. Her work often deals with struggles, such as alienation, poverty, and dual cultural loyalties. Cisneros’s stories and poems have won many awards. She has said of her success, “In everything I’ve done in my life, including all the choices I’ve made as a writer, I’ve followed my gut and my heart.”

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
There is a junk store. An old man owns it. We bought a used refrigerator from him once, and Carlos sold a box of magazines for a dollar. The store is small with just a dirty window for light. He doesn’t turn the lights on unless you got money to buy things with, so in the dark we look and see all kinds of things, me and Nenny. Tables with their feet upside-down and rows and rows of refrigerators with round corners and couches that spin dust in the air when you punch them and a hundred T.V.’s that don’t work probably. Everything is on top of everything so the whole store has skinny aisles to walk through. You can get lost easy.

The owner, he is a black man who doesn’t talk much and sometimes if you didn’t know better you could be in there a long time before your eyes notice a pair of gold glasses floating in the dark. Nenny who thinks she is smart and talks to any old man, asks lots of questions. Me, I never said nothing to him except once when I bought the Statue of Liberty for a dime.

But Nenny, I hear her asking one time how’s this here and the man says, This, this is a music box, and I turn around quick thinking he means a pretty box with flowers painted on it, with a ballerina inside. Only there’s nothing like that where this old man is pointing, just a wood box that’s old and got a big brass record in it with holes. Then he starts it up and all sorts of things start happening. It’s like all of a sudden he let go a million moths all over the dusty furniture and swan-neck shadows and in our bones. It’s like drops of water. Or like marimbas only with a funny little plucked sound to it like if you were running your fingers across the teeth of a metal comb.

And then I don’t know why, but I have to turn around and pretend I don’t care about the box so Nenny won’t see how stupid I am. But Nenny, who is stupider, already is asking how much and I can see her fingers going for the quarters in her pants pocket.

This, the old man says shutting the lid, this ain’t for sale.
Comprehension

1. **Recall** What item did the narrator’s family buy from the junk store in the past?

2. **Clarify** Why is it sometimes hard to know that the owner is in the store?

3. **Summarize** In your own words, describe the appearance of the junk store.

Literary Analysis

4. **Make Inferences** Review the chart you created as you read the anecdote. Based on these inferences, why do you think each character reacted to the music box the way he or she did? Give details from the anecdote to support your answer.

5. **Interpret a Symbol** What does the music box symbolize? Explain why you think so.

6. **Draw Conclusions** What do you think the narrator means when she says, “I have to turn around and pretend I don’t care about the box so Nenny won’t see how stupid I am”? Consider what this tells you about her personality.

7. **Compare and Contrast Characters** Using a Venn diagram like the one shown, compare and contrast the narrator and Nenny. As you fill in the diagram, note how the girls interact with the storeowner.

8. **Evaluate a Setting** A story’s setting can affect your expectations about what is going to happen. Reread lines 1–9. In what ways is the junk store an appropriate setting for the characters to discover something priceless? In what ways is the setting surprising?

Extension and Challenge

9. **Creative Project: Art** Think about the description of the junk store and the various items for sale there. Then make a collage of items you would expect to find in the store. You can cut out pictures from magazines and newspapers or include your own sketches.

**What makes something PRICELESS?**

Why do you think the owner of the junk shop considers the music box to be priceless? Support your answer with details from the anecdote.
Conventions in Writing

**GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT: Maintain Subject-Verb Agreement**

You may recall that subjects and verbs must agree in number. That rule remains true even when a subject and a verb have a **prepositional phrase** between them. The subject of a sentence is never found in a prepositional phrase. If you are having a problem deciding whether to use a singular or plural verb in a sentence that contains a prepositional phrase, mentally block out the phrase. This will help you determine what the subject of the sentence is and whether it needs a singular or plural verb.

*Example:* The items in the junk shop are too numerous to count. *(The subject is items, not shop, so the sentence needs the plural verb are.)*

**PRACTICE** Choose the verb form that agrees with the subject in each sentence.

1. A box of books (was, were) one item that got sold to the owner of the store.
2. Refrigerators in the aisle (create, creates) a problem.
3. The owner’s impression of the kids (are, is) that they aren’t actually going to buy anything.
4. A handful of quarters (are, is) all that Nenny has to spend.

*For more help with subject-verb agreement, see page R65 in the Grammar Handbook.*

**READING-WRITING CONNECTION**

Show your understanding of the characters in “Gil’s Furniture Bought & Sold” by responding to this prompt. Then use the **revising tip** to improve your writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>WRITING PROMPT</strong></th>
<th><strong>REVISIING TIP</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Short Response: Write a Dialogue</strong></td>
<td>Review your dialogue. Do all your subjects and verbs agree in number, even if a prepositional phrase comes between them? If not, revise your writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagine what the narrator and Nenny talked about after they left the junk store. Write a <strong>half-page dialogue</strong> that captures what they may have said. Be sure to use language that matches the personalities of the characters.</td>
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**Interactive Revision**

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