



Caramelo (2002), by Sandra Cisneros Argument-Based Discussion Questions

These argument-based questions on Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo* can be used in a variety of ways in class to help students to analyze the text in relation to the debatable interpretive questions established at the beginning of the unit. One way is to conduct small group discussions on the questions after the class completes chapter-clusters, conducting small group discussions five times in the unit. The groups should be asked to share out their responses with each other. There is an opportunity here to look for differing, clashing interpretive responses to the stories.

Another way to use these questions, using them at the end of the unit, is to jigsaw with them. The class should be divided into five groups, with each group assigned a chapter-cluster. The groups should discuss each question, with each student offering their view, supported by reference to the text. The group members should try to come to a consensus around their best collective response to each question. Each student should write out the group's collective response so that they can bring it to newly formulated jigsaw groups. These groups should have one representative from each of the five groups. Each student in the jigsaw groups should present their responses to each of their questions, beginning each one by reading the question aloud. After each response, students have an opportunity to disagree with the response or add something significant to it.

Part One: Chapters 1 - 10

1. What are the significances of the novel's opening with Celaya describing a photograph of her family, when she was a little girl, visiting Acapulco, but "I'm not here. They've forgotten about me . . . No one notices I'm off by myself building sand houses" (4)?
2. In describing her extended family, Celaya says this about her Aunt Licha and Uncle Fat-Face.

Aunty is jealous of every woman, old or young, who comes near Uncle Fat-Face, though Uncle is almost as bald and as small and brown as a peanut. Mother says, -- If a woman's crazy jealous like Licha you can bet it's because someone's giving her reason to be, know what I mean? It's that she's from over there, Mother continues, meaning from the Mexican side, and not this side. -- Mexican women are just like the Mexican songs, *locas* for love (11).

Situating this passage in the larger context of the first half of Part One, and in Chapter 3 in particular, explain how it relates to the debatable question about moderation.

3. When the Reyes family crosses the border into Mexico, “everything switches to another language. . . . Sweets sweeter, colors brighter, the bitter more bitter. . . . Every year I cross the border, it's the same – my mind forgets. But my body always remembers” (17-18). *Caramelo* continuously draws distinctions between Mexican and American culture, as Celaya does here. How do these distinctions affect your reading of the novel on the themes of moderation and of capitalism?
4. Celaya's cousins have intriguing, allusive names. Aunt Licha and Uncle Fat-Face have boys named Elvis, Aristotle, and Byron. Aunt Ninfa and Uncle Baby have girls named Amor and Paz. What do Celaya's cousins' names and – to the extent we know them at this point – her cousins' *characters* say about how girls and boys are treated, how easy their lives are made, in Mexican and Mexican-American families?

Part One: Chapters 11 - 20

1. Soledad and Narciso aren't rich but they host the full extended family and absorb the cost. “But what's money compared to family? The Grandmother insists. – Renters come and go, but my sons are my sons” (47). And then again a couple chapters later, Celaya uses indirect discourse to relate Soledad's similar thoughts. “Of course, I'd rather have my family near. What's money compared to the joy of having one's family close by? You have to make sacrifices. Family always comes first. Remember that” (67). How would you describe the grandparents' relationship to money? How does it differ, if it does differ, from their children's and in-laws' relationship to money? What implications do your responses here have on the novel's thematic meaning pertaining to capitalism?
2. As Celaya observes Candelaria on the sands and in the ocean while they're in Acapulco, chapter 19 concludes with this enigmatic passage.

Candelaria sparkling like a shiny water bird. The sun so bright it makes her even darker. When she turns her head squinting that squint, it's then I know. Without knowing I know.

This all in one second.

Before the ocean opens its big mouth and swallows (78).

What are three possibilities for what Celaya comes to know in this instance? Which is the most likely, and why?

3. Part One climaxes with two rancorous fights, both of which involve Zoila. In the first, Zoila is upset at her husband for being dishonest with her, which she says she has learned about from Soledad.

It is . . . It is true, isn't it? Everything your mother told me. She didn't make it up this time. She didn't have to, did she? Did she? Inocencio, I'm talking to you! Answer me.

Father looks straight ahead and keeps driving as if we aren't here.

-- Canalla! You lie more by what you don't say, than what you do. You're nothing but a goddamn, shitty, liar! Liar! Liar!! Liar!!! (82-83).

But we remember seven chapters earlier Narciso telling Celaya, "Not a lie! A healthy lie. Which sometimes we have to tell so that there won't be trouble" (56). What interpretive argument can you make about the novel's truth and lies thematic meaning, based on this chapter-cluster?

4. The second fight is between Zoila and Soledad, and it ends the chapter, without a resolution; the ending of Part One leaves the reader in suspense as to the outcome. Soledad implores her favorite son, "Wives come and go, but mothers, you have only one!" (85). What are Soledad's good qualities in this part's final scene? What do we fault her for? Which of your judgments weighs more heavily in the balance, and why?

Part Two: Chapters 21 - 30

1. "Women across the republic, rich or poor, plain or beautiful, ancient or young in the times of my grandmother all owned *rebozos* . . . Soledad would remember her father's words. *Just enough, but not too much.* And though they were instructions on how to dye the black *rebozos* black, who would've guessed they would instruct her on how to live her life" (93-95). What symbolic meaning does the *rebozo* have in the novel? And how might the symbolism of the *rebozo* be relevant to the moderation theme?

2. Narciso's parents, Eleuterio and Regina, are of a high social caste but they are not affluent, especially during the Mexican Revolution. "But it was Regina's 'little commerce' that enabled them to keep the apartment and keep the appearance that they were *gente adinerada*, especially during the harsh years to come when no one could afford to be proud" (115). A couple chapters later this passage occurs. Regina "didn't understand about art, how by creating something you can keep yourself from dying. Regina only understood *pesos*, not the mathematics of the heart" (127). What significance do these passages have for the novel's thematic meaning regarding capitalism and craftsmanship?

3. There are several short lines toward the end of this chapter-cluster that have to do with representing reality in story-telling versus embracing fictionalizing or "lying" in narrative. "Nobody talks about it, and I refuse to invent what I don't know" (134). Soledad "began to doubt what she'd actually seen and what she'd embroidered over time, because after a while the embroidery seems real and the real seems

embroidery” (135). “This next part of the story I know sounds as if I am making it up, but the facts are so unbelievable they can only be true” (143). Pick one or more of these quotations and, putting them in their context in the novel, explicate the position it or they support on the first debatable question.

Part Two: Chapters 31 - 40

1. About the aesthetic tastes of Eleuterio and Regina, the narrator says, “More is more. It was a style of decorating that was to figure prominent in this and succeeding generations of the family Reyes” (150). Do the furnishing and decorating tastes of the Reyes, especially the older generations, have any implications for the moderation theme in *Caramelo*? If so, what are they and why? If not, what leads you to that conclusion?

2. In an intervention on the narrative in Chapter 34, the voice of Soledad dialogues with Celaya.

Why do you constantly have to impose your filthy politics? Can't you just tell the facts?

And what kind of story would this be with just facts?

The truth!

It depends on whose truth you're talking about. The same story becomes a different story depending on who is telling it (156).

Does *Caramelo* fully support this view expressed by Celaya? Is the truth entirely dependent on who is describing it? Does every person have their own truth, according to the novel? If so, why include Soledad's contrary view here? And what about the instances in which characters demand that other characters tell the truth?

3. About the Reyes family history, Celaya says at the end of Chapter 35 that they

invented a past, reminding everyone that their ancestors had been accustomed to eating oysters with mother-of-pear forks on porcelain plates brought over on the Manila galleons. It was a pretty story and told with such fine attention to detail, neighbors who knew better said nothing, charmed by the rococo embroidery that came to be a Reyes talent (163).

Does the Reyes' embroidery of their family history suggest an argument that fictionalizing is a good thing? Take a close look at the context here. Consider how their own family history treats race, in your response.

4. The musical performer Pánfila, is characterized as a stunning performer. She sang “*con ganas* . . . with feeling. It gave everything she sang authenticity, and authenticity of emotions engendered admiration, and admiration – love. Singing, she said what the public could not say, what they did not know they felt” (178). Does Cisneros' artistic theory here – her definition of what makes a singing performer effective – mean that the novel tells us that art is successful to the extent that it evokes strong emotion, passion, in its audience?

Part Two: Chapters 41 - 51

1. The narrator says deep into the Reyes family history that is Part Two: “Remembering is the hand of God. I remember you, therefore I make you immortal. *Recuerdo*. I remember. *Un recuerdo*. A memory. A memento” (194). Does this idea about the relationship between memory and immortality have any bearing on the novel’s truth and lies theme? If a person can live on in human memory and the stories that memory produces, doesn’t that memory have to be factually accurate if the actual person is to “survive”?
2. When Inocencio is born, Soledad dotes more than even the average new loving mother does. “You little tum-tum of *caramel*. Yum, yum, yum, yum. . . . Now she watched Inocencio sleep beside her. *How is it God could pour so much beauty into one little being*, she wondered. . . . This little human had grown inside her and now here he was, just as perfect as you please” (196-197). What additional symbolic resonance does this chapter give caramel, as a symbol in the novel?
3. After bearing Inocencio, Soledad has a deeper, philosophical understanding of the world. “So much misery in the world. But so much humanity, too. Just enough. Not too much. Just enough, thank God” (197). What argument does this passage support on the moderation theme in *Caramelo*, and how does the passage support that argument? (Don’t confuse an interpretive argument with an overall position, in responding to this question.)
4. In recounting her birth, Celaya declares, “I am the favorite child of a favorite child. I know my worth. . . . And when the Awful Grandmother saw my Father with that crazy look of joy in his eye, she knew. She was no longer his queen” (231-232). Doesn’t this quotation refute the position that *Carmelo* views Mexican families as having a sexist, patriarchal preference for sons?

Part Three: Chapters 52 - 63

1. The Vietnam War appears to be a factor in Zoila’s leftward political turn. The writers she reads, for example, are all notable revolutionary or progressive writers of the 1960s (248). What thematic meaning do you think Zoila’s leftist politics might have in the novel?
2. Chapter 54 ends with a bitter fight between Soledad and her daughter Aunty Light-Skin. “All those years living with someone, and she’s never noticed her daughter except to say, -- Pass me that plate. She’s been too busy with Narciso, with Inocencio. . . . The Grandmother throws herself on the bed and draws the *caramel rebozo* over her face to still the pain behind her eyes. *Ungrateful girl!*” (262-263). This passage might be used to support arguments on (at least) three debatable questions: the questions about Soledad’s character, caramel’s symbolic meaning, and whether Mexican families favor the boys. Pick two of these debatable questions and develop an argument in response to each.
3. In the next chapter, Aunty Light-Skin has an intimate conversation with her niece Celaya. She confides:

-- That's how we are, we *mexicanas*, *puro coraje y passion*. That's what we're made of, Lala, you and me. That's us. We love like we hate. Backward and forward, past, present, and future. With our heart and soul and our *tripas*, too.

-- And is that good?

-- It isn't good or bad, it just is. Look, when you don't know how to use your emotions, your emotions use you. . . . You be careful with love, Lalita. To love is a terrible, wonderful thing. The pleasure reminds you – I am alive! But the pain reminds you of the same thing – *Ay!* I am alive (274-275).

Is Aunt Light-Skin right? Are her views here supported by the rest of the novel? What is Sandra Cisneros' attitude toward her views?

4. Soledad has what sounds like a familiar kind of contradictory view about class divisions.

In the neighborhoods she could afford, she couldn't stand being associated with these low-class Mexicans, but in the neighborhoods she couldn't, her neighbors couldn't stand being associated with her. Everyone in Chicago lived with an idea of being superior to someone else, and they did not, if they could help it, live on the same block without a lot of readjustments, of exceptions made for the people they knew by name instead of as "those so-and-so's" (289-290).

What relevance does this idea have to the novel's thematic meaning related to capitalism?

Part Three: Chapters 64 - 75

1. Why do you think the novel moves to a focus on Celaya's high school experience, and especially her relationship with Viviana, in Chapters 64 – 66? What deeper significance does this narrative have, do you think? Is there any thematic meaning to be derived?

2. Viviana is able to lie her way out of the trouble she gets into for shoplifting.

Her mom's dead, died from leukemia last winter, a slow, horrible death. And I don't know where she gets the nerve to make up such a bunch of baloney, but she does it, all the while sniffing and hiccupping like if every word is true. Damn, she's so good, she almost has me crying (339).

Does this scene offer a new and different take on the truth and lies theme in the novel? Why or why not?

3. In Chapter 68, "My Cross," Zoila is depicted taking out a kind of vengeance on Soledad, very late in the grandmother's life. Does the way she is treated as she approaches death cast her life in a more favorable moral light? Explain.

4. Viviana represents an empowered, irrepressible, and passionate approach to life. In Chapter 69 she tells Celaya

Listen, sweets, it's simple. You're the author of the *telenovela* of your life. You want a comedy or a tragedy? If the episode's a tearjerker, you can hang yourself or hang in there. Choose. I believe in destiny as much as you do, but sometimes you've gotta help your destiny along (345).

Does Viviana's character in the novel support the interpretive position that *Caramelo* leans in favor of passion and immoderation more than "Just enough, but not too much"?

Part Three: Chapters 76 - 86

1. What does Inocencio's business failure in Texas suggest about the novel's theme on capitalism versus craftsmanship, if anything?

2. In Chapter 80, this unexpected passage appears:

I unpack the *caramelo rebozo* and drape Ernesto in it. When I rummaged the walnut-wood armoire for my birth certificate just before leaving, I grabbed the Grandmonster's *rebozo* on an impulse. "Good lucky." Ernesto looks beautiful in it, I'm not kidding. That boy body of his, hairless and smooth, the candy stripes against his skin. A real sin men don't wear *rebozos*.

Do a thematic analysis of this passage.

3. Celaya elopes, or intends to elope, with her boyfriend Ernesto. "I want to be him, and for him to be me. I want to empty myself and fill myself with him," she says, rapturously in love (or perhaps infatuated?) with him. But then he abruptly cuts off their relationship. What position does this episode in the novel support on the moderation theme, and why?

4. As Celaya tries to process her heartbreak, she has a kind of recognition about life, one involving the *rebozo* (not specifically *caramelo*, though it could be).

I look up, and la Virgen looks don at me, and, honest to God, this sounds like a lie, but it's true. The universe a cloth, and all humanity interwoven. Each and every person connected to me, and me connected to them, like the strands of a *rebozo*. Pull one string and the whole thing comes undone. Each person who comes into my life affecting the patter, and me affecting theirs (389).

Which of our debatable questions does this epiphany connect with, and how does it do so?



5. *Caramelo*'s final chapter, Chapter 86, is climactic in certain ways, and has passages that support arguments on all of our debatable interpretive questions. Pick four questions and develop arguments, supported by four passages from the chapter, that addresses each of them.