



Caramelo (2002), by Sandra Cisneros Argumentative Reasoning Assessment

This assessment zooms in on what many students consider to be an especially challenging element of making interpretive arguments: reasoning through their evidence. Some students want their evidence to, in effect, speak for itself. But an argument without reasoning is an argument missing the author’s voice, articulating their own thinking for the reader or listener. It is an argument that over-relies on another writer or speaker’s voice. Some students substitute paraphrase for reasoning, repeating in their own words what the evidence says and leaving it there. That is supplying a faux-voice: the appearance of reasoning but actually substance that adds little or nothing to what is in the evidence.

Argumentative reasoning is thinking, and thinking is hard. Students can benefit from specific guidance, which is why we have developed a three-step process that can assist students of any experience and proficiency level produce analytical and robust reasoning. The process forms the acronym A – W – E, as in *AWE-some argumentation*. We delve into each step in this process in more detail in other resources, but here is a short-form explication. The first step in argumentative reasoning is to **analyze** (A) the evidence. This is often confused by students for paraphrasing, but it is actually “paraphrasing with a point,” or “pointed paraphrasing.” The point, of course, is to accentuate what in the evidence is most directly and authoritatively supportive of the claim. Next, the evidence needs to be **warranted** (W), in Stephen Toulmin’s language. This means that the writer or speaker should identify the principle, standard, criterion, or point of logic that justifies for the reader or listener that the evidence actually substantiates the claim, and that the claim actually substantiates the overall position. Finally, argumentative reasoning should include emphasis (E) of the importance of either the evidence or the full argument to the overall position. In other words, the writer or speaker should include a response to the unstated So what? question that they should expect the critical reader or listener to harbor.



For this assessment, you should study the model interpretive argument closely, then you should complete the interpretive arguments below, using the three-step, A – W – E process, so that you can produce ***AWE-some argumentation***. All of the arguments below align with the debatable issues that we have been using in this unit on Cisneros’ *Caramelo*. And for each argument you are to complete you are being given your interpretive position, the argumentative claim that develops it, and the textual evidence supportive of the claim. Your work is all about the *argumentative reasoning*.

For the models, here is the Argumentative Elements Index. We will use these color indexing for the claims and evidence in the arguments you will complete, but for your use it is optional.

Black font is for the argumentative claim.

Blue font is for evidence.

Green font is for reasoning which (A) analyzes the evidence.

Gray font is for reasoning which (W) warrants the evidence.

Red font is for reasoning which (E) emphasizes the importance of the evidence for the claim and/or for the overall position.

Model A

Position: *Caramelo* acknowledges that there is a strand within Mexican culture that is intensely passionate, but it speaks for moderation, emotional balance, and the mantra “just enough, but not too much,” as a better way to live.

In *Caramelo*, Cisneros marginalizes and cautions against the voice of pure passion, leading the sensitive reader to infer a critique below the surface. In Chapter 55, Aunt Light-Skin has an intimate conversation with her niece Celaya.

- 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).

Initially, it is tempting to read this passage as identifying Mexican culture with *puro passion*, suffused with emotion, loving and hating “with our heart and soul.” Aunt Light-Skin even equates intense feeling with being alive. But the tone in this passage and in this scene as a whole is rueful, one of regret. Ceyla’s aunt here is warning her against what has apparently so damaged, even traumatized, Light-Skin emotionally. Of Ceyla’s parents’ generation, Aunt Light-Skin is almost a ghost-like figure – silent, still living with her

parents, haunted. If she has lived with a philosophy that only when we are intensely feeling are we alive, she represents that belief as a kind of zombie, a living-dead being. **And given the way that the novel seems to kind of build a cosmos and a full way of viewing and living in the world in this extended Reyes family, Aunty Light-Skin’s warning – in language and in her life example – suggests that Cisneros is critiquing Mexicans’ cultural embrace of *puro passion*.**

1

Position: Sandra Cisneros embeds a rather significant criticism of capitalism, particularly American capitalist values.

Major characters in *Caramelo* show signs that they have a more ethical, more balanced, more humane relationship to money when they are in Mexico compared to their relationship to money when they are in the United States. In Chapter 59, when Soledad is brought to live in Chicago, she is unhappy with whatever neighborhood she is introduced to.

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).

Complete the argument with you’re A – W – E-some argumentative reasoning.

2

Position: In *Caramelo*, Sandra Cisneros projects a view that doesn’t place great weight on factual truth, but instead values imaginative story-telling regardless of “facts.”

Caramelo takes a clear position that truth is relative and that everyone has a right to their own truth. 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).

Complete the argument with you're A – W – E-some argumentative reasoning.

3

Position: Despite several literal statements to the contrary, *Caramelo* is fully committed to the traditional virtue of the truth and truth-telling.

Major characters in *Caramelo* show signs that they have a more ethical, more balanced, more humane relationship to money when they are in Mexico compared to their relationship to money when they are in the United States. In Chapter 20, Part One comes to a climax with two rancorous fights. 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).

Complete the argument with you're A – W – E-some argumentative reasoning.

4

Position: *Caramelo* depicts a culture – Mexican and Mexican-American – that is misogynist in that it clearly favors male sons over female daughters.

Soledad and her generation significantly favor their boys over their girls. 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).

Complete the argument with your A – W – E-some argumentative reasoning.