



Caramelo (2002), by Sandra Cisneros Debatable Questions

These are debatable issues for use in a unit on Sandra Cisneros' epic autobiographical novel, *Caramelo*.

(A) Truth & Lies

Sandra Cisneros uses this imploration as the epigraph to her autobiographical novel, *Caramelo: Cuéntame algo, aunque sea una mentira* – *Tell me a story, even if it's a lie*. She writes in her prefatory “Disclaimer,” “I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies.” These opening notes suggest a fiction writer’s embrace of fabrication and imaginative story-telling over journalistic fact-telling, but the novel actually has a complicated and deeply considered relationship with the common virtue of telling the truth. There are instances in which when a character’s story is misrepresented or lied about – Candelaria’s, for instance – we see the pain and unhappiness that can cause. And a driving objective underneath the entire enterprise seems to be Cisneros’ desire to reveal the truth about Mexican-Americans’ and Mexicans’ humanity as opposed to caricatures or stereotypes. What is *Caramelo*’s position on speaking the truth: is it an intrinsic virtue or does it have very little value in and of itself, and rather one’s stories and speech are merely means to achieve other, higher purposes.

(B) Capitalism & Craftsmanship

At the novel’s opening the Reyes brothers are all “craftsmen. They don’t use a staple gun and cardboard like the upholsterers in the U.S. They make sofas and chairs *by hand*. Quality work” (8). But later in the novel, after Inocencio comes back from San Antonio, having been unsuccessful in starting his own business, he joins his brothers Baby and Fat-Face in their low-quality, high-volume furniture sales business and becomes the King of Plastic Covers. *Caramelo* sustains this tension throughout between poor but proud and caring craftsmen in contrast to affluent but indifferent and mass-producing businessmen. Does *Caramelo*

critique capitalism, or instead does it warn that resistance to capitalism is both futile and damaging to families?

(C) Soledad in the Balance

Celaya says of Soledad (whom she refers to her by her pejorative nickname “the Awful Grandmother”), when the Reyes family goes to visit her in Part One, that she “is like the witch in that story of Hansel and Gretel. She likes to eat boys and girls” (23). But then later when she is in dialogue with her memory of Soledad she promises her that she will be fair to her in this narrative and that Soledad will be happy in the end with it. Would Soledad be happy with her depiction, overall? Is she a character whose virtues and behaviors lean in her favor, or do her flaws and shortcomings weigh too heavily against her and make her unlikable, in this telling?

(D) Caramelo as Central Symbol

Caramelo, the titular color, is richly symbolic in Sandra Cisneros’ novel. Celaya says of Candelaria, for example: “Her skin is *caramelo*. A color so sweet, it hurts to even look at her” (37). The *caramel rebozo*, to cite another example, is among the most prized of the Mexican scarves and has various, adaptive emotional resonances. Accepting that *caramelo* is a multifarious symbol, which of its meanings is predominant? Does it suggest, above its other meanings, bi-culturalism (the mix of white and brown, European and Mexican)? Sensualism? Perhaps simply beauty? Moderateness and balance in life? Mexican history and tradition? Yes, it can and does mean all of these things (and more); but which one meaning would you argue predominates?

(E) “Just enough, but not too much” or “Too much is never enough”

The Greek poet Hesiod (c.700 BCE) is the first writer to have said “moderation in all things is best.” *Caramelo* seems to make an intriguing inquiry into moderation, balance, equanimity. On the one hand, the novel is punctuated by characters, including the narrator, repeating this phrase, almost like a mantra: “Just enough, but not too much” (e.g., 92). But it also describes Mexican culture as being extremely passionate and emotional, praising love that is pure, all-consuming, and overwhelming, even speaking favorably of the *telenovela*, a genre that would seem to be the opposite of “not too much.” The interpretive question here is, Which is it? Does *Caramelo* speak on behalf of moderation and balance, or the extreme and all-in?

(F) Boys & Girls

In Part Two, and during her narrative of the Reyes’ life during the Mexican Revolution, Celaya says, “There is nothing Mexican men revere more than their mamas: they are the most devoted of sons, perhaps because their mamas are the most devoted of mamas . . . when it comes to their boys” (128). According to Sandra Cisneros in *Caramelo*, do Mexican and Mexican-American families make life easier for sons than for daughters?