

Only Daughter

Personal Essay by Sandra Cisneros

from *Caramelo*

Fiction by Sandra Cisneros

What is your **ROLE** in your household?

COMMON CORE

RI 4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text. **RI 5** Analyze in detail how an author's ideas are developed by portions of text.

RI 6 Determine an author's purpose in a text.

Think about the different roles that you play in your family and how you feel about them. Has your gender helped to determine these roles? In the following selections by Sandra Cisneros, you will learn what it means to be a daughter in a traditional Mexican-American family.

DISCUSS During the 1960s, many people began reexamining the role of women both at home and in society. Since then, ideas about the proper roles of males and females have changed dramatically. In a large group, share your thoughts about the roles of males and females today. Discuss gender roles at home, at school, in the workplace, and in the community.



● TEXT ANALYSIS: STYLE AND VOICE

Sandra Cisneros is a contemporary writer who is known for her vibrant writing style. Her work is easily recognizable because of her distinctive voice. In literature, a **voice** is a writer’s use of language in a way that allows readers to “hear” a personality in his or her writing. In “Only Daughter,” Cisneros states:

At Christmas, I flew home to Chicago. The house was throbbing, same as always; hot tamales and sweet tamales hissing in my mother’s pressure cooker, and everybody—my mother, six brothers, wives, babies, aunts, cousins—talking too loud and at the same time. . . .

Cisneros’s use of conversational language, vivid images, and lyrical sentences gives readers a sense of her own lively spirit. As you read the two selections, think about the other stylistic elements that contribute to her voice.

● READING SKILL: IDENTIFY AUTHOR’S PURPOSE

You may recall that an **author’s purpose** is the reason why he or she creates a particular work. Often, an author’s purpose directly relates to the form, or genre, of a text, as well as its structural pattern. Cisneros is a versatile writer whose body of work comprises different forms, including poetry, nonfiction, and fiction. As you read each selection, jot down answers to the following questions:

- What is the form, or genre, of this work?
- Why do writers usually write this type of work?
- Which words or phrases suggest a specific tone?
- Does the tone of the work suggest a specific purpose?

Later, you will use your answers to help you draw conclusions about Cisneros’s purpose in each selection.

▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

The words in boldface help reveal what it’s like to grow up in a traditional household. Restate each phrase, substituting a different word or words for each boldfaced word.

1. an **anthology** of short stories
2. fulfilling one’s **destiny**
3. viewing events in **retrospect**
4. a **trauma** to the head
5. **nostalgia** for earlier days

Sandra Cisneros

born 1954

A Writer Under Wraps

Born in Chicago in 1954, Sandra Cisneros (sĭs-nĕr’rōs) grew up with her Mexican father, Mexican-American mother, and six brothers. As a young girl, she had few friends because her family moved frequently between Chicago and Mexico City. To ward off loneliness, she often read stories and wrote poetry. As a teenager, she continued to write but was careful to keep her work away from family members, who disapproved of her writing.

A Proud Latina

While in graduate school, Cisneros began to embrace her own cultural heritage and experiences. She learned that the people and events that had shaped her life were different from those that had influenced the lives of her classmates. This discovery helped her find her own literary voice—one that reflected her unique Mexican-American background. In 1984, Cisneros published *The House on Mango Street*—a series of prose vignettes told by a girl living in a Chicago neighborhood. Since then, she has continued to tell stories drawn from her personal history.

BACKGROUND TO THE SELECTIONS

Traditional Roles

In “Only Daughter,” Cisneros describes her father’s ideas about the proper role of females. Coming from the culture of old Mexico, Cisneros’s father held the patriarchal beliefs of many traditional cultures—that is, he considered men the heads of families and the leaders of society. According to his values, a woman needed only to “become someone’s wife” and devote herself to her home and family.

Author
Online

THINK
central

Go to thinkcentral.com.
KEYWORD: HML10-901



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

ONLY DAUGHTER

Sandra Cisneros

Once, several years ago, when I was just starting out my writing career, I was asked to write my own contributor's note for an **anthology** I was part of. I wrote: "I am the only daughter in a family of six sons. *That* explains everything."

Well, I've thought about that ever since, and yes, it explains a lot to me, but for the reader's sake I should have written: "I am the only daughter in a *Mexican* family of six sons." Or even: "I am the only daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother." Or: "I am the only daughter of a working-class family of nine." All of these had everything to do with who I
10 am today.

I was/am the only daughter and *only* a daughter. Being an only daughter in a family of six sons forced me by circumstance to spend a lot of time by myself because my brothers felt it beneath them to play with a *girl* in public. But that
aloneness, that loneliness, was good for a would-be writer—it allowed me time to think and think, to imagine, to read and prepare myself. **A**

Being only a daughter for my father meant my **destiny** would lead me to become someone's wife. That's what he believed. But when I was in the fifth grade and shared my plans for college with him, I was sure he understood. I remember my father saying, "*Que bueno, mi'ja*,¹ that's good." That meant a lot
20 to me, especially since my brothers thought the idea hilarious. What I didn't realize was that my father thought college was good for girls—good for finding a husband. After four years in college and two more in graduate school and still no husband, my father shakes his head even now and says I wasted all that education.

In **retrospect**, I'm lucky my father believed daughters were meant for husbands. It meant it didn't matter if I majored in something silly like English. After all, I'd find a nice professional eventually, right? This allowed me the liberty to putter about embroidering my little poems and stories without my father interrupting with so much as a "What's that you're writing?"

anthology (än-thöl'ə-jē) *n.* a collection of written works—such as poems, short stories, or plays—in a single book or set

A AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

Reread lines 11–15. What specific experience is the **subject** of this personal essay? Identify the details that helped you draw your conclusion.

destiny (dēs'tə-nē) *n.* the determined fate of a particular person or thing; lot in life

retrospect (rēt'rə-spěkt') *n.* a view or contemplation of something past

1. *Que bueno, mi'ja* (kě bwě'nò mē'hā) *Spanish:* That's good, my daughter. (*Mi'ja* is a shortened form of *mi hija*.)



30 But the truth is, I wanted him to interrupt. I wanted my father to understand what it was I was scribbling, to introduce me as “My only daughter, the writer.” Not as “This is only my daughter. She teaches.” *Es maestra*²—teacher. Not even *profesora*.³

In a sense, everything I have ever written has been for him, to win his approval even though I know my father can't read English words, even though my father's only reading includes the brown-ink *Esto* sports magazines from Mexico City and the bloody *¡Alarma!* magazines that feature yet another sighting of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*⁴ on a tortilla or a wife's revenge on her philandering⁵ husband by bashing his skull in with a *molcajete*⁶ (a kitchen
40 mortar⁷ made of volcanic rock). Or the *fotonovelas*,⁸ the little picture paperbacks with tragedy and **trauma** erupting from the characters' mouths in bubbles. **B**

My father represents, then, the public majority. A public who is disinterested in reading, and yet one whom I am writing about and for and privately trying to woo.

When we were growing up in Chicago, we moved a lot because of my father. He suffered bouts of **nostalgia**. Then we'd have to let go our flat, store the furniture with mother's relatives, load the station wagon with baggage and bologna sandwiches, and head south. To Mexico City.

50 We came back, of course. To yet another Chicago flat, another Chicago neighborhood, another Catholic school. Each time, my father would seek out the parish priest in order to get a tuition break and complain or boast: “I have seven sons.”

He meant *siete hijos*,⁹ seven children, but he translated it as “sons.” “I have seven sons.” To anyone who would listen. The Sears Roebuck employee who sold us the washing machine. The short-order cook where my father ate his ham-and-eggs breakfasts. “I have seven sons.” As if he deserved a medal from the state.

60 My papa. He didn't mean anything by that mistranslation, I'm sure. But somehow I could feel myself being erased. I'd tug my father's sleeve and whisper: “Not seven sons. Six! and *one daughter*.” **C**

When my oldest brother graduated from medical school, he fulfilled my father's dream that we study hard and use this—our heads, instead of this—our hands. Even now my father's hands are thick and yellow, stubbed by a history of hammer and nails and twine and coils and springs. “Use this,”

trauma (trō'mə) *n.* severe physical or emotional distress

B STYLE AND VOICE
Reread lines 34–42. Describe Cisneros's **tone**, or attitude, toward her father and his reading habits. Which details strongly convey her feelings?

nostalgia (nŏ-stäl'jə) *n.* a wistful longing for the past or the familiar

C AUTHOR'S PURPOSE
In personal essays, writers often express opinions on subjects. Which details in lines 46–61 suggest Cisneros's opinions?

2. *Es maestra* (ēs mā-ēs'trā) *Spanish*: She is a teacher.

3. *profesora* (prō-fē-sō'rā) *Spanish*: professor.

4. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (lā vēr'hēn dē gwā-dā-lōō'pē) *Spanish*: the Virgin of Guadalupe—a vision of Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus, said to have appeared on a hill outside Mexico City in 1531.

5. **philandering**: engaging in many casual love affairs.

6. *molcajete* (mōl-kā-hē'tē) *Spanish*.

7. *mortar*: bowl for grinding grain.

8. *fotonovelas* (fō-tō-nō-vē'lās) *Spanish*.

9. *siete hijos* (syē'tē ē'hōs) *Spanish*. (*Hijos* can mean either “children” or “sons.”)

my father said, tapping his head, “and not this,” showing us those hands. He always looked tired when he said it.

Wasn't college an investment? And hadn't I spent all those years in college? And if I didn't marry, what was it all for? Why would anyone go to college and then choose to be poor? Especially someone who had always been poor.

Last year, after ten years of writing professionally, the financial rewards started to trickle in. My second National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship.¹⁰ A guest professorship at the University of California, Berkeley. My book, which sold to a major New York publishing house.

At Christmas, I flew home to Chicago. The house was throbbing, same as always; hot *tamales*¹¹ and sweet *tamales* hissing in my mother's pressure cooker, and everybody—my mother, six brothers, wives, babies, aunts, cousins—talking too loud and at the same time, like in a Fellini¹² film, because that's just how we are.

I went upstairs to my father's room. One of my stories had just been translated into Spanish and published in an anthology of Chicano¹³ writing, and I wanted to show it to him. Ever since he recovered from a stroke two years ago, my father likes to spend his leisure hours horizontally. And that's how I found him, watching a Pedro Infante¹⁴ movie on Galavisión¹⁵ and eating rice pudding.


There was a glass filled with milk on the bedside table. There were several vials of pills and balled Kleenex. And on the floor, one black sock and a plastic urinal that I didn't want to look at but looked at anyway. Pedro Infante was about to burst into song, and my father was laughing. **D**

I'm not sure if it was because my story was translated into Spanish or because it was published in Mexico or perhaps because the story dealt with Tepeyac,¹⁶ the *colonia* my father was raised in and the house he grew up in, but at any rate, my father punched the mute button on his remote control and read my story.

I sat on the bed next to my father and waited. He read it very slowly. As if he were reading each line over and over. He laughed at all the right places and read lines he liked out loud. He pointed and asked questions: “Is this So-and-so?”

“Yes,” I said. He kept reading.

When he was finally finished, after what seemed like hours, my father looked up and asked: “Where can we get more copies of this for the relatives?”

Of all the wonderful things that happened to me last year, that was the most wonderful. 

10. **National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship:** The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)—a U.S. government agency—awards money in the form of fellowships to artists and writers.

11. **tamales** (tä-mä'lës) *Spanish:* rolls of cornmeal dough filled with meat and peppers and steamed in cornhusk wrappings.

12. **Fellini:** the Italian movie director Federico Fellini (1920–1993), famous for his noisy, energetic films.

13. **Chicano:** Mexican-American.

14. **Pedro Infante** (pä'drō ĩn-fän'tä): a popular Mexican film star.

15. **Galavisión:** cable TV network that features movies and programs in Spanish.

16. **Tepeyac** (të-pë-yäk'): a district of Mexico City.

COMMON CORE RI 4

Language Coach

Connotations The images and feelings connected with a word are its **connotations**. *Throbbing* and *pulsating* both mean “beating,” but *throbbing* implies strength and energy, and *pulsating* implies regularity. How would *pulsating* change the meaning of line 75 if it were substituted for *throbbing*?

COMMON CORE RI 5

D IMAGERY IN NONFICTION

Imagery is the descriptive words and phrases a writer uses to create a sensory experience for the reader. Reread lines 86–89, noting how Cisneros used vivid sensory images to allow the reader to visualize the father's room. Why do you think Cisneros chose to relate these specific details of her father's room to the reader?

Caramelo

Sandra Cisneros

Acuérdate de Acapulco,
de aquellas noches,
María bonita, María del alma;
acuérdate que en la playa,
con tus manitas las estrellitas
las enjuagabas.¹

—“*María bonita*,” by Augustín Lara, version sung by the composer while playing the piano, accompanied by a sweet, but very, very sweet violin

We’re all little in the photograph above Father’s bed. We were little in Acapulco. We will always be little. For him we are just as we were then.

Here are the Acapulco waters lapping just behind us, and here we are sitting on the lip of land and water. The little kids, Lolo and Memo, making devil horns behind each other’s head; the Awful Grandmother holding them even though she never held them in real life. Mother seated as far from her as politely possible; Toto slouched beside her. The big boys, Rafa, Ito, and Tikis, stand under the roof of Father’s skinny arms. Aunt Light-Skin hugging Antonieta Araceli to her belly. Aunt shutting her eyes when the shutter clicks, as if she chooses not to remember the future, the house on Destiny Street sold, the move north to Monterrey. **E**

Here is Father squinting that same squint I always make when I’m photographed. He isn’t *acabado*² yet. He isn’t *finished*, worn from working, from worrying, from smoking too many packs of cigarettes. There isn’t anything on his face but his face, and a tidy, thin mustache, like Pedro Infante, like Clark Gable.³ Father’s skin pulpy and soft, pale as the belly side of a shark.

The Awful Grandmother has the same light skin as Father, but in elephant folds, stuffed into a bathing suit the color of an old umbrella with an amber handle.

I’m not here. They’ve forgotten about me when the photographer walking along the beach proposes a portrait, *un recuerdo*, a remembrance literally. No one notices I’m off playing by myself building sand houses. They won’t realize I’m missing until the photographer delivers the portrait to Catita’s house, and I look at it for the first time and ask,—When was this taken? Where?

Then everyone realizes the portrait is incomplete. It’s as if I didn’t exist. It’s as if I’m the photographer walking along the beach with the tripod camera on my shoulder asking.—¿*Un recuerdo*? A souvenir? A memory? **F**

E AUTHOR’S PURPOSE

Reread lines 3–11.

Consider your own reaction to phrases such as “making devil horns” and “the Awful Grandmother.” What purpose do they suggest?

F STYLE AND VOICE

Cisneros’s style is often characterized by loosely structured sentences, such as those in lines 20–27. What aspect of Cisneros’s **voice** comes through in this type of writing?

1. **Acuérdate de Acapulco . . . las enjuagabas** *Spanish*: Remember Acapulco, those nights, beautiful Maria, Maria of my soul; remember that in the sand, you washed the stars with your hands.

2. **acabado** (ä-kä-bä’dô) *Spanish*: finished.

3. **Clark Gable**: an American film star of the 1940s.



Comprehension

1. **Recall** According to “Only Daughter,” what expectations did Cisneros’s father have for her?
2. **Recall** In what way did Cisneros go against her father’s expectations?
3. **Summarize** Describe the different family members included in the souvenir photograph in the excerpt from *Caramelo*. Who is missing from the picture?
4. **Clarify** Reread lines 25–27 of the excerpt. Why does the narrator compare herself to the photographer?



RL 4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text. **RI 4** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text. **RI 6** Determine an author’s purpose in a text.

Text Analysis

5. **Identify Theme** In “Only Daughter,” what theme about female roles does Cisneros communicate through her relationship with her father? Support your answer with evidence from the essay.
6. **Examine Style and Voice** Cisneros’s writing style is often marked by a use of conversational language and fragmented sentences. How might your sense of Cisneros and her experiences be different if “Only Daughter” had been written with more formal words and sentence structures?
7. **Interpret Symbol** A person, a place, an activity, or an object that represents something beyond itself is called a symbol. In the excerpt from *Caramelo*, what does the souvenir photograph seem to symbolize to the narrator?
8. **Relate Imagery and Tone** Reread lines 12–19 of the excerpt, reviewing Cisneros’s use of vivid sensory images. Considering words such as “squinting,” “elephant folds,” and “the color of an old umbrella,” describe the narrator’s tone, or attitude, toward her father and her grandmother.
9. **Compare Author’s Purposes** Review your answers to the questions on page 901. Identify Cisneros’s purpose for writing each selection. What similarities or differences in purpose do you see between “Only Daughter” and the excerpt from *Caramelo*? Explain your response.

Text Criticism

10. **Social Context** “Only Daughter” was first published in *Glamour*, a monthly magazine that is read almost exclusively by women, many of whom are young and single. Does this information affect your understanding of Cisneros’s purpose for writing the personal essay? Explain your response.

What is your **ROLE** in your household?

What has shaped the way your family members take on different roles?

Vocabulary in Context

▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Select the vocabulary word that best completes each sentence.

1. Josh believed that his _____ would lead him to become a famous actor.
2. Someone with _____ often relives happy memories of earlier times.
3. Shirley is often seen carrying a(n) _____ of the works of Langston Hughes, her favorite author.
4. In _____, I wish I had done things differently.
5. The _____ of the accident would never completely leave Kyra.

WORD LIST

anthology
destiny
nostalgia
retrospect
trauma

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

- clarify
- feature
- precise
- style
- transmit

Write a short narrative that shares a positive or negative experience from your childhood. Use your own personal **style** to help readers understand what happened. Specific details will help **clarify** the events for anyone who was not there. Use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your response.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: ETYMOLOGY

Etymology is the history of words, and knowing this history can often help you remember a word's meaning. For example, the word *nostalgia* derives from two Greek words: *nostos*, which means "homecoming," and *algos*, meaning "pain, grief, or distress." In modern English, this translates to "a sad or wistful yearning for the past."

nos•tal•gi•a (nŏ-stäl'jə) *n.* **1.** a bittersweet longing. **2.** a sad or wistful yearning for the past. [Greek *nostos*, homecoming + Greek *algos*, pain, grief, or distress.]

PRACTICE Use the dictionary or an online reference to research the etymology of each word below. Study each word's derivation, meaning, and spelling.

1. anthology
2. retrospect
3. trauma

COMMON CORE

L 4c Consult reference materials to determine or clarify the etymology of a word.

Interactive Vocabulary **THINK** central

Go to thinkcentral.com.
KEYWORD: HML10-909