

Anansi: The Spider

Amari Cross & Matthew Williams • English Literature • May 10, 2026

Anansi is not a character in the traditional dramatic sense. He is a spider, a story, a symbol, and a principle. He exists in the Forest of Stories (the imaginative space the Girl enters through the Woman's telling) and he represents the idea that intelligence, not physical strength, is the ultimate form of power.

Campbell draws on the Akan/Ashanti oral tradition of West Africa, where Anansi is the god of stories and wisdom: a trickster spider who navigates a world full of creatures larger and more dangerous than himself by thinking faster than all of them. This tradition was brought to the Caribbean by enslaved West Africans and adapted into the Brer Anansi stories of the region. In the play, these stories become the Girl's inheritance.

Who He Is

Anansi is small, quick, and eight-legged. He introduces himself directly to the audience in his opening monologue:

I am Anansi, small and quick / Some folk are bigger, but usually thick / A crafty spider's what I am / I'm never without the smartest plan / The smartest plan and the cleverest head / Is how I keep from getting dead.

The rhyming couplets are deliberate. In the Forest of Stories, language is rhythmic, energetic, and musical, which is a direct contrast to the flat prose of the ship scenes. The form itself signals that Anansi's world operates by different rules, where wit and wordplay are the dominant currencies.

He is not a straightforward hero. He steals Tiger's fat, manipulates Snake's vanity, takes credit for Soliday's defeat of Mancrow, and disguises himself as a woman to con a wicked employer out of her secrets. He lies, flatters, disappears when caught, and operates in whatever way serves his immediate survival. Campbell gives him this complexity because he has to. Dignity alone cannot survive inside a system built to destroy it. The enslaved needed to be cunning, opportunistic, and sometimes dishonest to stay alive, and the play refuses to pretend otherwise.

His Stories in the Play

Story 1: Naming the Stories

Tiger wants the great stories of the forest named after himself. Anansi proposes an alternative: if he can bring Tiger Snake tied to a pole, the stories will be named after Anansi instead. Tiger agrees, thinking this is impossible. Anansi then goes to work on Snake.

The key technique is flattery and ego manipulation. Tiger's overconfidence is his weakness. Anansi has understood it and builds the whole plan around it. He does not fight Tiger; he makes Tiger agree to the terms of his own defeat.

Story 2: Tricking Snake

Anansi first tries two obvious traps on Snake (a pig and a chicken with visible nooses). Snake sees through both easily. This is deliberate: Anansi is building Snake's confidence and priming his ego. Then Anansi mentions that the Longest Creature of the Year prize might go to a bamboo tree. Snake cannot bear the thought. He insists on measuring himself against the tree by stretching himself out, and Anansi ties him to it.

"I'll get you for this, Anansi, you... you... arachnid! / Using what for legs, my friend? / You're all tied up, you cannot bend."

Snake's vanity is the trap. Anansi never needed to be stronger than Snake; he only needed to understand him.

Story 3: The Mancrow Battle

When Soliday kills Mancrow, Anansi is watching from the sidelines. He grabs Mancrow's feather, reaches the King first, and claims the credit. Soliday eventually receives recognition, but Anansi escapes with the food from the feast:

Off they go to the wedding bed / Me? I'll stay just me... and fed. / Live on the outside, grab what I can / Be myself, quick spider man.

This is Anansi at his most self-aware. He is not the heroic type; he is the survivor type. He improvises, takes what he can, and disappears before anyone can punish him. Campbell does not apologise for this. The play frames it as a survival strategy, not a moral failing.

Story 4: Tiger's Fat

On a hot day, Anansi convinces Tiger that swimming in his fur coat will cause it to shrink, and that the "three-toed fat-eating bloogers" in the pool will eat him if he does not remove his fat. Tiger removes both. Anansi cooks and eats the fat, then manipulates Ratbat into entering a singing contest with a song about Tiger fat, so that when Tiger arrives, Ratbat is implicated and Anansi can disappear.

This story adds a layer: Anansi's ability to set up a second person to take the consequences of his own scheme. Ratbat is not malicious; he is simply too easily flattered to notice what he has been used for. The principle is the same as every other story: understand your target's weakness, exploit it, and be gone before the reckoning.

Story 5: Her and the Calabash

The final Anansi story is told by the Girl herself at the auction. A wicked old woman named Her forces servants to work until they cry bitter tears, which she drinks. The servants advertise for a new worker with a secret wager: whoever guesses Her's real name wins half her possessions. Anansi disguises himself as a girl-worker, flatters Crab into revealing the name, confronts Her with it, and walks away with half her wealth.

The story ends with Her throwing her calabash at Crab in rage, and it sticks to his back permanently, along with all the tears enslaved people ever cried. The Girl draws her own meaning from this: "That's what my story's going to be: a hard back, many tears and a name that nobody knows. A new story for a new world." She is not Anansi in this story; she is the enslaved worker, facing the same brutality. But she has Anansi's approach: find the crack, use what is available, survive.

The Web

Anansi's web is the play's central symbol. It appears literally (the Girl watches the actual spider in the darkness of the hold) and metaphorically throughout.

The Girl first sees Anansi struggling: scrambling up to the beam, falling, scrambling again, falling again. She wonders why he does not give up and find a different spot. Then one thread sticks. The web begins.

The Woman draws the lesson: "From inside himself he finds the strength to make his web: just enough and no more. Enough is all he needs to catch a fly."

The web represents: strength built from nothing (no material except what comes from inside himself), patience and persistence (many failures before one success), intelligence as

construction (the web catches rather than attacks), and cultural connection (the web of stories binds the Girl to the Woman, to Africa, to the oral tradition).

The Web's Double Meaning

In the hold, Anansi builds an actual web. In the play's structure, Campbell weaves stories together the same way: each thread connecting to the next, creating something strong from many small, fragile parts. The web is both symbol and form.

Dramatic Techniques

Rhyming couplets and rap: Anansi speaks in verse throughout. After catching Snake, he delivers a rap soliloquy directed at the audience. The rhyme adds humour and energy, but Campbell's choice of rap form is significant: it connects the Akan oral tradition to a modern Caribbean performance style, showing how oral tradition survives and adapts. The tradition does not freeze in time; it evolves.

Dramatic irony: The audience always knows Anansi's plan before his targets do. This creates two effects simultaneously: comedy (watching Tiger or Snake walk into the trap while believing they are in control) and alignment (the audience becomes a co-conspirator, invested in Anansi's success). By extension, the audience becomes invested in the survival of the enslaved Africans the stories are told for.


Stage directions: Campbell's stage directions for Anansi show his scheming in advance, revealing intent the other characters cannot see. This is consistent with the dramatic irony: the audience is always one step ahead of the powerful figures being manipulated.

The web as prop: The physical web in the hold is one of the most important theatrical objects in the play. The Sailor brushes it aside when he passes through. The Girl watches it with growing attention. The Woman uses it to teach. The same object, almost invisible, becomes the play's central image of persistence.

His Complexity

Campbell gives Anansi a line that sums up his philosophy: "If in doubt, chicken out. / If there's a prize, improvise. / When you've a thirst, get there first."

This is not heroism in the classical sense; it is survivalism. Anansi is opportunistic, self-interested, sometimes dishonest, and comfortable with taking credit he has not fully earned. The play does not sanitise this. It asks instead whether, in a world designed to destroy you, conventional moral standards of heroism can still apply. The answer is no, and the play celebrates Anansi's cunning the more honestly for it.

 **Exam Tip**

If asked about Anansi as a character, address his complexity directly. He is not a traditional hero. Explain what he is instead (a trickster who uses wit and deception to survive in a world stacked against him) and connect this to why his stories mattered to enslaved Africans. Then move to specific stories and techniques.

Study Vault