

Anansi: The Captain and the Boy

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

The Captain and the Boy occupy the same cabin, the same ship, and by the play's logic, the same moral universe. They are a foil pair, and Campbell uses their relationship to ask one of the play's most uncomfortable questions: what does it take to turn an innocent child into an instrument of oppression? The answer is not cruelty alone. It is silence, normalisation, and the systematic removal of every outlet for conscience.

The Captain

The Captain commands the Good Ship Hope and represents the colonial slave-owning class at its most functional. He is not passionate about evil; he is businesslike about it. His cruelty operates through procedure rather than rage: through log entries, ledgers, dictations, and decisions made in the same measured tone as any other administrative task.

His worldview is stated plainly when the Boy raises the moral question about money: "The only story that counts, young man. The story that says that money makes the world go round." He dismisses the Boy's diary as "nonsense for lasses." He thanks God for losing only 150 enslaved people on the Atlantic crossing. He dictates that "maimed, defective or diseased slaves" must be thrown overboard to protect "the best beasts in the herd" before auction. Each of these moments uses a different register (religious, commercial, agricultural), but they all say the same thing: enslaved people are inventory.

He is also an oppressive father. He hits the Boy, confiscates his diary, silences his questions, and forces him to adopt the formal title "Captain" even in private. His relationship with his son mirrors his relationship with the enslaved: control through the removal of speech, individuality, and record.

His Decline

By the end of the play, the Captain coughs violently. This is the same coughing that has been the auditory signature of the enslaved throughout the ship scenes, as disease spreads in the hold. Campbell brings it to the Captain deliberately. His apparent invulnerability was always an illusion. Disease, like Anansi's wit, does not respect rank. The slave trade destroys all involved, including its architects.

Key Quotes

Quote	Significance
"The only story that counts... the story that says that money makes the world go round."	Exposes his entire worldview: economic logic overrides human worth
"One cup of maize porridge per slave per day should ensure that stores are sufficient."	Bureaucratic dehumanisation: the enslaved are kept alive at minimum cost
"My conscience is clear. I am doing no more than any good farmer to protect the best beasts in the herd."	Self-justification through analogy; he genuinely believes this
"Do you think there is a man alive who has no master of one kind or another?"	A rare moment of self-awareness: he knows he serves financial masters, and it does not trouble him

How Campbell Develops Him

Monologue (log entries): The Captain's dictations are the play's clearest example of how ideology enables atrocity. He does not confess; he justifies. The log is a public-facing record, and it reveals, without intending to, the moral bankruptcy of the system.

Sound effects: His violent coughing at the end connects him to the disease of the hold. Campbell stages the Captain's physical decline as a form of poetic justice.

Foil with the Woman: The Woman and the Captain both exercise authority, one through formal power and one through wisdom and care. His authority degrades; hers transmits.

Dramatic irony: The audience recognises what the Captain's log entries mean in human terms. He does not.

The Boy

The Boy is the Captain's son and the play's most morally complex figure on the ship. He arrives at the beginning of the voyage with genuine curiosity and compassion ("They looked just like people to me") and genuine bewilderment at what he is witnessing. He is literate, thoughtful, and troubled by things his father refuses to discuss.

His diary is his most important prop. It represents literacy as privilege: the Boy has the time, safety, and education to record his thoughts, while the enslaved survive through oral memory. When the Captain forces him to throw the diary overboard, the act symbolises the deliberate suppression of conscience within the system.

His First Diary Entry

The Boy's diary is his first act of independent witness. In it he records the people he saw herded on the shore: crying, beaten, some defiant. He notes in particular one older African woman whose hands were tied but who stood "stiff and proud," who caught his eye before turning away. He thinks she reminded him of his grandmother.

This detail is worth attention. The Boy, raised in and by the same system that has just enslaved this woman, still has the capacity to recognise her dignity. His comparison to his grandmother is not a patronising equivalence; it is the instinctive reaching of a moral conscience not yet fully closed. He sees a person where the Captain sees cargo.

His Moral Questioning

The Boy's most revealing exchange is with the Sailor, when he asks: "What colour is God?" The question is not naive. If God made all people in his image, and if "we're all of us made in His image," then the man thrown into the sea looks just as much like God as anyone. The Sailor dismisses it ("Slaves are different... more like beasts, or so they reckon") and tells the Boy that some thoughts are "plain dangerous." The Boy responds: "But she wasn't a beast! She was just like me!"

This is the key line for understanding him. He sees it. He understands what the system refuses to. But every channel for acting on that understanding is closed: the Sailor silences him, the Captain hits him and confiscates his diary, and he has no language or power to change what is happening.

His Ambiguous End

At Kingston Harbour, the Boy arrives "upright and stern." The Sailor says he can see "a man" in him. He is now doing the Captain's ledgers at the auction. He has shed, or suppressed, the bewilderment and compassion of the opening scenes.

His final exchange with the Sailor is significant: asked if he has found the colour of God, he says "Yes," but we never hear the answer. Campbell leaves this unresolved. The Boy may have found a moral answer he intends to hold privately, or he may have adopted his father's answer. The ambiguity is the point. The play does not tell us whether complicity was inevitable. It asks the audience to consider whether the conscience he started with could survive, and what it would have taken for it to do so.

The Boy's Diary

The diary represents the written historical record, kept by those close to power. When the Captain forces the Boy to throw it overboard, Campbell asks: whose account of slavery was preserved? The enslaved survived through oral tradition. The Boy's literate record is destroyed. The parallel to the Girl's position is deliberate.

Key Quotes

Quote	Significance
"They looked just like people to me."	Opening moral clarity, before the system teaches him otherwise
"What colour is God?"	The play's most pointed theological challenge: if God made all people in his image, what does the treatment of the enslaved mean?
"But she wasn't a beast! She was just like me!"	Recognition of shared humanity; the clearest statement of his moral conscience
"Dear Diary. I'm throwing you away. And though you are not finished, I'll keep your story in my head."	Small internal resistance after the Captain confiscates his diary
"Yes." (when asked the colour of God)	Final line: answered but unexplained; ambiguous moral destination

How Campbell Develops Him

Props (the diary): It is his form of recording and resistance. Its destruction by the Captain is the most direct act of censorship in the play.

Foil with the Girl: Both are young; both are on the same ship; both have curiosity and sensitivity. But everything about their material position is different. His relative freedom above deck makes her suffering below seem not inevitable but engineered.

Monologue/diary entries: His reflections give the audience a viewpoint adjacent to power. He witnesses and records what the Captain normalises. His perspective shows how close observers can still be complicit, not through malice but through proximity and silence.

Stage directions: His crumpling in agony to distract the Sailor when the Woman is being examined is one of the most important moments of physical stagecraft in the play. He acts, briefly, to protect her.

Captain and Boy as Foils

	Captain	Boy
View of the enslaved	Cargo, livestock, inventory	Human beings who look "just like me"
Relationship to language	Uses language to justify and record commerce	Uses language to question, record conscience
Relationship to power	Holds it absolutely; will not share it	Adjacent to it; confused by it; eventually absorbed into it
Physical state at end	Coughing violently; deteriorating	Upright, stern; managing the ledgers
Moral certainty	Total: never questions	Opening: none. End: ambiguous

The contrast is not simply good father versus bad father. It is a study in how conscience is shaped and suppressed by systems of power. The Captain had his moral certainty before the Boy was born. The Boy arrives with his moral instincts intact, and the play watches the system work on him throughout the voyage.

Exam Tip

The Captain and Boy are often paired in essay questions about relationships, power, or complicity. Do not treat the Boy as simply innocent. Show that Campbell uses him to explore how systems produce complicity, not through obvious cruelty but through the removal of outlets for conscience. The diary, the Sailor's dismissal, the Captain's violence: each closes a door.