

Anansi: The Woman

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The Woman is one of the most powerful characters in *Anansi*, and she is never seen. She is heard (coughing, speaking, telling stories, answering riddles) from behind the Girl in the darkness of the hold. That absence from the stage is not an accident. It is one of the most deliberate dramatic choices in the play, and understanding it is essential to understanding her significance.

Who She Is

The Woman is an older enslaved African tied to the same upright beam as the Girl in the hold of the Good Ship Hope. She is a keeper of Akan oral tradition, a mother figure, and a teacher of the most important kind: one who prepares a student to survive without her.

She is never named and never seen. The only stage direction about her is that she is tied "to the other side of the beam" from the Girl. "We will hear but never see this person." Campbell makes this explicit in both text and staging. Her invisibility on stage mirrors her position in the historical record: the Woman represents enslaved African women whose experiences were never written down, and whose survival depended entirely on what they could pass on through story.

Her Role in the Play

The Woman has two functions operating simultaneously. On the surface, she comforts a terrified child in the dark. Beneath that, she conducts a structured programme of education: through riddles, stories, and questions, she gives the Girl the inner tools to survive what is coming.

She establishes the relationship immediately: "No amount of fear and darkness can change that truth. Hold on to it!" This is not comfort in the usual sense. She does not pretend things are fine or promise they will improve. She insists that the Girl's identity, her truth, her self, cannot be taken even by the worst circumstances.

Her riddles form the curriculum:

Riddle One: "What part of you stays free when your arms and legs are tied?"

The answer is the mind. The Girl does not answer it at first; she is too frightened. But the riddle plants the question, and everything that follows is the answer taking shape.

Riddle Two: "So light you can barely see it. So beautiful no human being can hope to make one. Strong enough to hunt with, pure enough to see through, always being made again."

The small answer is Anansi's web. The big answer is the soul. Both matter: the web shows what the Girl can see in the darkness right now; the soul shows what the web represents, which is the inviolable part of a person that slavery cannot own.

The Woman's Riddles

(1) What stays free when you're tied? **Your mind.**

(2) Light, beautiful, strong, always being remade? Small answer: **Anansi's web.** Big answer: **the soul.**

These riddles are the play's core message in compressed form. Know both answers and connect them to theme.

She also teaches through the Anansi stories, not simply by telling them but by inviting the Girl to watch, respond, question, and eventually laugh. The shift from the Girl's terror to her genuine laughter at the Tiger Fat story marks how far the teaching has worked.

Her Departure

The Woman becomes visibly ill. The Sailor identifies her and begins to untie her to take her away. The Boy distracts the Sailor long enough to delay this, but when he returns she is removed. Her final words to the Girl are: "My teaching has ended and you must go on."

Campbell stages this with tremendous economy. The Woman does not protest. She does not weep. She tells the Girl: "Let them come." Her calm in the face of being thrown overboard is not resignation; it is the fullest expression of what she has been teaching. She has already given everything she could give. The stories belong to the Girl now. "I'll be with you." And she is, because the Girl carries her.

After the Woman is gone, the Girl sings the Tiger Fat song to herself. She does not explain it. The Boy who lingers does not understand what it means. But the audience does: the oral tradition has crossed from one generation to the next, exactly as it was always meant to.

Key Quotes

Quote	Significance
"No amount of fear and darkness can change that truth."	Core lesson: identity and selfhood cannot be taken by captivity

"Africa is your mother."	Redirects the Girl's grief toward cultural identity as a living source of strength
"They eat your soul and leave your body empty. I pity them."	Inverts the power dynamic: she pities the slave traders for their spiritual emptiness
"Weave your little web, like a dream in the dark, and wait, wait, wait."	Anansi's web as a model for inner strength and patient resistance
"From inside himself he finds the strength to make his web: just enough and no more."	The principle of survival through inner resourcefulness
"When they see us they see the thing they fear the most."	Her answer when the Girl asks why the white men hate the Africans; refuses to frame hatred as a statement about the Africans' worth and instead frames it as a statement about the slavers' own fear
"My teaching has ended and you must go on."	Final statement: calm preparation for independence, not defeat

How Campbell Develops Her

Invisibility as technique: The Woman's most distinctive staging choice is that she is never seen. This emphasises the literal darkness of the hold, gives her words more weight because no body competes with them, and positions her as a presence that persists beyond physical form. Even after she is taken away, her voice continues through the stories the Girl retells.

Voice as character: Campbell builds her entire characterisation through dialogue alone. She is not patient in a soft or passive sense; she is direct, occasionally sharp ("Don't question your elders!"), insistent, and clearly experienced. Her voice carries authority because she has survived worse than the Girl has seen.

Juxtaposed scenes: Her scenes in the hold are placed immediately against the captain's cabin above. The contrast between her voice and the Captain's log entries is Campbell's clearest argument about two kinds of record-keeping: the Captain's ledgers dehumanise, while the Woman's stories preserve humanity.

Foil with the Captain: The Woman and the Captain represent opposite relationships to power. He has formal authority and uses it to diminish others. She has none and uses everything she has to build someone up. Her strength outlasts his because it is transmitted, not held.

Thematic Significance

The Woman is the living embodiment of the oral tradition theme and the play's most direct argument about what it means to be strong. Physical power belongs to the Captain and the Sailor. Cultural and spiritual strength belongs to her. Campbell makes clear which is more durable: the Captain deteriorates and dies; the Woman's stories reach Jamaica with the Girl and outlast the voyage entirely.

Her pity for the slavers ("I pity them") is the most radical inversion in the play. She refuses the position of victim even while being victimised. She sees the slavers' moral emptiness as the real poverty. This is not naïve; it is a way of maintaining interior dignity that the system cannot access.

Exam Tip

If asked about the role of oral tradition, the Woman is your central example. Focus on: her invisibility as a staging choice, her riddles as structured teaching, her Anansi stories as cultural transmission, and the moment the Girl sings the Tiger Fat song after she is gone, which is evidence that the tradition has passed on successfully.