

Anansi: Forest Characters

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

The Forest of Stories is home to characters who exist parallel to the ship scenes. None of them are realistic; they are folk tale figures, drawn from oral tradition, who embody ideas rather than psychologies. Understanding them means understanding what each one represents for the Girl, and by extension for the enslaved Africans the play is about.

Tiger

Tiger is the most feared creature in the Forest. His arrival silences everything around him: flowers close, birds pretend to be flowers, monkeys pretend to be birds pretending to be flowers. His power is completely real, and everyone knows it.

What he lacks is wisdom about his own weaknesses. He is vain, impatient, and unaccustomed to being questioned. He boasts about his physical dominance and his "schedule" of being terrifying. When Anansi flatters him ("Tiger, Tiger, burning bright. You're the boss by day or night"), Tiger hears it as his due. He cannot tell sycophancy from genuine respect, because he has never needed to.

Anansi defeats him twice. First, he tricks Tiger into accepting a challenge that Anansi has already prepared the answer to (bringing Snake tied to a pole). Second, at the pool, he convinces Tiger to remove his fur coat and fat, then cooks and eats the fat while Tiger swims. When Tiger emerges to find his coat too large for his now-slimmer body, Anansi has already vanished.

What Tiger represents: The slave masters and colonial power: dominant by force and assumption, but not invincible. His strength rests on the belief that no one beneath him would dare challenge him. The moment someone does, without fear, his power starts to look different. He is not defeated by a superior force; he is defeated by a clearer mind.

Tiger's Weakness

Tiger's weakness is not physical; it is psychological. His vanity, his certainty about his own superiority, and his impatience all make him predictable. Anansi uses each of these against him. The lesson: understanding your opponent's psychology is more useful than matching their strength.

Snake

Snake appears in the Tricking Snake story and exists to demonstrate the same principle as Tiger, but through a different weakness: pride about his own attributes rather than general dominance.

When Anansi suggests that the Longest Creature of the Year prize might go to a bamboo tree, Snake cannot contain his indignation: "A bamboo tree! But any silly, simpering, snivelling little snit can see that I'm longer than that stupid tree!" He demands to stretch himself alongside it to prove his superiority, and Anansi ties him down in the process.

"I'll get you for this, Anansi, you... you... arachnid! / Using what for legs, my friend? / You're all tied up, you cannot bend / When you can squiggle from your tree / Then you can settle things with me."

Snake is described as "wise and shiny, cool and long" in Anansi's introduction: physically impressive and self-aware enough to spot Anansi's first two obvious traps. He is not stupid. But he is proud of his intelligence as well as his length, and that pride is the second lever. Anansi lets him feel clever for seeing through the pig and chicken traps before springing the real one.

What Snake represents: A variation on Tiger's theme: physical superiority defeated by ego. The bamboo tree and the tied knots are simple objects. What makes them weapons is Snake's inability to resist the suggestion that he might be bettered.

Mancrow

Mancrow is introduced in verse by the other forest animals:

Mancrow's coming! Despair and death! / Close your eyes and bate your breath! / Huge as horror, vast as night / Blotting the sun out, eating light.

He arrives with thunder and demands babies and eggs, promising to devour the entire forest. His name combines "man" and "crow," making him explicitly part-human and part-predator. He does not merely threaten; he consumes the light itself.

When Soliday kills him, the King announces: "The day is saved! The sun is bright! / Weakness has triumphed over might!" The return of the sun is not metaphorical in the Forest of Stories; it is literal. Light comes back because Mancrow is gone.

What Mancrow represents: Oppressive, consuming evil: slavery and colonial power taken to their absolute extreme. He does not merely enslave; he blots out every source of hope and sustenance. His defeat is the play's most direct image of liberation. The Woman tells the Girl

this story at the moment when she is asking about the sailors throwing bodies overboard. The timing is deliberate: Mancrow is the answer to the Girl's question about whether overwhelming evil can be defeated.

Soliday

Soliday is the true hero of the Mancrow story, though Anansi tries to steal the credit by grabbing Mancrow's feather first. He is a young human warrior who presents himself to Gran before going to fight the great bird.

Gran examines him, looks him in the eye, and says: "You'll do." This small exchange matters. She does not promise victory. She does not say he is the strongest or most talented. She simply confirms that he has what is needed, and equips him accordingly.

Gran gives him six arrows:

Arrow	Gran's words
Hope	Without it, we quail
Wits	Without them, we fail
Fear	Your fear makes you strong
Anger	At everything wrong
Ancestry (Name)	Simple and true
The Secret	Held only by you

Soliday fires them in order against Mancrow. Each one strikes but does not immediately kill. Mancrow taunts him after every hit: "Your hope means nothing to me... Your wits are far too wee... Your fear is justified... Your anger's empty pride... Your name will be snuffed out..." and then the sixth arrow, the Secret, the private inner power that belongs to Soliday alone and cannot be anticipated or mocked. "That's odd... I usually get this right." And Mancrow dies.

What Soliday represents: Human agency in the fight against oppression. Anansi's wit alone is not enough to defeat Mancrow; the play is explicit about this. Anansi watches from a safe distance and grabs the reward after the danger has passed. It takes a human being, willing to stand in front of evil and fire each inner resource in sequence, to actually kill it. Soliday parallels the Girl: not the most powerful figure in the story, but honest, courageous, and equipped by an elder who knows what is needed.

Exam Tip

The six arrows are a favourite exam detail. Know all six names and Gran's line for each. They represent the inner resources the play argues are necessary for survival and resistance: Hope, Wits, Fear (courage), Anger (righteous), Ancestry, and a private, inalienable inner strength.

Gran

Gran is Soliday's grandmother and the Forest of Stories' equivalent of the Woman on the ship. She is elderly, comically self-described as "splintery-boned," "crotchety-fingered," and "rustily-elbowed," a deliberately comic characterisation that makes her eventual authority feel even more striking. She presents herself as a burden; she is, in fact, the most important figure in the story.

Her method is the same as the Woman's: she does not simply instruct. She tests first ("Let me look you in the eye. That's where the truth is") and then equips. The six arrows she gives Soliday come from knowledge, not armoury. She conjures them from nowhere. They are her understanding made physical for one specific purpose.

Her final instruction ("Now go, without a word. You have everything you need") is the same note the Woman strikes throughout the ship scenes. Both elder women know that the best teaching prepares someone for independence, not dependence. You cannot hand victory to someone else.

What Gran represents: The matriarch as transmitter of wisdom and strength across generations. The Woman and Gran are structural foils: different settings, identical function. Together they form the play's central argument that generational teaching through story and direct guidance is what makes survival possible.

Ratbat

Ratbat is the Forest's comic minor character, a self-styled cool figure who operates in daylight despite being nocturnal because it is "too hot to sleep today." He introduces himself in snatches of popular songs, describes himself as cool "as an icecube in a polar bear's pyjamas," and is convinced he is the most talented singer in the forest.

Anansi manipulates him easily. After cooking Tiger's fat, he tells Ratbat about a fictional Best Song About Tiger Fat Contest, for which Anansi happens to have the perfect entry. Ratbat agrees to sing it at Song City ("Yesterday this time me am yum Tiger fat"), and when Tiger arrives in fury, Ratbat is standing there holding the evidence.

Ratbat is not malicious; he is simply too easily flattered and too confident in his coolness to notice what he has been used for. His function is to add another layer to the Tiger Fat story while providing broad comedy. He also shows that Anansi's wit extends to everyone, not just the powerful: even the savvy and self-aware fall into the same trap when their ego is the target.

Campbell uses Ratbat at a moment when the ship scenes are becoming particularly bleak. The Ratbat sequence is deliberately funny, providing the kind of relief that makes the next return to the ship feel heavier by contrast.

Forest Characters and the Ship

Every major Forest character maps onto the ship's dynamic:

Forest Character	Ship Parallel	Shared Principle
Tiger	The Captain / slave masters	Dominant power, defeated by understanding its weakness
Snake	The Sailor / complicit figures	Pride exploited; superiority used against itself
Mancrow	The slave trade as system	Consuming evil; defeated only by inner resources
Soliday	The Girl	Human courage and inner strength facing overwhelming power
Gran	The Woman	Elder woman equipping the young with inner tools, not answers
Ratbat	Minor figures absorbed into Anansi's schemes	Even the clever get used when ego overrides caution