

# Anansi Overview

Amari Cross & Matthew Williams • English Literature • May 7, 2026

*Anansi* by Alistair Campbell is a play about slavery, survival, storytelling, and mental resistance. It moves between the hold of a slave ship and the world of Anansi stories. That structure is important because the ship shows physical captivity, while the stories show freedom of mind, cultural memory, and hope.

The play uses Anansi, the spider trickster from West African Akan oral tradition, as a symbol of intelligence. Anansi is physically small, but he survives by thinking faster than stronger opponents such as Snake and Tiger. Campbell places these trickster stories beside the suffering of enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage, so the stories become more than entertainment. They become a way to survive terror, preserve identity, and imagine resistance.

## What the Play Is About

The main setting is the Good Ship Hope in 1781. The name of the ship is deeply ironic because the enslaved Africans trapped below deck are surrounded by fear, sickness, darkness, and hopelessness. The hold of the ship represents the physical horror of slavery. People are confined, dehumanised, separated from home, and treated as cargo rather than human beings.

Alongside the ship scenes, the play enters the Forest of Stories, where Anansi tricks powerful animals. These stories create a sharp contrast with the ship. The hold is dark and suffocating, but the Forest of Stories is imaginative, active, and free. Campbell uses this contrast to show that even when the body is imprisoned, the mind and spirit can resist.

The structure works like Anansi's web. Different stories, characters, settings, and symbols connect to each other. The ship scenes show suffering. The Anansi stories answer that suffering with wit, courage, and cultural memory. The play keeps moving between both worlds so the audience understands that storytelling is not escape in a weak sense. It is a form of strength.

## Main Characters

**Anansi** is the trickster spider. He is cunning, funny, resourceful, and subversive. He does not win through size or physical force. He wins by understanding pride, weakness, and timing. His web symbolises intelligence, connection, and storytelling. As a dramatic figure, he represents the survival of African oral tradition under slavery.

**The Girl** is an enslaved African child trapped in the hold of the ship. She is frightened, grieving, and vulnerable, but she is not weak. Her fear makes her suffering real, while her ability to

continue speaking and imagining shows resilience. She represents the human cost of slavery, especially for women and children.

**The Woman** is an enslaved African adult in the hold. She is protective, dignified, and culturally rooted. Her role as a storyteller is central because she helps preserve memory and comfort the girl. She shows that resistance can take the form of care, speech, and the passing on of tradition.

**The Boy** is connected to the captain and has relative comfort and freedom compared with the girl. His diary is an important prop because it shows privilege. He has literacy, space, and the power to record what he sees. Campbell uses him to raise a serious question: whose version of history gets written down, and whose is forced to survive orally?

**The Captain** represents colonial power and the slave trade. He appears authoritative, but he is morally blind and eventually physically weakened. His violent coughing is important because it links him to the sickness below deck. Campbell suggests that the slave trade corrupts and damages everyone involved, including those who profit from it.

**Snake and Tiger** are powerful opponents in the Anansi stories. They are stronger than Anansi, but they are also proud and easily manipulated. They work as foils to Anansi because their physical power makes his intelligence stand out.

## Key Themes

**Slavery and the Middle Passage** are central to the play. Campbell does not present slavery as a distant historical topic. He makes it immediate through setting, sound, lighting, and contrast. The hold of the ship is dark and cramped. Coughing suggests disease and poor conditions. Crying makes suffering audible even when characters are hidden in darkness. The audience is made to feel the cruelty of the system rather than simply learn about it.

**Storytelling and oral tradition** are presented as forms of survival. The Anansi stories carry wisdom from African culture into the world of the ship. They allow enslaved characters to hold on to identity when everything around them tries to erase it. The play itself becomes an act of storytelling, showing that culture can survive even violent displacement.

**Resourcefulness and intelligence** are shown through Anansi. He defeats Snake and Tiger not because he is stronger, but because he understands them. The bamboo tree, calabash, and web are ordinary or simple objects, but Anansi turns them into tools. This matters because enslaved people had very little physical power in the slave system. Campbell uses Anansi to show that mental resistance can still be powerful.

**Deception and trickery** work in different ways. Anansi uses trickery against bullies and stronger enemies, so his deception feels like justice. The slave traders also use deception, but

theirs is cruel and exploitative. The name Good Ship Hope is a major example of this hypocrisy. The ship promises hope in name while carrying people into bondage.

**Captivity and freedom** run through the whole play. The enslaved Africans are physically trapped, but the Forest of Stories shows imaginative freedom. This does not make the ship less horrific. Instead, it shows that slavery cannot fully control memory, culture, imagination, or spirit.

**Hope and hopelessness** are held together. The ship creates a world that seems almost hopeless, but the Anansi stories repeatedly show a small figure outwitting powerful enemies. Campbell does not present hope as easy optimism. Hope in this play is endurance, memory, and the refusal to let suffering become the only story.

**Strength and resilience** are redefined. The captain has formal power, but he is morally weak and physically deteriorating. The girl is frightened, but her survival is strength. The woman is trapped, but her storytelling protects identity. Anansi is small, but his mind makes him powerful.

## Dramatic Techniques

**Setting** is one of Campbell's most important tools. The hold, cabin, deck, Forest of Stories, and Kingston Harbour all carry meaning. The hold represents captivity and dehumanisation. The cabin represents privilege and authority. The Forest of Stories represents imagination and cultural freedom.

**Juxtaposition** is used when Campbell places the cabin and the hold beside each other. The boy may be writing in relative comfort while the girl and woman are suffering below deck. This forces the audience to see two realities at once: the comfort of those close to power and the terror of those without power.

**Sound effects** make suffering present. Coughing suggests disease throughout the ship scenes. The girl's crying makes the audience hear pain that might not be fully visible. When the captain coughs violently, it becomes symbolic because the sickness of the ship reaches the person in command.

**Lighting** builds the contrast between captivity and hope. Darkness in the hold suggests fear, imprisonment, and helplessness. Any beam of light becomes precious because it suggests the possibility of hope. The Forest of Stories would naturally contrast with this through brighter, freer staging.

**Props** carry symbolic meaning. The boy's diary represents privilege and the written historical record. The calabash and bamboo show Anansi's resourcefulness. The web represents connection, intelligence, and storytelling. Tiger's coat and other objects in the Anansi stories show how power can be taken apart through cleverness.

**Dramatic irony** is common in the Anansi stories. The audience often understands Anansi's plan before Snake or Tiger does. This creates humour and suspense, but it also makes the audience share in Anansi's cleverness. We are encouraged to enjoy the defeat of arrogant power.

**Monologues and soliloquies** reveal private thought. The girl's monologue gives direct access to fear and grief. The boy's reflections show the viewpoint of someone close to power but not fully innocent. The captain's speech exposes the thinking that justifies oppression. Anansi's rap after catching Snake adds humour and rhythm, while also connecting traditional storytelling to modern Caribbean performance.

## Structure

Campbell does not rely on a simple, traditional structure. Instead, the play moves between ship locations and Anansi stories. This can feel fragmented, but that fragmentation is meaningful. The enslaved characters have been torn from home, family, language, and safety. The broken structure reflects a broken historical experience.

The repeated movement from ship to forest and back again is the play's main structural pattern. The ship is reality: captivity, violence, disease, and fear. The forest is story: memory, imagination, cleverness, and possible victory. Each return to the forest gives the audience a different way to understand the ship.

The Anansi stories operate like a subplot. They mirror the main action rather than distracting from it. When Anansi defeats a stronger enemy, the play gives symbolic hope to those trapped by a stronger system. The message is not that slavery can be solved easily. The message is that oppression does not erase intelligence, culture, or resistance.

## Exam Focus

For exams, focus on how Campbell uses dramatic technique to build meaning. Do not only say that the play is about slavery. Explain how the hold, coughing, darkness, juxtaposed scenes, and the ironic ship name make slavery feel immediate and cruel.

If the question is about storytelling, write about the Forest of Stories, Anansi's web, oral tradition, the woman's role, and the way each Anansi tale reflects the main plot. If the question is about resilience, compare Anansi's cleverness with the girl's endurance and the woman's protective storytelling. If the question is about power, compare the captain's authority with Anansi's intelligence and the boy's diary with the girl's silenced experience.

### **Fast Memory Hook**

Anansi shows that slavery controls bodies, but storytelling protects memory, identity, and imagination. Anansi's web is the best symbol for the whole play: many small threads become one strong structure.

Study Vault