

Anansi: Overview

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

Anansi by Alistair Campbell is a play about enslaved Africans aboard a slave ship in 1791 and the West African folk stories that keep them alive inside. It moves between two parallel worlds: the hold of the Good Ship Hope and the Forest of Stories, where Anansi the spider trickster outsmarts powerful opponents. The structural contrast between physical captivity and imaginative freedom is the play's central argument.

Campbell first created the play for Breakout Theatre in Education Company in 1990. It draws on the Akan/Ashanti oral tradition of the spider trickster, brought to the Caribbean by enslaved West Africans and adapted into the Brer Anansi stories of the region. The play is simultaneously a piece of historical drama about the Middle Passage and a celebration of oral tradition as a form of survival.

Context

Setting	The Good Ship Hope, West African Coast to Jamaica, 1791
First performed	1990, Breakout Theatre in Education Company
Tradition	Akan/Ashanti oral folk hero, brought to the Caribbean through slavery
CSEC placement	English B (Literature), prescribed drama text

The name of the ship matters. Calling it the Good Ship Hope is one of the play's first ironies: the enslaved Africans below deck experience no hope whatsoever. Campbell uses the name to expose the hypocrisy woven into the language of the slave trade.

Structure

The play does not use traditional acts and scenes. Instead, it alternates between locations on the ship (the cabin, the deck, the hold, Kingston Harbour) and named Anansi stories set in the Forest of Stories. This back-and-forth is the play's most important structural feature.

The Two Worlds

The Ship: dark, suffocating, tragic; physical captivity, disease, dehumanisation

The Forest of Stories: vivid, energetic, comic; imagination, cultural memory, freedom of mind

The ship shows what slavery does to the body. The Forest shows what storytelling does for the spirit.

The Anansi stories are not escape from the main plot; they run parallel to it. Every forest story mirrors something happening on the ship. When Anansi outsmarts Tiger or Snake, the play offers a symbolic version of the same dynamic: the small and powerless triumphing over the large and dominant through wit. The stories are thematic commentary, not relief.

Campbell uses dotted lines instead of traditional scene headings to separate sections. The fragmentation of form reflects the fragmented experience of the enslaved, torn from home, family, language, and continuity.

The Origin of Anansi

Long before the play begins, Anansi was a spider in a world that had no stories. All the stories of every animal and person who had ever existed were kept by Nyame, the sky god, who laughed when Anansi climbed up to the heavens and offered to buy them. Even kingdoms could not afford such a price, he said. What could a spider possibly offer?

Anansi told him to name his terms. Nyame set an impossible task: capture the four most dangerous creatures in the world and bring them to the sky. Anansi captured the python by tricking it into measuring itself against a bamboo tree, then tying it fast. He captured the leopard by luring it into a pit and pretending to rescue it. He trapped the hornets by convincing them the rains had started and that they should shelter inside his gourd, then sealed it. He caught the forest spirit using a doll and the spirit's own loneliness. He brought all four to Nyame.

Nyame had no choice. He gave the world's stories to Anansi, and from that day on they have been called Anansi stories.

This origin is not retold inside Campbell's play, but it underlies everything in it. Anansi is not simply a clever spider who tells stories: he is the reason stories exist. The act of telling a story is, in the tradition the play draws on, an act that belongs to him. When the Woman tells the Anansi stories to the Girl in the hold of the ship, she is doing exactly what Anansi did when he climbed to the heavens: she is refusing to accept that the most precious things can be taken from her.

Major Themes

History of slavery: Campbell does not present the Middle Passage as distant history. The setting, the language of the Captain's log entries, the coughing, the darkness, and the auction all make the horror immediate and physical.

Storytelling and oral tradition: Anansi stories carry African cultural memory across the Middle Passage. The play argues that oral tradition is not a lesser form of record-keeping; it is survival itself. Stories transmit wisdom, identity, and hope when everything else has been taken.

Resourcefulness and intelligence: Anansi consistently defeats physically superior opponents through wit, timing, and understanding of their weaknesses. Campbell uses this to show that power can be resisted mentally and culturally even when physical resistance is impossible.

Captivity and freedom of mind: The enslaved are chained in the hold, but the Forest of Stories is always accessible. The play insists that slavery can imprison the body without fully imprisoning imagination, memory, or identity.

Strength and resilience: Redefined throughout the play. The Captain appears powerful but deteriorates. The Girl appears helpless but grows. Anansi is tiny but unstoppable. Resilience in the play means endurance, community, and the refusal to let suffering be the final word.

Hope and hopelessness: Held together throughout. The ship creates near-total hopelessness. The Anansi stories counter it, not with easy optimism but with evidence that clever, small figures can repeatedly outwit dominant ones.

Desire versus destiny: Several characters are caught between what they want and what the world has assigned them. The Boy desires knowledge and moral clarity; his destiny, enforced by the Captain, is to become a captain himself. The Girl desires her mother, her home, and freedom; her destiny, as determined by the slave trade, is the plantation. The tension between desire and destiny runs beneath every major character arc.

Prejudice and racism: The Captain and the Sailor treat the enslaved Africans as subhuman throughout, using the language of livestock management, cargo, and property. This is not incidental cruelty but structured ideology: a belief system that allows the trade to function by denying the humanity of those it destroys.

Alienation: The enslaved are physically separated from their homeland, their families, their language, and each other. The Girl cannot make herself understood on deck; she is isolated even in the hold, tied in darkness alongside people she cannot see. The Boy experiences a different alienation: he is the only person on the ship who seems troubled by what is happening, which leaves him without anyone to speak to honestly except his diary.

Gender roles: The play examines what is expected of men and women on both sides of the divide. The Sailor tells the weeping Boy that "big boys don't cry," enforcing emotional suppression as a condition of masculinity. The Captain dismisses the Boy's diary as "nonsense for lasses." On the other side, the Woman defines strength, wisdom, and the transmission of culture as the matriarch's role, and Gran fulfils the same function in the Forest. Campbell suggests that the qualities the system labels feminine (tenderness, reflection, storytelling, moral questioning) are precisely the ones that make survival possible.

God and religion: The Captain thanks God after crossing the Atlantic with relatively few deaths, treating divine providence as an endorsement of the trade. The Boy's response is to ask what colour God is: if all people are made in God's image, then the man thrown overboard looks like God too. The contradiction he names is the contradiction the entire ideological structure of the slave trade depended on suppressing. The play never resolves it; it only makes it visible.

Key Symbols

Symbol	What It Represents
Anansi's web	Storytelling, cultural connection, strength built from nothing, intelligence as power
The Good Ship Hope	Ironic: the name promises hope; the reality is suffering and bondage
Light and darkness	Darkness represents captivity and despair; light through the crack in the hold represents hope
The sea	The Middle Passage, the impossible distance from home, the irreversibility of displacement
The Forest of Stories	Imaginative freedom, cultural heritage, the mind's resistance to physical captivity
The soul	Woman's answer to her second riddle: the part of a person that slavery cannot own
The Boy's diary	Privilege, the written record, whose version of history gets preserved
The calabash	Ancestral wisdom; collective suffering; permanent consequences (sticks to Crab's back)

Dramatic Techniques

Stage directions: Campbell uses stage directions to establish the play's two worlds as physical realities, not described states. The hold is in near-total darkness; the forest is lit and energetic. The Woman — tied to the other side of the same beam as the Girl — is described in a direction as someone "we will hear but never see." This is the play's most precise staging choice: the keeper of oral culture, the transmitter of stories, is a voice without a body, present to the Girl (and the audience) only through sound. The dotted lines Campbell uses instead of traditional scene headings are themselves a directorial choice: fragmented form reflects the fragmented experience of people torn from home, family, and continuity.

Lighting: The single crack of light in the hold is the Girl's first image of hope; when she focuses on it, it becomes her anchor. The forest scenes contrast sharply — bright, warm, energetic. The Captain's cabin has adequate light, because his writing, his records, and his comfort all depend on visibility. Campbell makes light a direct expression of power: those with power have light; those without it are kept in the dark.

Costume: The Girl's chains are her defining costume element. She is not dressed as a person with a personal identity but as cargo — property. The Boy's relative freedom of movement and his writing materials signal his entirely different standing on the same ship. The Captain's uniform signals colonial authority. In the forest, costume serves symbolic purpose: Anansi tricks Tiger into removing his stylish coat before swimming — convincing him it will shrink — and the coat disappears along with Tiger's fat. Tiger's coat, stripped from the dominant predator through wit rather than force, is the play's image of power changing hands without a fight.

Prop: The Boy's diary is the play's most politically loaded prop. It is a written record that preserves only one perspective: the literate, colonial one. The calabash, which in the Crab story holds ancestral wisdom and permanent memory, is its counterpart: one form of record-keeping is owned by the powerful; the other belongs to everyone. The bamboo tree is the instrument by which Anansi tricks the python. The web represents storytelling itself — constructed, purposeful, with the maker always present inside it.

Juxtaposition: The hold and the forest are the play's central juxtaposition: physical captivity against imaginative freedom, darkness against light, suffering against comedy, the irreversible against the resourceful. Campbell runs these worlds simultaneously. The audience is never permitted to retreat fully into the comedy of the forest story without the knowledge of what is happening below deck. The Boy writes in light while the Girl cries in darkness; the juxtaposition is not sequential but simultaneous.

Dramatic irony: When Anansi is tricking Tiger or Snake, the audience knows his plan before his targets do. Tiger believes he is simply demonstrating his strength; Snake believes he is proving his superiority. Their confidence in themselves is precisely the condition that makes them

vulnerable. The audience watches with pleasure because they share in Anansi's knowledge — they are positioned as clever, not fooled, unlike the play's villains.

Situational irony: The ship is named the Good Ship Hope. This is the play's first irony: the name promises what the vessel destroys. The Captain's log records the voyage as a commercial and providential success; the same journey is a death sentence for the people below deck. The Boy's diary is written in full light and will survive; the stories told in the hold in darkness carry no such official guarantee of preservation.

Aside: Anansi addresses the audience directly, in the tradition of the griot and the oral storyteller. His asides step outside the action of the forest story to invite the audience into his reasoning or to signal what is coming. This is consistent with the West African and Caribbean oral tradition the play draws on: the storyteller and the audience are in a relationship, not a performance hierarchy. When Anansi explains his trick to the audience before executing it, he makes them co-conspirators, which is exactly the position Anansi occupies in the tradition — not just a clever character, but the reason stories exist at all.

Soliloquy: The Captain's log entries are performed as soliloquies: they give direct access to the ideology that justifies the trade, expressed in the Captain's own confident voice. The Girl's monologue at the Kingston auction is the counterpart: the first time her interior world is given full, unmediated expression, in a scene that marks her transfer from one form of captivity to another. Anansi's rhyming rap, which connects Akan storytelling to modern Caribbean performance, functions as a soliloquy in the sense that it makes his reasoning visible to the audience alone — his targets never hear it.

Foil: Campbell constructs the play through paired contrasts. The Girl and the Boy are foils: one is imprisoned without rights; the other is being groomed for authority on the same ship. The Woman and the Captain are foils: one transmits culture through oral story, the other documents his actions in written records. Anansi and Tiger are foils: cleverness against strength, the small against the large. Gran and the Woman are foils: both elder figures who equip the young with the tools for survival, one in the forest, one in the hold.

 **Exam Tip**

For essay questions, always move from technique to specific example to effect on audience to theme. Do not just identify a technique. Say what Campbell does with it, what the audience experiences, and what larger idea it serves.

Quick Character Map

Character	World	Role
The Girl	Ship	Protagonist; enslaved African child; grows from despair to storyteller
The Woman	Ship	Mentor and mother figure; keeper of cultural memory; never seen on stage
The Captain	Ship	Colonial authority; morally blind; physically deteriorating
The Boy	Ship	Captain's son; morally conflicted witness; ambiguous fate
The Sailor	Ship	Everyday complicity; dehumanising language; no moral questioning
The Auctioneer	Kingston	Final transaction; commerce language; completes the trade cycle
Anansi	Forest	Spider trickster; wit over strength; symbol of resilience and oral tradition
Tiger	Forest	Power and pride; defeated by overconfidence; parallels slave masters
Snake	Forest	Vanity and length; tricked by flattery; defeated by the same pride
Mancrow	Forest	Consuming evil; darkness embodied; allegorical figure for slavery
Soliday	Forest	True hero of the Mancrow story; inner strength over brute force
Gran	Forest	Elder guide; parallels the Woman; equips the young with inner tools
Ratbat	Forest	Comic relief; accidentally implicated in Anansi's schemes