

Anansi: Scene 3 - Fever and Mancrow

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<CharacterChips characters={"The Girl", "The Woman", "The Boy", "The Sailor", "Anansi", "Soliday", "Gran", "Mancrow"} />

Summary

The hold grows worse. The Woman tells the Girl to listen with forest ears, not sick ears. In the darkness, two sailors untie a dead man from the beam and drag him out of sight, cursing as they go. The Girl panics. The Woman tells her to stay still and say nothing: to them, you are not a person, just a thing. The Girl asks whether the sailors will eat them. The Woman's reply is quiet and exact: they eat your soul and leave your body empty, and she pities them for it.

The Sailor and the Boy pass through the hold. The Sailor looks at the Woman and tells the Boy that if she gets any worse she is going over the side. The Boy says nothing. The sailors brush through a spider's web as they leave.

The Woman poses a second riddle: 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 Girl answers quickly: Anansi's web. The Woman tells her that is the small answer. The big answer is the soul.

The Girl asks whether they are going to die. The Woman tells her she is going to live, and then says: listen to my story.

The Forest of Stories opens on the Mancrow sequence. Animals are dancing and singing when thunder rolls across the sky. Mancrow arrives: huge, dark, blotting out the sun, demanding babies and eggs. The animals scatter in terror.

The King announces a reward: whoever kills Mancrow will receive untold wealth and his daughter's hand. Soliday presents himself to his grandmother Gran before going to fight. Gran is elderly, self-described as splintery-boned and rustily-elbowed, and she presents herself as a burden. She looks Soliday in the eye to see whether he has what is needed, and tells him simply: you'll do. She conjures six arrows from nowhere, one for each resource he will need: Hope, Wits, Fear, Anger, his Name, and a secret held only by him. She gives him each with a single line, and sends him off without another word.

Soliday fights Mancrow. He fires each arrow in sequence. After every hit, Mancrow taunts him: your hope means nothing to me, your wits are too small, your fear is justified, your anger is

empty pride, your name will be snuffed out. Then comes the sixth arrow, the secret that belongs only to Soliday, the inner resource Mancrow cannot name or mock. Mancrow dies.

Anansi, who has been watching from a safe distance, grabs a feather, reaches the King first, and claims the credit. Soliday arrives with his own feather. The King looks Soliday in the eye and understands the truth, and the servants chase Anansi across the stage. Anansi escapes through a locked door and disappears with the food from the banquet. Soliday receives the real reward.

Back on the ship, on deck, the Boy sits crying. The Sailor finds him and tells him to pull himself together. The Boy asks: what colour is God? If all men are made in God's image, then the man they threw in the sea today looks just as much like God as you or I. The Sailor falls back on what he was told: slaves are different, more like beasts. The Boy insists on what he saw: she was just like me.

Analysis

The Mancrow story is the play's most direct statement about oppression and what it takes to overcome it. Mancrow is not a nuanced villain: he blots out the sun, he devours everything, he is consuming evil given a body and a name. Campbell introduces him immediately after the scene of the sailor throwing a dead man overboard. The connection is deliberate. Mancrow is the slave trade taken to its symbolic extreme: it does not merely enslave, it eats the light.

Gran's function in this story is identical to the Woman's on the ship. Both are elderly women who do not simply give comfort; they equip. Gran's six arrows are not physical objects. They are the inner resources the play argues are necessary for survival: hope, intelligence, the courage that fear becomes when you act anyway, anger at injustice properly directed, identity (your name, your ancestry), and a private strength that cannot be anticipated or taken from the outside. Mancrow's taunts after each arrow are his attempt to unmake these resources by naming them. They do not work, because the sixth arrow is the one he cannot name.

Anansi's behaviour in the Mancrow sequence is important because it shows the limits of pure wit. He watches from safety, grabs a reward he did not earn, and escapes before the consequences arrive. The play does not condemn this; it frames it as survival. But it is also explicit that Anansi did not kill Mancrow. The spider's cleverness is not enough against consuming evil. It takes a human being willing to stand in front of it, equipped by an elder, firing every resource in sequence.

The second riddle's answer, the soul, completes what the first riddle began. The first riddle asked what stays free when the body is tied; the second identifies the thing that slavery cannot reach. Campbell places this answer at the moment the Girl has just watched sailors throw a man overboard. The timing is exact: the body can be discarded, but the soul is something else entirely.

The Boy's question about God's colour is his clearest moral statement in the play. He is not making an abstract theological argument; he is connecting the man thrown in the sea to a principle he was taught. The Sailor's deflection ("slaves are different, more like beasts") is the justification the slave trade gave itself, and the Boy, young as he is, can see through it. His inability to act on what he knows, beyond asking the question, defines his arc for the rest of the play.

The Six Arrows

Gran gives Soliday six arrows in this order: Hope, Wits, Fear (courage), Anger (at injustice), his Name/Ancestry, and a secret inner strength. Mancrow taunts him after each hit but cannot name or mock the sixth. The sixth arrow is the one that kills him.

Themes

- **Slavery and the Slave Trade:** The physical reality of the trade becomes most visible here: bodies dragged out of the hold, a man thrown overboard, the Sailor's casual explanation that it is just orders. The scale of the Captain's log entry ("only one hundred and fifty") makes the horror statistical. Mancrow, arriving at the same time in the Forest, is the system's symbolic twin.
- **Strength and Resilience vs Weakness:** Gran's six arrows are the scene's clearest statement that inner resources are what make survival possible. Mancrow's taunts after each arrow try to name and unmake each one: your hope means nothing, your wits are too small. The sixth arrow kills him precisely because it cannot be anticipated or mocked.
- **Hope vs Hopelessness:** The second riddle's answer, the soul, is the play's answer to hopelessness. Bodies are being thrown overboard; the soul is the thing that cannot be thrown. The Woman places this answer at the moment the Girl has just watched a man discarded, which makes it feel earned rather than abstract.
- **Oral Tradition and Storytelling:** The Mancrow story arrives exactly when the Girl asks whether they are going to die. The Woman's response is: listen to my story. The story does not avoid the question; it answers it by showing what inner resources make survival possible. Story is the medium through which the lesson is delivered.
- **Parent/Child:** Gran and the Woman function as the same figure in two registers: the elder who equips the young before a confrontation with overwhelming power. Both test first, give what is needed, and send away. The transmission of inner resources from elder to youth is the parent-child relationship in its most purposeful form.
- **Oppressed vs Oppressor:** Mancrow is the oppressor taken to symbolic extremity: he blots out the sun and devours everything. Soliday, equipped only with inner resources, defeats him. The scene insists that the oppressed carry something the oppressor cannot anticipate or name, and that this is what makes survival possible.

- **Gender Roles:** When the Sailor finds the Boy crying on deck, his response is blunt: big boys do not cry. Emotional vulnerability is assigned to girls and women; men are expected to suppress feeling and perform composure. The same scene shows the Boy asking a question the Sailor cannot answer honestly, and the Sailor responding not with reason but with a dismissal that amounts to: some thoughts are too dangerous to have. The system enforces gender norms and intellectual suppression through the same mechanism: the withdrawal of permission.

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