

Anansi: Scene 5 - Kingston Harbour and the Auction

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Summary

The ship has docked at Kingston Harbour, Jamaica. The Sailor is drinking from a flask. The Boy approaches him, upright and serious. The Sailor asks if the Boy has found out the colour of God yet. The Boy says yes. The Sailor warns him to be careful of blasphemy. The Boy says goodbye, thanking him for teaching him how to tie knots.

The enslaved people, including the Girl, are led onto an auction platform. The Auctioneer addresses the crowd: freshly arrived from the African coast, healthy stock, fit for the plantation. The Girl cannot understand what is being said. She watches. As the bidding rises, she speaks in lines that sit between thought and vow:

I want to cry, but I won't. I want to die, but I won't.

She calls for her mothers, the old and the new. The Auctioneer hammers down: sold.

The scene freezes. The Girl steps down from the platform and addresses the audience directly. She begins to tell a story of her own: a clever spider named Anansi who lived in the Forest of Stories and always got what he wanted.

In the Forest of Stories, the wicked woman Her forces her servants Dog, Cat, and Crab to work without rest, weeping while they labour so she can collect their tears in a calabash and drink. Dog, Cat, and Crab arrange a wager: whoever can guess Her's real name wins half her possessions. They place an advertisement for a new helper. Anansi arrives dressed as a woman, looking ridiculous in a curtsy. Her puts him to work immediately: chop wood, fetch water, grind millet, bake bread.

After a week, Anansi finds Crab at the river and flatters him into revealing Her's name. Crab whispers it. Anansi confronts Her directly and names her: Lilibet. She freezes. Anansi takes half her possessions and leaves. Her throws the empty calabash at Crab in rage, and it sticks hard and fast to his back, along with all the tears that every one of her slaves ever cried. Hard work and a hard back have been stuck together with tears ever since.

The Girl steps back into the auction scene, which comes to life again. She says:

That's what my story's going to be: a hard back, many tears and a name that nobody knows. A new story for a new world.

She no longer looks frightened. The Auctioneer hammers down one last time: sold.

The Girl speaks the final lines of the play directly to the audience:

Once upon a time there was a girl who got taken away. She lives in a story that never seems to end. Remember her.

Analysis

The Sailor and Boy exchange at the harbour is a quiet resolution to the Boy's arc. His answer to the colour of God question is not stated. He simply says yes, and the Sailor does not ask further. The question was always rhetorical: it was the Boy saying, I know what I have seen, and I know what it means. His goodbye to the Sailor, thanking him for teaching him to tie things up with fancy knots, carries weight in both directions: literal thanks for a practical skill, and an ironic echo of how the enslaved were tied, bound, and controlled throughout the play.

The Girl's auction monologue is the play's emotional and moral centre. Campbell freezes the scene and gives her direct address, which is the most powerful staging tool in the play. While the auction continues around her, she steps outside it to speak to the audience in her own voice. This is not naturalistic; it is a deliberate break in the theatrical frame that insists the audience look at her as a person, not a transaction. Her lines, "I want to cry, but I won't. I want to die, but I won't," are not a denial of the pain. They are a decision made in full awareness of it. The parallel structure gives them the quality of a vow.

The Her and the Calabash story is the one the Girl tells herself, and this is significant. Every previous Anansi story in the play has been told by the Woman to the Girl. This one is told by the Girl to the audience. The transmission of the oral tradition is now complete: she has received it, and she is passing it on. The story itself is about an enslaved person winning their freedom through knowledge that power cannot anticipate. Anansi disguises himself, earns Crab's trust, acquires the name, and walks away with half of everything. The Girl's interpretation of it is not triumphalist: she says her story will be a hard back, many tears, and a name that nobody knows. She takes the harshest reading of the story and claims it honestly.

The calabash stuck to Crab's back is one of the play's richest symbols. It carries all the tears of the enslaved, and it is now permanent and visible. Crab did not mean to give away the name, but his slip of the tongue becomes his physical burden. The image captures something about complicity and consequence: those who participate in oppression, even accidentally, carry the weight of it.

The final stage direction says she does not look frightened any more. Campbell does not explain this through dialogue. It is shown, not spoken. The fear has not been resolved by any external change: she is still sold, still enslaved, still in 1791. What has changed is internal. She has become the storyteller. "Remember her" is not a plea; it is a claim on the future.

Exam Tip

The final scene is the most exam-relevant in the play for questions on resilience, transformation, and the role of storytelling. The Girl's arc ends here: she was terrified and voiceless in Scene 1; she tells her own Anansi story and demands to be remembered in Scene 5. Track the journey between those two moments.

Themes

- **Slavery and the Slave Trade:** The auction is the trade's final form in the play: the body sold, the price announced, the person made into a transaction in full public view. Campbell does not flinch from the scene but fractures it at its worst moment to give the Girl her monologue, insisting that even here the inner person is present and defiant.
- **Captivity vs Freedom:** The Girl's body is sold. Her mind tells the audience a story while the auction is frozen around her. This simultaneous physical captivity and imaginative freedom is the play's central paradox made literal: the stage pictures it at once, body in chains and voice free.
- **Strength and Resilience vs Weakness:** "I want to cry, but I won't. I want to die, but I won't." The Girl's vow at the auction is the play's clearest statement of resilience as choice rather than absence of pain. She is not pretending the horror is not real; she is deciding not to be consumed by it.
- **Oral Tradition and Storytelling:** The Girl tells the Her and the Calabash story herself, completing the transmission the Woman began. The oral tradition has passed from the Woman to the Girl, and now from the Girl to the audience. "Remember her" is not just a plea but an act of participation: she is making the audience part of the tradition.
- **Oppressed vs Oppressor:** The auction is this dynamic at its starkest: a body sold publicly, a price called out, a person made into a transaction. Her and the Calabash mirrors it: Her has oppressed her servants for years, collecting their tears. She loses everything the moment her power, which was always just a secret name, is taken from her.
- **Anti-hero and the Duped:** Anansi enters Her's household in disguise, does the work, flatters Crab into giving up the name, and walks away with half of everything. Crab is the duped: he gives away the name without understanding what he is doing, and carries the consequences literally on his back forever.
- **Hope vs Hopelessness:** The final stage direction says she does not look frightened any more. The play ends with a sold girl on a platform in 1791 demanding to be remembered.

Campbell offers no resolution to the injustice. What he offers instead is the stubborn persistence of identity against every attempt to erase it, which is the only hope the play's world allows.

Study Vault