## Dramatic Conventions – A Glossary

A play is written to be ***viewed and experienced***. Therefore when studying *The Crucible*, you must consider the dramatic elements that the composer has imagined would be utilised on the stage to help convey the meaning/ideas of the text to an audience.

In theatre performances, audiences and performers agree to “suspend belief” to pretend together that the action is real and is happening for the first time. This agreement often relies on the acceptance of dramatic/performance conventions (practices accepted as part of playmaking in various forms and styles of performance).

When considering dramatic devices they can be divided into two central categories:

* 1. **VERBAL TECHNIQUES**: essentially what we learn through the dialogue, what characters say.
  2. **NON-VERBAL TECHNIQUES**:
* STRUCTURE of the play - Acts and Scenes
* DIRECTIONS of the playwright
* SETS
* COSTUME
* MUSIC and sound, sound effects
* LIGHTING
* PROPS
* CHARACTER movement, gestures, body-language, interaction

The non-verbal aspects of a text can be just as important as the words in shaping its meaning and effects.

**Verbal Techniques/Conventions**

**Speech:** An utterance of a single speaker, either within a dialogue, a monologue, or an aside.

**Dialogue:** A sequence of conversational 'turns' exchanged between two or more speakers or 'interlocutors'. The more specific term **duologue** is occasionally used to refer to a dialogue between exactly two speakers.

**Monologue:** A long speech in which a character talks to him- or herself. Often, only one character is on stage during a monologue, in which case one also speaks of a **soliloquy** (from Latin *solus*, 'alone'). Monologues and soliloquies serve a number of dramatic functions: they foreground the monologist/soliloquist; they provide a transition (or bridge) between scenes; they open a source of information and exposition; and they let the audience know something of the private thoughts, motives, and plans of characters. Typically, they are also 'great speeches' that constitute a play's dramatic high points. For this reason, they are sometimes compared to operatic arias.

**Aside**: A remark that is not heard by the other characters on stage. There are three types of asides: monological, dialogical, and *ad spectatores*.

* + A **monological aside** is a remark that occurs in a dialogue, but is not meant to be heard by any of the speaker's interlocutors (it is 'monological' because it is basically a self-communication).
  + A **dialogical aside**, in contrast, is a remark that is addressed to a specific hearer, but is heard by nobody else present (i.e., by nobody but the intended hearer).
  + An **aside *ad spectatores*** is addressed directly to the audience (bypassing the convention of the invisible 'fourth wall')

**Implied Stage Direction**: An indication, in a character's speech, of some property or behavior that should be perceptible to the audience. For instance, "I'll shave off my beard" implies, even in the absence of an explicit stage direction, that the speaker should have a beard.

**Direct Address:** Characters address the audience, like a form of oral diary and, a revealing of inner thoughts or inner monologue. This can move the action forward and/or set a mood for the following action.

**Tone, pace, volume, clarity, pauses, use of voice (stuttering/silence/humour)** should also be considered when analysing verbal techniques.

**Non Verbal Techniques/Conventions**

**Dramatis Personae**: The list (or cast) of characters. This is a peri textual element usually accompanied by a brief explicit characterization indicating role, social status, etc. ("JELLABY, a butler, middle-aged"). Often the characters are simply listed in their order of appearance, but other arrangements are also frequent. For instance, the dramatis personae may reflect the hierarchy of an aristocratic society, listing the king and his relatives first, then the dukes and earls, then the common citizens, and then the beggars and prostitutes.

**Acts and Scenes (Structure)**

* **act** A major unit (or structural division) of a dramatic text. Many classical plays are divided into five acts; most modern plays have two, to allow for an intermission. Usually, an act consists of a sequence of smaller action units called scenes. Other popular formats are three-act plays and one-act plays.
* **scene** An action unit within an act. Usually, transition from one scene to another involves a new stage situation and a fresh episode, marked either by a change in time and/or location, or by an empty stage, or by characters entering or going off stage.

**Stage Direction:** A descriptive or narrative passage of secondary text (usually set in *italics*), either (a) *describing* set, scenery, props, costumes, characters, or (b) *recounting* events and the behaviour of the characters (such as their movements. In performance, a stage direction can normally be translated into a property or a physical action which is directly perceptible to the audience. (Stage directions that cannot be so translated, or are obviously addressed to the reader only are termed **autonomous stage directions**.

**Doubling**: When performers play more than one role in the performance.

**Setting:** Suggested by use of simple props and furniture.

**Narrator: T**he character of Lewis acts as the play’s narrator; he is the character through which the audience views other characters and situations. Lewis is the audiences’ lens or viewfinder.

**Foil Character:** A character whose personality or attitudes are in sharp contrast to those of another character in the same work

**Props :** Moveable objects used by characters as part of the dramatic action.

**Sub-text :** The underlying idea behind what is said.

**Design Concept**: The design concept should clearly support and reinforce the directorial concept, presenting a visual representation of the world of the play. Visual aspects include sets, costumes and lighting. This description will include:

* key images, objects and props (staging)
* colours, textures, lines, shapes and mass
* sound
* use of space
* use of light and dark (lighting)
* costume and make up
* the focus on a particular period, style, metaphor for the production.

**Characters and Relationships:** Characterisation is integral to any dramatic text. Responders should consider:

* a description of the character, their role and status
* the development of significant characters
* their function within the play as a whole
* the motivation and main objectives of characters
* relationships between characters
* physical realisation of characters though movement, stance, gesture and facial expressions
* any specific needs for props or costumes.
* character movement, gestures, body-language, interaction

**Given Circumstances:** Background information (context), at any given moment that helps with the interpretation of the text. It may include information about previous incidents or events, relationships between characters, motivation and so on.

**Lighting:** The way lights are used and modified by changing focus, colour or intensity to draw attention to aspects of a production. Lightning is integral to create tone and can also be used to create symbolism.

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## Didacticism: Didacticism is the instruction or teaching of a moral lesson. Plays are didactic in that they all serve to teach the audience or send a message about certain aspects of society, politics or economy. They are plays which are designed to educate the performers and audience

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## Breaking the Fourth Wall: 'The Fourth Wall' is an imaginary wall separating the audience from the action on the stage. In realistic productions this wall remains intact and the performers do not acknowledge that they are being watched. The audience are observers who are conditioned to believe that the world of the play is 'real'. It is a suspension of disbelief. 'Breaking the fourth wall' involves the characters directly addressing and acknowledging the audience, whether they break character or perform with an awareness of being watched. It is made clear that the characters and their actions are not real and the audience are aware that they are witnessing fiction. By taking away the fourth wall the audience must face the action, make decisions and have the opportunity to be aroused to action.

**Context**: a lens or frame through which dramatic action and meaning is viewed.

**Cultural and Historical Context**: the cultural and historical features surrounding a dramatic work. These may refer to the cultural and historical background in which the work was created as well as in which it is set.

**Gestus**: a term derived from the German word for *gesture* to refer to the actor’s or ensemble’s physical actions which reveal the thematic ideas of the play.

**Paralanguage:** the system of non-phonemic but vocal factors in speech, such as tone of voice, tempo of speech, and sighing, by which communication is assisted.

**Entrance and Exits:** It is important to notice when characters exit and enter a scene. Pay particularattention to what is being said as they enter or what they say as they leave.

**Symbolism:** When an object is used to represent something else, e.g. a broken vase may symbolise a broken relationship.

**Off-stage:** Noises off-stage may indicate the coming of conflict, of something bad likely to happen.

**Recurring Imagery:** Look out for repeated words, phrases and images. Together, these create a sense ofmood or a key theme, e.g. references to chains may suggest the feeling ofimprisonment.