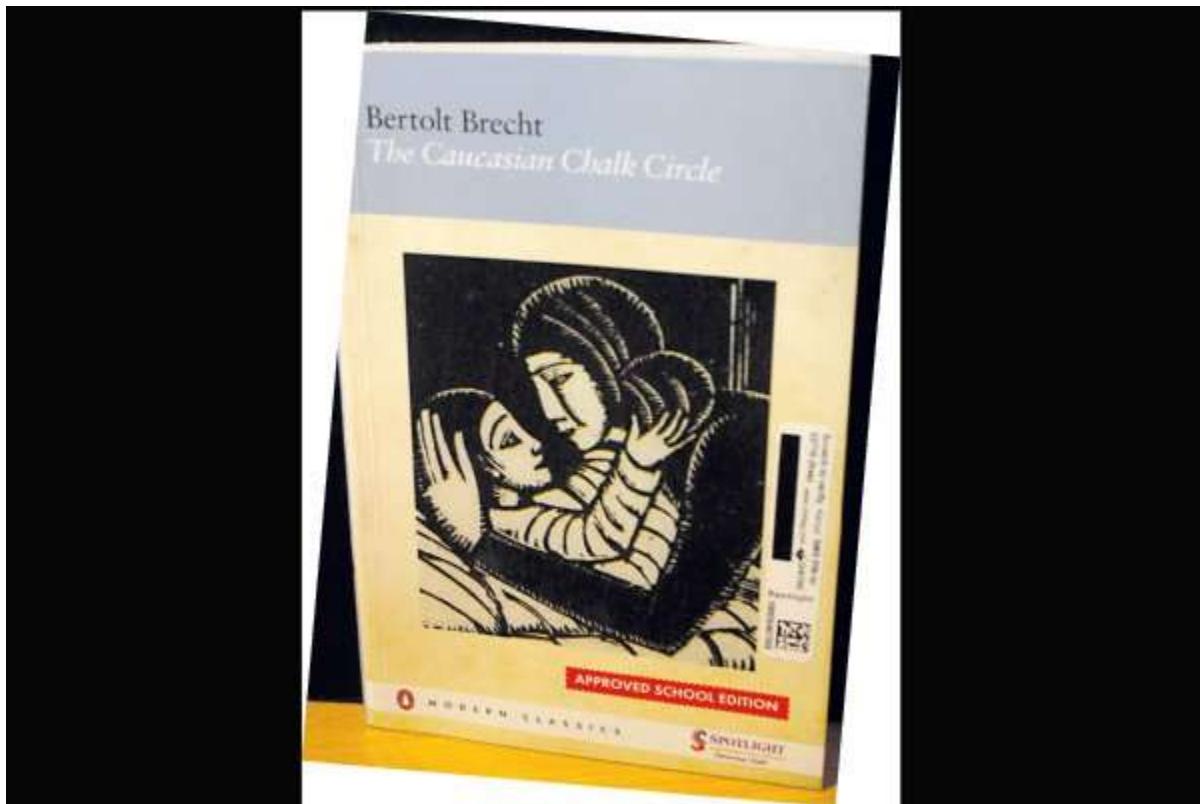


What to watch out for when answering questions in KCSE English Paper Two and Three

By Lucy Kamau

The set texts studied in secondary school are tested in KCSE English Paper Two and Paper Three. Paper Two is usually set as an excerpt taken from any part of one of the compulsory texts and then questions are set from it.

One of the common and tricky questions on the excerpt is placing the excerpt in its immediate context, which requires the student to place the excerpt exactly where it was taken from in the text. This means that the student needs to have mastered the plot and have the fine details of the events, including the quotes and exact words of the characters.



A student who has mastered the plot is able to talk about the events that happen just before and immediately after the excerpt, which is what is expected of such a question. The events before are supposed to be presented in prose (not in point form) using simple present tense.

The other questions on the excerpt are mainly on the themes, styles and characters. The characters are described using adjectives while themes and styles are stated using nouns. All the answers given on the three areas should be well illustrated using evidence from the excerpt.

Students who identify themes, styles or character traits without illustrations may not score any marks because the identification may be considered as guess work. There may also be questions on comprehension, interpretation and grammar. Other questions may require the student to relate the events in the excerpt to others in the text, which again emphasises the importance of mastery of the text.

Paper Three is about essay writing, where students are expected to write three essays, two of which are based on the set texts. The essay questions test the student's mastery of the text as well as his analytical and critical ability, which will enable him to advance plausible arguments with relevant illustrations.

Before embarking on the writing, you should interpret and establish the demands of the question, which can be done by identifying the major words and their meaning, which can then be related to the text. It is also important to plan your essay by identifying your points, the illustrations to support them and the order in which you will present them in your essay. You can organise your points in their order of strength.

A good essay has an introduction, a body and a conclusion. There are various ways of writing an introduction; it can be a general comment on the society based on the statement in the question, a contextualised comment, which focuses on the text, or a combination of both, starting with the general then the contextualised.

Another way is to write an outline of the various points that you will discuss in the body. It is important to note that definition is not considered an introduction because defining the terms alone does not prove that you have understood and interpreted the question. The introduction should be brief and on its own paragraph.

The body is divided into well structured paragraphs with each paragraph discussing one point. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence which gives a general idea about what the paragraph will talk about. This should be followed by supporting sentences, which give more information on the topic sentence. The supporting evidence should be taken from the text and should be relevant to the question. As you present your evidence, always go back to the question and ensure that your illustrations are addressing and meeting the demands of the question. End your paragraphs with a clincher which concludes the paragraph by showing the relevance of the paragraph to the question.

Your essay should have a conclusion, which can be a recap of the points or a statement that shows the validity of what is stated in the question. Like the introduction, the conclusion should be as brief as possible and on its own paragraph. Ensure that you do not have sub-headings in your essay and it does not exceed 450 words to avoid unnecessary penalties.

The following is a sample essay question from The Caucasian Chalk Circle:

'The play, The Caucasian Chalk Circle is satirical.' Write an essay to show the validity of this statement, drawing illustrations from Bertolt Brecht's The Caucasian Chalk Circle:

"In society, some institutions and individuals have weaknesses which make them do things that are contrary to the expectation of those who rely on them. In The Caucasian Chalk Circle, institutions such as judiciary, religion, government and armed force are humorously criticised to bring out their weaknesses such as corruption, hypocrisy and misuse of power among others. Individual weaknesses are also highlighted in the same way in characters like Natella, Aniko, Lavrenti and the monk.

The government in Grusinia is portrayed as an irresponsible one which has neglected its subjects. As governor Abashwili attends the service on Easter Sunday, he is approached by beggars and petitioners at his doorstep, who are pleading with him but he ignores them and his soldiers lash at them with whips. The petitioners complain about high taxes, employees taking bribes, their sons being drafted to the army, family members being falsely accused and being maimed in war. The governor, who is representative of the government, is ridiculed when he doesn't address his subjects but instead prefers to attend the service. The princes also take advantage of war to enrich themselves at the expense of their country. They fight for contracts instead of fighting for their country and their greed is humorously highlighted when they receive funds for food and horses, which they embezzle, failing to supply food and bringing sick horses. Irresponsibility on the part of the government and greed on the part of the princes results in a coup, which leaves many dead and many more suffering. It is through satirising the leaders that Brecht exposes the weaknesses in the government.

The judicial system is also ridiculed from the appointment of the judge to the way he handles cases and the rulings that he makes. There is no due process that is followed in the appointment of the judge and his qualifications are a non-entity. When he sits on the judge's chair, he exercises corruption by demanding bribes openly and, instead of using the statute book when delivering his verdicts, he sits on it. At one point, he sits on the floor and tells granny, one of the accused, to sit on the judge's chair and make the ruling. By satirising the judge, vices such as corruption, nepotism and opportunism that are in the judiciary are brought out.

Brecht also criticises religion, which is seen as a channel that all individuals use to exercise their hypocritical tendencies. Aniko, Grusha's sister-in-law, is said to be so sensitive and religious that she cannot stand people talking of an illegitimate child and she pressurises her husband until he finds a husband for his sister. It is ironically ridiculous for her to talk of being sensitive and religious when she is exactly the opposite. George Aahswili, the governor, also portrays religious hypocrisy when he ignores beggars and petitioners who are evidently in dire need of help yet he is going to church. The monk who should be an epitome of morality, goes to the tavern and presides over the funeral-cum-wedding service while drunk. By ridiculing these characters, their hypocritical nature is highlighted and religion does not seem to teach people virtues that enhance compassion and honesty.

Marriage and family is satirised and some of the people in marriage are there for their own conveniences. Natella Abashwili is clearly in the marriage for material gains and has no feelings for her husband, who is beheaded. Lavrenti lives in the shadow of his wife and does everything to please her even at the expense of his sister. The two are ridiculed to bring out their hypocritical and selfish nature at the same time highlighting hypocrisy in families.

In conclusion, it is evident that Brecht has effectively brought out individual and institutions' weaknesses through satire."

The above sample is just a guide that is not exhaustive. There are other characters like the fat prince, the old man with the milk and the mother-in law that are also satirised. Students are encouraged to be on the lookout for more questions and attempt them. The best essays will be published.

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