

THE TYRANT OF CENTRAL HIGH

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[Assignment: Write a short essay making a point about education by responding to our reading and discussion. You can use your own experience to support or oppose something we have read or to analyze the writers' ideas.]

(1) In the recent movie, Class of 1984, the viewer meets a high school biology teacher who is giving a pop quiz with one question for each student. If the student answers correctly, he receives an A. If he gives a wrong answer, the teacher uses a gun held to the student's temple to give him a permanent failing grade. Although to many this movie teacher's methods for testing may appear unbelievably severe, Pauline Kael in her article "High School and Other Forms of Madness" suggests that the teachers in high schools are very close to controlling their students with such tactics. Kael describes teachers as being brilliant at delivering and enforcing severe, petty, and often unfair rules and procedures. During my junior and senior year in high school, I met Miss Hilton. She would have made Kael smile from ear to ear, because she was a living example of Kael's idea that high school teachers are severe, rule-enforcing, military double-talking dictators.

(2) Miss Hilton was the accounting teacher for my high school. She was almost 5' 4" and weighed approximately 260 pounds. She had had reconstructive surgery on the left side of her face that caused her to maintain a continuous foreboding frown. Appearance does not make a person the type of teacher that Kael describes, but Miss Hilton's appearance simply made her true nature visible. When students entered her classroom, they felt an almost visible weight of oppression and gloom. Despite this feeling, they would greet her with a "good morning," and in return would receive a frown deeper than her normal one, which seemed to ask how any school day could be pleasant. Many of her students left the classroom, after having a class with her, with a frown that suspiciously resembled her own.

(3) Kael spoke of the teacher's ability to speak "beautiful military double-talk when it's a question of a teacher's incompetence or unfairness." Miss Hilton was very fluent with double-talk and had also mastered the art of speaking with a forked tongue. If students questioned her about her knowledge in a subject she was not familiar with, she often refused to answer that question or any other question from that student for the rest of the class period. Sometimes, she fabricated an inaccurate answer to the question with the hope of silencing further questions. Her unfairness and her ability to explain it was plainly visible from her method of grading. If students discovered a mistake in the way a test had been graded, she double-talked the students into accepting the missed points for their correct

answers. A student's final grade for her class was calculated by averaging the test scores, adding a third of a letter grade if the student was female, and adding a third of a letter grade if she liked the student, or subtracting up to four letter grades if he was not in her good graces. She always had eloquent reasons prepared to deliver to the counselors about why the student who had an A- test average deserved the final grade of D-.

(4) Miss Hilton was the self-appointed police officer of Central High School. Within range of her hawklike eyes, students innocently roaming the halls were constantly "in danger of breaking some pointless petty rule," as Kael put it. If she caught a student in the hallway without a pass, it was similar to an East Berlin guard discovering an American tourist exploring city streets at night without his passport. She karate-chopped students' hands apart to enforce the "no affectionate physical contact" rule, and she never accepted any reason for the breaking of these or several dozen other rules.

(5) Kael also described teachers as petty tyrants, and Miss Hilton's tyranny in her domain, the classroom, was exercised from the moment of our entrance to the time of our exit. Students received warnings for smiling, laughing, frowning, talking, moving, and chewing gum. The only reasonable way to avoid all of these was to become catatonic. But if the students were too silent, they received a warning and were forced to do twenty-five jumping jacks to assist them in reviving. Students who ignored one of these warnings were quickly sent on a walk to have a long discussion with the counselors about why they were incorrigible.

(6) Although Miss Hilton never used a gun to deliver a test score, her style of teaching used almost every type of authoritarian method conceivable. If Pauline Kael had met Miss Hilton, she would have been reassured that her views of teachers were accurate, but she would also have shuddered to think about these double-talking dictators posing as teachers in the high schools of today.