

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

6B- \_\_\_\_\_

Writing: Sample Theme Essay: *Schooled*

**Directions:** Use this sample essay to help you write your own. **Note:** This is the essay version of the paragraph on your handout entitled “Sample Theme ¶: *Schooled*.” Note the similarities and differences. Again, the explanations are longer than needed, just to give you a strong idea of how they might sound...

Lao-Tzu, the Chinese philosopher and leader of Taoist thought, once said, “Mastering others is strength. Mastering yourself is true power.” While ancient, this philosophy still holds true today. For example, in Gordon Korman’s novel *Schooled*, Capricorn Anderson leaves his hippie commune to attend a local public school called Claverage Middle School, or C-Average, where he shows his new peers the difference between their strength and his power. Through this dramatic plot, Gordon Korman expresses one of the book’s themes, popularity.

The author introduces this theme early, when Hugh Winkleman describes the hierarchy of popularity to his new hippie friend. Almost immediately upon his arrival, the popular kids at C-Average — Zach Powers, Naomi, and Lena — elect Capricorn, or Cap, as president to entertain themselves with his mishaps. In this seemingly impossible role, Cap promises to memorize every student’s name and, possibly even less likely, to organize the school’s annual Halloween Dance. More than familiar with Zach’s bullying himself, Hugh, an academic all-star, befriends Cap in the cafeteria, where he takes the opportunity to give the naïve hippie insight into the cliques at his new public school: “That crowd thinks they own the place. They think that because they do. Stay away from them. They’ll chop you up and press you into salami. Now, anyone you see hanging around their crew falls into one of two subgroups — the jocks and the wannabes. Stay away from both. And you definitely don’t want anything to do with goths, burnouts, skateboarders, hip-hop kids, environmentalists, or anybody who has a baseball cap on backward... You know, standard survival skills.” In effect, Hugh is afraid of *all* of his classmates, regardless of which social group they represent, because he understands the culture of his school. Stuck at the bottom of the social ladder, Hugh has been “mastered by others,” as Lao-Tzu might say. Damaged from years of abuse by his peers, Hugh doesn’t have a chance to “master himself,” to really excel at school without fear of consequences. As a result, Hugh’s perspective warps, causing him to view middle school not as a place for learning or even for socializing, not as the place for self-discovery that it could be; instead, he perceives school as a place that demands sharp survival skills, a place where he can’t let down his guard, let alone learn to understand himself. So Hugh is neither strong, in the sense that Zach is, nor powerful. On the contrary, he’s fearful, weak, and nearly ready to surrender completely. Ironically, while Hugh’s academic intelligence could be his greatest asset, instead it makes him a target for bullying at his school, where the popular kids gain strength by dividing and conquering those they can master.

After establishing students' positions on the social ladder of C-Average — with Hugh and Cap at the bottom and Zach at the top — the author reinforces the theme in the climax by returning to this ladder and tipping it over. In the process of trying to do the impossible — to be a good president — Cap charms his peers, including Naomi, with his innocence, selflessness, and old-fashioned values. Specifically, he buries a dead bird, teaches Tai-Chi, and heroically rescues his bus driver and a busload full of his classmates. So, when one of Zach's pranks puts Cap in an ambulance, the kids, thinking their new hero is dead, hold a memorial in his honor. While the event is really just another one of Zach's stunts to regain his power, the rest of the kids use the occasion to eulogize their cherished president, who stuns everyone when he shows up and recites each student's name, one at a time, leading Zach, a jock, to reflect on this amazing role-reversal: "No football player could fail to recognize what I was experiencing right then. It was the moment on the field when you realize that you're completely, hopelessly outclassed. When I looked at the hairball on the payload, I didn't see the eighth grade president; I saw the Super Bowl champions. There was no defeating a kid who could memorize an entire school." Ultimately, as strong as he might be, Zach surrenders to Cap's newfound power. Metaphorically, Zach equates earning peers' admiration with winning the Super Bowl. He recognizes that Cap, perhaps unknowingly, has beaten Zach at his own game. In other words, Cap has achieved the power that Zach has always coveted, and he's done it so simply, by "mastering himself" — that is, by applying the hippie values of Garland to the ugly rat race for power at his new school. Motivated by the best kind of self-interest, his desire to be true to himself, Cap earnestly plans the dance and nobly keeps his word by memorizing his classmates' names, nearly making the ultimate sacrifice in the process. Symbolically, these names represent to Cap not a mass of admirers or pawns — as they might to the arrogantly self-interested Zach — but instead a collection of individuals living together in a community that is only as strong as its weakest link. On the contrary, Zach's pranks and power plays only prove that he foolishly confuses his classmates' fear with their respect; their weakness, with his strength; their surrender, with his victory. In the end, the irony is that Cap's vulnerability, which stems from his sheltered past at the commune, is his greatest source of power; his classmates find Cap's innocence refreshing compared to Zach's self-serving opportunism, which might give him strength but can't give him true power.

In review, Gordon Korman expresses the theme of popularity through Hugh's description of social cliques and Cap's eventual rise to power over Zach. Basically, Zach's defeat at the memorial illustrates a great irony of life, that people's obsession with power and popularity at any cost can render them strong, maybe, but essentially powerless and pathetic. Meanwhile, the truly humble few are able, in some cases, to earn honor not through mastering others, but through their ability to "master themselves."