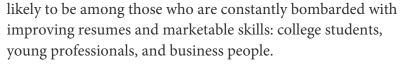
David Brooks's "The Moral Bucket List": A Rhetorical Analysis

Because our economy is currently stalled, or downturned, depending on who you talk to, it is no surprise that David Brooks would dedicate an Op-Ed designed to ask us to reflect on the ways we achieve – or don't achieve – meaningful self-fulfillment. In "The Moral Bucket List," he reflectively proposes that we should care more about what people will say about us at our funerals than what is on our "marketplace"-based resumes. In an age that is focused on marketable traits, Brooks challenges us to examine ourselves on a deeper level and focus on what is truly important in life: our character.

[P] Brooks makes his persuasive case by using a range of **rhetorical strategies**. [I] For example, he establishes his **ethos** early by noting that even *he* doesn't possess all of the virtues that he proposes in the essay. And this is a particularly interesting **strategy**, because most readers know Brooks as the confident Op-Ed writer who tries to **persuade** us on social, cultural, and political issues twice a week. He exposes an element of vulnerability that even in the "strongest people" there is always a side that is always seeking to fix what's wrong with us. For instance, his list includes, "humility," "self defeat," "dependency," "love," a "calling," "conscience." [E] This an **ironic** list because at the same time, **he implies** we are stumblers, but should be prepared to fail at these virtues.

[P] Another compelling **strategy** is how Brooks connects with **readers**. His **tone** seems encouraging: [I] "wonderful people are made, not born" and "these are the very people we want to be." His **tone shifts** from admiring in the early part of the essay where he is commending those who seem to live virtuous lives, and then to a more **informal tone** when he refers to the rest of us as mere "stumblers" just trying to get through life. [E] The "stumbler" **appeal** is designed to show empathy for **readers** who might not be virtue rich.

This simultaneous **tone** of encouragement and informality is likely to **appeal** to NYT **readers**, who, it is safe to assume, are looking to improve themselves: "the stumbler doesn't build her life by being better than others, but by being better than she used to be." **Readers** of this essay are



One thing all those **readers** have **in common** is growth and the *need* to grow. The accompanying **illustration** mirrors the **rhetoric** of internal individual-based growth of the article. Consider the **position** in which the woman in the illustration is sitting on her knees: we know the process of growing is uncomfortable and slow. The large head **represents** *external*



growth and being in the world, while the woman kneeling with the plant is *internal* growth.

[Your individual conclusions] brainstorming:

A good conclusion should offer the reader a "so what?" payoff. Here are some possibilities, but you're welcome to come up with your own:

- What's the relationship between the issue (virtues) and the rhetoric (empathetic)?
- By focusing on "virtues," is Brooks making a conservative argument? (Those with conservative ideologies tend to argue about virtues, so ...)
- Why would this essay appeal to contemporary college students who, for example, are assigned to read the *New York Times*?
- From the final paragraph: "Unexpectedly, there are transcendent moments of deep tranquility" aren't there moments of that tranquility in the essay itself? Is Brooks somehow modeling that tranquility with is language and rhetoric?

Brooks, David. "The Moral Bucket List." *New York Times.* 11 April 2015. Sunday Review, 1. Print.