Russell Baker’s “The Plot Against People”

Socratic Seminar Model

**Opening Question:**
Why do people blame others, even inanimate objects, for their own flaws and mistakes?

I have a propensity to curse at inanimate objects when I feel they don’t perform to my expectations. When the soap slips out of my lathered hands, when a blade of grass escapes my lawn mower, when mustard squirts out the side of my sandwich onto my clean slacks, I ask my deity to condemn it to the lowest level of hell. To be certain, in each case, the fault is my own. Why then, when the only variable in the equation is me, do I put the blame on the poor mustard? I suppose I could be blaming fate, as if some “butterfly effect” started on some distant African plain resulted in an environmental condition primed to welcome mustard off my sandwich. Blaming fate, however, is not as satisfying as condemning a condiment to an eternity of torment.

Perhaps the reason we objectify our miscalculation, our faults and what we overlook is because it focuses our attention away from ourselves. Introspection requires more humility and more of an acknowledgement of our own fallibility, and ultimately our own mortality. Evoking God to strike down a blade of grass reinforces our own desire to be perfect, victimized, and ultimately, immortal.

**Core Question 1:**
How does Baker’s use of diction like “evolve,” “breed,” and “burrow” to personify inanimate objects affect the essay’s purpose?

In “The Plot Against People,” Baker employs diction that evokes animals and instinctive behaviors. Baker’s use of words such as “burrow,” “evolve,” and “breed” redefines common, inanimate objects to unknown animate creatures. A purse’s meaning is not singularly derived from our use of it but from the often hidden behaviors invisible to all but the most observant—the speaker in this case. Baker further defines these now animate objects as sentient. Words like “developed a secret plan,” “negotiate,” and “conditioning” portray these antagonists as thinking, conniving, and worthy foes.

The coupling of animalistic behaviors with the capacity to reason further creates Baker’s intended hyperbole. A flashlight is not merely an object used for illumination, it is a mastermind bent on utterly defeating humanity. This absurd idea mocks our need to elevate the significance of others, even unthinking others, to excuse our lack of control and reason.

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Created by Adam Stephens
Inanimate objects by behaviors: Items that cease to function at inopportune times, devices that hide, and objects that willingly break. In much the same way a zoologist or anthropologist might observe and classify by dominate characteristics, Baker groups objects by their implied manners, their antagonisms to humanity. Baker’s determined dominate characteristic redefines each object’s utilitarian purpose through personification to the more ironic notion that each inanimate object is secretly plotting to maximize “misery, inconvenience, frustration and irritability among its human cargo.” Classification, used in concert with hyperbole and personification, mocks our own inclination to look for reason where none exists, to create false associations to satisfy our ignorance; furthermore, the idea that inanimate objects, in fact groups of inanimate objects, are plotting our downfall speaks of humanity’s innate need to blame outside agents for our own limitations. In essence, our refusal for introspection begets often strange and illogical conclusions (e.g. walking purses).

Why does Baker classify inanimate objects into groups based on behavior?

Baker employs classification to group common inanimate objects by behaviors: items that cease to function at inopportune times, devices that hide, and objects that willingly break. In much the same way a zoologist or anthropologist might observe and classify by dominate characteristics, Baker groups objects by their implied manners, their antagonisms to humanity. Baker’s determined dominate characteristic redefines each object’s utilitarian purpose through personification to the more ironic notion that each inanimate object is secretly plotting to maximize “misery, inconvenience, frustration and irritability among its human cargo.”

In keeping with the comic, ironic tone of the essay, Baker uses litotes to mock scientific verbiage. Typically, litotes understates or lessens ideas’ expected impact. In this case, Baker uses litotes to mock the unnecessary use of rhetoric in scientific writing—or at least by some scientists. Instead of stating that the object’s locomotion is common, Baker’s persona shields the audience from notions that such movement happens frequently and covertly. This decision appears unnecessary; common household items are commonly misplaced, or “move.” This redundancy compounds litotes—an additional rhetorical layer of meaning, or lack of meaning in this case—further develops Baker’s critique that we use science and language to rationalize even those behaviors and effects that appear obvious and ordinary. Moreover, through attempting to rationalize common foibles, Baker comically evokes our need to distance ourselves from human error through reasoning. If we can explain the phenomenon, we empowered ourselves to ignore our fallibility.

Why does Baker use litotes when articulating the locomotion of inanimate objects as “not uncommon” (paragraph 8)?

In keeping with the comic, ironic tone of the essay, Baker uses litotes to mock scientific verbiage. Typically, litotes understates or lessens ideas’ expected impacts by stating what is not and thus implying what is. Baker uses litotes to mock the unnecessary use of rhetoric in scientific writing—or at least by some scientists. Instead of stating that the object’s locomotion is common, Baker’s persona shields the audience from notions that such movement happens frequently and covertly. This decision appears unnecessary; common household items are commonly misplaced, or “move.” This redundancy compounds litotes—an additional rhetorical layer of meaning, or lack of meaning in this case—further develops Baker’s critique that we use science and language to rationalize even those behaviors and effects that appear obvious and ordinary. Moreover, through attempting to rationalize common foibles, Baker comically evokes our need to distance ourselves from human error through reasoning. If we can explain the phenomenon, we empowered ourselves to ignore our fallibility.

Closing Question:

Why do humans anthropomorphize?

How are we conditioned to accept undesirable circumstances or outcomes?

If death is the ultimate undesirable outcome, then we must constantly fight to distract ourselves from this ultimate demise. In our youth, we easily dismiss death—life’s horizon is too long to see the end and old people, those who die, aren’t really people after all. Nonetheless, as we age, the grim reaper gives us small reminders that life is not constant, nature takes away, and our mortal coil is

Comment [a15]: (Claim) Questions about rhetorical mode are also acceptable, but be sure that you can answer the question effectively and efficiently.

Comment [a16]: (Data) Because Baker’s structural decision is lengthy (as are most rhetorical modes), I imply the ideas instead offering a direct quote. I could have quoted the first sentence of the essay, but I want my audience to focus on the developed idea rather than any rhetorical decision found specifically in the first sentence. This is a judgment call, not a rule of rhetorical analysis.

Comment [a17]: (Warrant – Function) This idea addresses how the rhetorical mode functions in the essay. I could have included the increase in threat and intelligence Baker uses to organize the groups, but including structure analysis might drift my audience’s attention away from classification. Again, this is a judgment call—and a consideration that should be made in every analytic paragraph; have I included enough to make my analysis compelling without including any details that might distract or detract? Every word added is additional work for the audience and is only purchased with the currency of trust.

Comment [a18]: (Warrant – Significance) In this section of my paragraph, I connect the use of classification to the essay’s purpose. This deductive extension from specificity to larger purpose parallels Baker’s use of classification (and my essay’s structure).

Comment [a19]: 158 words

Comment [a20]: (Claim) With this question, I want to model analysis of an esoteric rhetorical decision.

Comment [a21]: (Warrant – Function) This use of litotes requires more function explanation because of the multiple layers of meaning. Don’t fear addressing layered meanings so long as they are relevant and efficiently and effectively explainable.

Comment [a22]: (Warrant – Significance) I address how the use of litotes underscores, albeit subtly, Baker’s intended purpose.

Comment [a23]: 161 words

Comment [a24]: For the sake of modeling, I include a few of the questions I considered when exploring the essay’s universality. When choosing the appropriate question, consider which one will be more interesting to write about, to explore, and to share with others.

Comment [a25]: (Claim) This claim establishes the direction for my answer.
The death of a pet, raised since infancy, brings the circle of life uncomfortably close. The failing of our endurance and fortitude—our athletic prowess—serves to reassert that we can’t escape change. (How many thirty-five-year-old gymnasts complete in the Olympics?) So how do we exist with such oppression, such doom? Certainly culture has provided a different perspective, if we can feign naiveté; we simply grow more graceful and distinguished with age. Each wrinkle builds character, each loss a gain in some other way. As Andrew Weil, the founder of integrative medicine, once mused, we age like wine by smoothing out our rough edges and increasing in character. Religion has offered us a solution too. Live righteously and regain your youth after death. Science boasts that they can give you the semblance of youth—if you have enough money. Each of these escapes serve to ease our growing sense morbidity, but our native tendency to forget ourselves as we age may make death familiar and acceptable. The pictures of me in youth speak of a person no longer living. If I can accept that my eleven-year-old self, wearing a baseball uniform and an optimistic grin, is irrevocably changed, perhaps I can accept existence as a series of changes, sprints instead of a marathon.