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## **A Small Fish in a Big Pond**

*Samantha Hartman*

In the essay “Sink or Swim”, published in *The Mall 2016-17*, Serena Maag ensures that nobody is alone in the struggles that students encounter upon arriving at college. Everyone fears the rumors of gaining the freshman fifteen, the scary professors, the never ending pages you have to read for homework, the impossible exams, and not being able to make any friends. In Maag’s writing, she uses a unique approach in order for us to gain a new perspective. She tells her story in third person from the perspective of a wooden bench.

A wooden bench is represented as something that does not actually know anyone but knows people through its own observations. Maag enforces the concept that when first transitioning into college, it is easy to conform. Everyone wants to fit in and not stand out as weird or different when thrown into a large mass of people you do not know. It is important in college for everyone to discover themselves and their identity. Many may not realize how easy it is to fall for conformity. Magg states “She realizes that even though this small act of conformity didn’t have any real impact on her life, it could easily send her down a slippery slope of mass conformity.” Maag encourages freshman to rise above conformity and choose to overcome it and not allow it to engulf them.

We encounter these struggles against conformity on a daily basis along with several other daily challenges. These struggles and challenges are described as sink or swim moments throughout the essay. In each of these moments, as individuals, we have the decision to make ourselves if we should sink or swim. Sink or swim is used as the idea of whether we choose to keep going and stay on top of our tasks and the challenges we face, or if we allow them to tear us down, unable to manage and overcome them. Maag uses the numerous fears of freshman year as sink or swim moments. She makes clear that half swimming will not be enough to stay afloat. She writes “The one arm and one leg doing all the work will eventually get tired. And the other half of you, having already checked out on the whole experience will not step in to help, leaving you to sink.” Therefore, when faced with adversity, don’t give up and put forth 100% of your effort from the start. The idea of not giving up is reinforced in the essay through the author’s repetition of “She just needs time to learn how to swim.” This prompts us to not give up

because she is telling us that anything is possible and we are all capable of overcoming the adversities we encounter daily.

As a first-year student in college this essay affects me on a more personal level. I am able to learn a lot of valuable information and realize that I am not alone. I have become intrigued to learn even more which is why I chose to contact Serena Maag.

**Q:** You choose to tell your story in third person through the perspective of a bench. Was there a significance behind this bench your freshman year? If so, what was it? If not, why write from the perspective of a bench? What made you decide to share your story in third person rather than from your own thoughts and perspective in first person?

**A:** The main reason I chose to write with the perspective of an inanimate object is because it was part of the prompt requirements for the FYS that I was in. However, it did allow for some originality in that not many stories are from the perspective of a bench. It also allowed for some close observations of the main character that you might not be able to get away with in a 1<sup>st</sup> person viewpoint. I didn't want to use thoughts or quotes to describe how she was feeling or what she was thinking, I wanted it to be illustrated through body language so the reader could make their own predictions and assumptions.

**Q:** At the start of the essay you describe how the bench enjoys the fall because it gets to watch all the new freshman come to campus and choose a specific freshman to keep it's eye on. Do you find yourself at the start of the new school year observing the new freshman come in? What do you notice as an upperclassman about the freshman that arrive? Do you observe freshman that seem to be going through the same experiences you found yourself going through? How so/ in what ways and experiences?

**A:** I do find myself guessing if the new faces I see are freshmen or not, and humorously enough it's quite easy to pinpoint who is and isn't. It's interesting to see the same trends develop each year. There's visible nerves and optimism at the beginning of the year which slowly transitions through various stages of stress and self-doubt, then finally ends with a small sense of assuredness in themselves and their place on campus. I think everyone goes through their own version of the same experience when taking their first steps in the college world. It's a whole new ballgame than high school was. There's an obvious transition period that most make it out of better than they went in, but for some it takes a little longer to realize what they want for themselves as an independent baby adult.

**Q:** You define your struggles throughout freshman year as sink or swim moments. While you were encountering these struggles did you know at the time that they were sink or swim moments? Or did you realize it when given this assignment. What do you define as a sink or swim moment?

**A:** A “sink or swim moment” is a point in an ongoing struggle where you can choose to surrender to the challenge or to power through. Most of the time this peak in conflict and the decision made is rooted in your subconscious. You’re aware that you have to make a choice, but often you’re not fully aware of the vastly different effects that choice could have. Not until you look back on the path you’ve taken do you find the core of what took you down that path.

**Q:** You repeat throughout the essay “She just needs to learn how to swim.” I took this quote as a way to tell us to not give up because anyone is capable of overcoming their struggles. Did you ever learn how to overcome your struggles? What actions did you take in order to learn what was necessary of you to do and learn how to “swim”?

**A:** I definitely overcame some initial struggles, but there are some things I’m still working on. There’s the cliché that everyday there’s a new struggle to overcome, but they’re manageable with the right mindset. I realized that I had to change my mindset from feeling wounded by everything that life threw at me to looking at it as a challenge, something that I had to overcome to prove that I’m the boss of my life not chemistry or really tempting Atherton desserts. Swimming just means you have a hold on your life and you’re not letting it slip out of control. You don’t necessarily have to conquering everything, you just have to be working towards conquering it.

**Q:** Conformity seems to be a big problem when transitioning into college. You wrote “She realizes that even though this small act of conformity didn’t have any real impact on her life, it could easily send her down a slippery slope of mass conformity.” Did you ever find yourself stuck in this mass conformity? If so, what happened and what did you conform towards? What would you do in order to avoid and not fall for conformity?

**A:** It’s all about groups and whether you’re apart of them or not. When you’re just beginning to figure out who you want to be there’s a lot of influences that can have an effect on you if you let them. I had always said that sorority life just wasn’t for me. I don’t have anything against it for other people, I just feel that it would limit my ability to be my own independent self. However, when you’re a freshman just trying to find your place and find friends it can be easy to see it as a way to get both of those things. It also doesn’t help that Greek

life makes up a very large portion of the campus, so it can feel as though not being involved makes you apart of the “other”. In the end, I just had to reaffirm my beliefs to myself. I had to sort out who I was and what my priorities were apart from outside influences.

**Q:** At the end of your essay you say that every day she is faced with the question: should I sink or swim? Do you continue to face sink or swim moments? What kind of sink or swim moments do you still have and are they similar to those from freshman year? Have you ever chosen to give up and sink?

**A:** I absolutely face sink or swim moments, maybe not every day. I do face choices every day that can lead me towards that pinnacle moment, but I feel as though I’m more aware of them now. I can assess the situation and see the possible future of each decision’s path. No one will ever know exactly where and how their path will run but based on past experiences you can venture a good guess. It’s a cliché but you really do learn from your mistakes. I do still struggle with the body image topic. It’s hard not to compare yourself to others, and I do find myself slipping and wanting to give up thinking I’ll never look a certain way. I just have to remind myself that I don’t have to look a certain way I just have to feel a certain way. My daily reminder is that I want to feel comfortable in my body no matter what that looks like. I’ve never chosen to sink. I think that would involve a total abandonment of myself, my values, and my goals. Luckily, I’ve not been met with such a challenge that would lead me to do so.

**Q:** I took away numerous themes and lessons that I was able to get from your essay. Some of these include that we are not alone when it comes to the struggles we face, that we all have sink or swim moments, it is important to not conform when transitioning into college, to not give up, and to put forth 100% rather than putting in half the work. Did you mean to include each of these themes throughout your essay? Which ones? What was your purpose behind this essay? If you could choose one lesson for your readers to take out of your essay, what would it be?

**A:** I think you hit the nail right on the head. That was exactly what I wanted this essay to be. I wanted it to be relatable to many, and not sugar coat the very real struggles we all face. I didn’t want the essay to end with a happy victory like she aced every test and got her dream body. I wanted it to end in the middle, she knows all her struggles won’t just disappear but she’s more prepared to meet those struggles now. The main lesson I want readers to walk away with is that you’re met with unpredictable problems in life, but you have the power to choose how those problems effect you.