

Philip the Trapped Swan in *Of Human Bondage*

Abstract Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* devotes to the quest of Philip for the freedom from the bondage of physical deformity and spiritual isolation. He is a swan trapped in his inner world and nature.

Key Words deformity freedom human nature

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W. Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* devotes to the quest of Philip for the freedom from some bondage. Born with a clubfoot, Philip was bullied by his classmates, which cast a shadow on his heart. When he grew older, this deformity prevented him from loving and being loved normally.

At first an old spinster Miss Wilkinson seduced him. Then a women painter Fanny Price who was wretchedly poor, wanting of charm, and ill tempered "troubled" him with her passion. But Philip wasn't aware of her love until she hanged herself in hungry. Then another woman appeared. It was Mildred. Philip fell in love with her at the first sight and tried his best to do nearly everything for her. He knew she was shallow, empty-headed and vain, he also knew "it [was] not love, but a hunger of the soul, a painful yearning, a bitter anguish" (chapter57 344), but he just couldn't help, just like he couldn't resist the seduction from Miss Wilkinson. This love affair was certainly a failure because Mildred never loved him seriously and what she bought to him were hurt and humiliation. Being frustrated and discouraged by the failures in his life, Philip attributed all his unhappiness to his clubfoot. He could never bear anyone call him "cripple".

In order to remedy the defect, Philip learned music, painting and then took up medicine. He thought these things could help free him from his deformity. But he failed, because his bondage is not from his inborn deformity or physical weakness but from his inner world and his nature.

Since he was a young boy, he was clearly aware of his deformity and had subconsciously made use of it. In chapter13, when Luard broke his pen-holder, he made up a pathetic story to make Luard feel so sorry for him. He didn't know why but he fully KNEW what he was doing. He also remembered that when Emma told him of his mother's death, he insisted on speaking good-bye to the ladies so that they might see his grief and pity him. Later when Mildred was to refuse him completely, he talked about his deformity himself! Though he felt disgusted with himself, his words did work—Mildred shed tears and accepted him.

It's true that Philip seems to deserve much sympathy because of his deformity. However, as a boy, he is not naïve; as a teenager, he is oversensitive, and as a young man, he is a selfish coward. The real bondage that tortures him and trapped him so long is nothing else but his own morbid nature.

Due to his clubfoot, he could not walk fast neither could he play the games boys liked. In order to avoid being sneered he isolated himself as much as possible. As a result, he became so sensitive and hunger of love that the common friendship from a boy (Rose) weighed too much for him. In chapter19, when Rose forgot their appointment, Philip was so disappointed. He waited on the platform with eager eyes and a sinking heart. He thought he was bound by his deformity so he treasured the tender feelings from the outer world very much. Rose didn't mind his clubfoot and developed the friendship with him. This friendship might free Philip from his isolation and brought him companions. But his sensitiveness and "a devil" in his heart prevented him from saying some good words to reconcile with Rose after a quarrel.

That is his pride deeply hidden in the bottom of his heart. He just wanted to guard his pride for a while but Rose's "damn cripple" crushed all his hope to be freed from loneliness and humiliation.

When he was little, his clubfoot bound him from walking fast or playing freely; when he was a teenager, over-sensitiveness and pride kept him from getting friendship and companions; and when he grew older, he was bound by the love with women.

It's very interesting that Maugham had given Philip so many chances to free him from the bondage. When he was young and ignorant, his uncle and aunt introduced him to books; when he felt lonely and isolated, he was converted to religion and then Rose came to him with friendship; when he wanted to be independent and freer, he got the opportunities to learn arts...But Philip let all the chances that might free him pass by. He would not devote him to religion. His sarcastic manner and words made his friendship with Rose broke. And when Norah, the vivacious and lovable lady stepped into his life, he refused her to receive Mildred. He'd rather be a servant or even a slave to Mildred than to keep Norah (The name reminds people of "Noah" in the Bible that saves the human being from the Flood) and live a happy and carefree life with her.

He fell, not to the hell but to the world of reality. During his practice as a doctor, the medical knowledge opened his eyes while the pains, despair, hopes, and courage of those people he met made him recognize how little things mattered and how unimportant life was with all its failures. The reality of the world made him mature and stronger. He seemed to be freed from his deformity. The most important thing was that he freed himself from the carnal and the blind love to women. It may be seen that when Mildred came back to him from Griffiths, Philip could face her calmly. He took the responsibility to take care of Mildred and her daughter and refuses her temptation several times. He had made him a real gentleman. But only after his union with Sally did he become a complete man and freed himself from nearly all the bondages cast by his deformity and the human nature.

It's long believed that there must be a swan in everybody's heart. It soars freely with our thoughts and creativity. But because of the bondage of desires, ambitions, or the pond to aid flying being too small, many of us have lost the free and vast sky for the hearts to soar.

Philip's clubfoot is like the swan's wings of which feathers are cut off, his love to Mildred is the rope bound his mind, and the circle in which he associated with the models, artists, and scholars is like the stuffy pond for him to develop. If he has not encountered the miseries of life, he would have always been bound and couldn't have the "freedom of action" and the "freedom of thought". Miseries bring the best in human nature, and also free Philip from the bondage of isolation and selfishness.

References:

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