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Idleness in the Works of Jerome K. Jerome

Jerome K. Jerome の作品における怠惰

Miyuki INOUE

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Introduction

Jerome K. Jerome (1859–1927) is a humourist who wrote several comic essays and books during the late Victorian period. In 1885, he wrote a series of essays that were published in the London magazine *Home Chimes*; the following year, he collected and published those essays under the title *Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow* (hereinafter referred to as *Idle Thoughts*). The book, particularly the first chapter, which bears the same name as the title of the book, praises idleness and seems to challenge - or, rather, to mock - Victorian values such as self-help and diligence. In the preface of the book, Jerome writes, “I perhaps should not have ventured to offer these mere ‘idle thoughts’ of mine as mental food for the English-speaking peoples of the earth. What readers ask nowadays in a book is that it should improve, instruct, and elevate.” Despite the current trends, especially among readers of the lower middle class, Jerome offers readers the chance to enjoy his idle thoughts.

*Idle Thoughts* sold well. Four years later, Jerome published *Three Men in a Boat* (1889; hereinafter referred to as *Three Men*), which humorously depicts three men enjoying a boating holiday on the Thames river. The three men are idle, just as the narrator of *Idle Thoughts* is. Some of the most famous sentences in the book include “I had the symptoms, beyond all mistake, the chief among them being ‘a general disinclination to work of any kind’” (4) and “I like work; it fascinates me, I can sit and look at it for hours” (131). Both books, especially *Three Men*, were bestsellers. Books that were bestsellers in the late Victorian period were categorized as middlebrow and catered to lower-middle-class readers (Pickford 84).

The 1870 Education Act established state-provided primary education in England, which brought huge gains in literacy among the general public (Carey 5). With the development of commerce and business in cities, clerical jobs expanded, and members of the literate public increasingly sought clerical jobs. In London, the number of male commercial clerks increased dramatically, from 58,278 in 1881 to 82,027 in 1911 and clerical worker was the largest single professional category among males with jobs (Heller 1). These clerks mostly lived in newly created suburban cities. The literate mass, as they were
colloquially known, changed the literary scene. This group preferred adventure stories, such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, to stories by George Eliot and works that they considered to be excessively literary (Carey 6).

Most of the readers of Jerome’s books were clerks; Jerome targeted his writings to them. Carolyn Oulton analyses Jerome’s 1880 letter to the British Museum and says that it shows an admittedly uneasy control of formal language (76). By contrast, Oulton opines that Jerome’s correspondence with *The Times* achieves a careful balance between humour and standard grammar and concludes that his use of “colloquial clerks’ English,” which some literary critics had criticized for its “vulgarity,” is precisely what Jerome intended to deploy (Oulton 76, Lewis xiv). The publisher, J. W. Arrowsmith, also suggested that some of the long paragraphs of *Three Men* be divided into smaller paragraphs, to avoid “frightening” the target audience (Oulton 73). The main characters’ lifestyle is also similar to that of many clerks, who also enjoyed leisurely boating trips on the Thames. Jerome’s main characters sometimes eat tinned foods, symbols of mass-market prosperity (Carey 22), and discuss the new emancipating “gadget” of democracy (Prichett 634). Thus, the unsigned reviewer of *Saturday Review* published on 5 October 1889 criticizes *Three Men*, saying that it is not a literary work but a mere collection of “documents” and that the book is “a genuine relation of a passage in the lives of actual people,” and only for that reason, the books may appear to be interesting to readers who have strong literary tastes (Connolly 74–75). As a middlebrow work, *Three Men* was widely criticized; however, it was certainly well-suited to the tastes of the clerk class.

Clerks were often dedicated to improving themselves by, as Jerome indicates in the preface of *Idle Thoughts*, reading “the best hundred books” and pursuing “useful purposes.” To succeed as a clerk, one must have a drive for self-improvement and for obtaining knowledge (Heller 71). The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of the self-help ethos, as exemplified by Samuel Smiles’ *Self-Help* (1859). That book was a great success, selling 20,000 copies within a year of its publication and selling a quarter million copies by Smiles’ death in 1904 (Sinnema vii). Smiles insisted that building strong character made a man a true gentleman (Jarvis 57). Clerks, taking his words to heart, pursued the self-help ethos most fervently in the age of self-help.

That Jerome’s readers accepted both extremes, of enjoying reading idle thoughts and of striving for self-improvement in their everyday lives, seems to correspond to the author’s life: Jerome, who wrote in praise of idleness, was a self-made man. In this paper, I examine how hardworking, diligent lower-middle-class clerks accepted and enjoyed the idle heroes of Jerome’s books and why Jerome was motivated to write on the theme on idleness.

So far, in studies of Victorian society, the notion of idleness has virtually always been regarded as one of two opposing attitudes toward life. In the field of social welfare, members of charity organizations
sometimes viewed idleness as the extreme that is opposite of self-help. Social-welfare associations were willingly to help those who seemed to be “the deserving,” by which they meant those who hold self-help ethos and tried to help themselves but not to help people whom they thought “the undeserving,” by which they meant “the alcoholic, the chronic idler or the totally depraved” (Fraser, 157–58). Later, in the middle of the twentieth century, William Beveridge, one of the founders of the Social Insurance program and the welfare state in England, spoke in condemnation of idleness, calling it the greatest among all social evils.

In one more area, the notion of idleness set up opposition between groups, namely, the diligent British against idle foreigners. For instance, British travellers who visited Italy tended to believe that the Italians spend all day lounging around in the Mediterranean sun. Bertrand Russell writes in 1932:

Everyone knows the story of the traveller in Naples who saw twelve beggars lying in the sun ⋯, and offered a lira to the laziest of them. Eleven of them jumped up to claim it, so he gave it to the twelfth. This traveller was on the right lines. But in countries which do not enjoy Mediterranean sunshine idleness is more difficult, and a great propaganda will be required to inaugurate it. (1–2)

British travellers who visited African and Asian colonies tended to believe that the indigenous peoples were lazy and should be taught to be diligent and productive.

Thus, the notion of idleness has been used by one socially superior group to describe and to accuse other, socially inferior, groups. Idleness is a notion that makes people divide themselves into groups and alienate others whom they deem to be inferior. Idleness, then, is an active indicator of otherness and social inferiority.

However, examination of Jerome and his works reveals that idleness can be found within the social group of clerks. Idleness is not the opposite of respectability or diligence but half of the character composition of self-made men. In Jerome’s works, idleness is indispensable for such successful men of the lower middle class.

I. Jerome as a Lower-middle-class Self-made Man

Jerome typifies the lower-middle-class self-made man. Born into a poor family, he practiced self-help and achieved popular and financial success as a writer. His life seems to champion the value of self-help, a virtue that characterized Victorian society and prevailed therein. The self-help ethos required hard work, honesty, thrift, saving, and self-improvement; it encouraged upward mobility among the lower and middle classes. The 1870 Education Act also encouraged pupils to exercise the self-help creed.
Throughout his childhood, Jerome’s family suffered from financial problems, which drove them to live in the East End area of London. At the age of fourteen years (which was then the usual age for one to leave school), he started working, mainly as a clerk. When he was in his teen, his parents died; at one point after that, he was homeless. Later, as a writer and editor, Jerome became successful and came to know famous literary figures such as H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, J.M. Barrie, H. Rider Haggard, George Moore, George Gissing, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, and Thomas Hardy (Harvey viii). He later came to know influential politicians such as Lloyd George and Ramsay MacDonald and was once invited to meet President Theodore Roosevelt (Harvey viii). Oulton, the author of a newly published biography of Jerome, says that in Jerome’s life, what is impressing is ‘his obvious aptitude for learning, as well as his determination and persistence’ (45). The examination of how Jerome overcame his predicament to become successful, through the publication of Idle Thoughts and his most famous book, Three Men, will help readers to understand why Jerome, as a self-made man, wrote essays and books on the theme of idleness.

Jerome was born in 1859 to Jerome Clapp (who later renamed himself Jerome Clapp Jerome) and Marguerite Jones. The father was a preacher and gentleman farmer; one year after Jerome was born, he went bankrupt when his silver mining, investment in ironworks and coal industry failed (Oulton 21–22). When Jerome was three years old, his sixteen-year-old sister left home to take up a post as a governess. Suffering from financial troubles, the family moved to Poplar, East London, where Jerome observed the grim poverty of the urban poor. The family could not afford to pay for a housemaid and sometimes did not have the money to pay their debts (Oulton 27). At the age of nine years, Jerome began his elementary education, but when he was fourteen years old, one year after his father’s death, he left school to work as a railway clerk at Euston Station (Harvey 37). When he was sixteen years old, his mother died. After this, he got a job at a stock company, which he quit in five months; next, he became an actor for a travelling repertory theatre company. When he returned to London in a few years, he was penniless; he was also homeless for about half a year. As a result, Jerome often wrote about the difficulties of poverty. One of his plays starts with the wife of the main character lamenting her poverty:

Did you ever know what it was to be poor – real poor I mean? Do you know what Ted and I have got for dinner? Three sausages between us! … And do you know what I am longing for more than anything else in the world? A great plate of roast beef – heaps of beef – and Yorkshire pudding and potatoes – large potatoes. (Sniffs in the air.) Did you ever feel like that? (The Prude’s Progress 1)

Then, with help from an old friend, Jerome got a job as a penny-a-line journalist (Oulton 44) and later worked as a teacher and a shorthand writer, which helped him afford a place to live. In 1884, he became a founding member of the Playgoers’ Club, which held weekly meetings; then, with a friend, he founded
the weekly *Playgoer* publication. After that, he wrote a series of essays that were published in *Home Chimes*. Engaging in club activities and submitting written contributions to magazines, he came to know prominent writers: Bram Stoker, F.W. Robinson, Algernon Swinburne, Theodore Watts-Dunton, Westland Marston, Philip Marston, Coulson Kernahan, William Sharp, Coventry Patmore, Israel Zangwill, J.M. Barrie, and E. Nesbit (Oulton 54). Although he became a regular contributor to *Home Chimes*, he was financially insecure; he also worked as a legal clerk for solicitor Charles Hodgson and later for solicitor James Anderson Rose.

When *Idle Thoughts* was published, it was widely successful; by the following year, it was in its eighth edition (Oulton 71), and by 1889, it was in its fifteenth edition (Connoly 70). In total, it sold more than 20,000 copies in Great Britain (Lewis xvi). In 1889, the successful publication of *Three Men* made Jerome a very popular writer. As a result, the owner of the monthly magazine *The Idler* appointed him as its editor, to succeed Rudyard Kipling.

Jerome’s status as the writer of the popular book *Idle Thoughts* and *Three Men* reveals that he is a seemingly contradictory figure: a hardworking, self-made man who became popular for his illustration of the enjoyment of being idle.

II. Idleness Presupposes Hard Work

The narrators and main characters of *Idle Thoughts* and *Three Men* are idlers, but their idleness does not consist of doing nothing. “He [a genuine idler] is not a man who slouches about with his hands in his pockets. On the contrary, his most startling characteristic is that he is always intensely busy” (“On Being Idle” 11). Jerome states, “[i]t is impossible to enjoy idling thoroughly unless one has plenty of work to do” (11). It is when his “desk is heaped highest with letters that must be answered by the next post” or when he has “a heavy evening’s work” before him or when he “ought to be up particularly early in the morning” that he inclines toward being idle (14). It is “overwork” and “the overstrain upon [their] brains” that drive the three main characters in *Three Men* to go on a boating trip for “rest and a complete change” (5). Jerome’s insistence on enjoying idleness presupposes hard work.

Idleness in Jerome’s works is also different from idleness as it was often depicted in the mid-to-late Victorian period, as discussed in Valerie Sanders’ essay on the idle son theme. In this literary theme, “sons addicted to the leisured life of a gentleman with private means” who are “unmotivated to work at a career” (Sanders 49) cause pervasive concern for their families. The typical idle sons are those born into middle-class and upper-middle-class families; they are “sufficiently confident of paternal handouts and convinced of their own ‘gentlemanly’ status” (Sanders 49). These sons try to establish and maintain
strong careers but tend to lead lives of self-indulgence and dissipation (Sanders 49). This theme focuses on inter-generational conflicts and the disappointment of fathers regarding their idle sons (Sanders 51). The social class of those idle sons in this literary tradition and that of the idlers in Jerome’s books are, of course different: Jerome’s idlers are lower middle class. However, compared with the idle son theme, the characteristic of idleness in *Idle Thoughts* and *Three Men* becomes clear: families, especially fathers, are not depicted. In *Three Men*, George, one of the three protagonists, mentions only a cousin (5); J, the narrator, mentions only his brother-in-law (6) and an uncle and his family (16–19). Jerome’s idle bachelor characters are free from the judgment of parents on their sons; also, they have no responsibility to support wives or children. Without the burdens of expectations from and responsibility for families, they are allowed to be carefree, funny idlers. Their show of enjoying idleness, however, might mislead readers to believe that the reason they can enjoy their idling, unproductive boating trip is because they are free from all the burdens and responsibility. Rather, their situation of lacking family-based burdens indicates that they need to be independent, unlike those idle sons who can rely on their fathers’ wealth. Jerome depicts the idleness of clerks and lower-middle-class men who must work for a living. What Jerome calls enjoying idleness is only possible when one cannot afford to be permanently idle.

The more Jerome praises idleness, the more the harsh reality of clerks’ lives becomes visible. This explains the perplexing insertion into *Idle Thoughts* of two chapters which seem to be incompatible with the others. The chapters “On Being Hard Up” and “On Getting on in the World” seem sombre compared with chapters such as “On Cats and Dogs” and “On Babies.” Jerome admits this in the first sentence of “On Getting on in the World,” saying, “[n]ot exactly the sort of thing for an idle fellow to think about, is it?” (42).

In these two chapters, Jerome shares with readers the harsh realities of being hard up. He says, “I have lived on 15 shilling [sic] a week. I have lived a week on 10, owing the other 5; and I have lived for a fortnight on a great-coat” (30). He continues:

> If you want to find out the value of money, live on 15 shillings a week and see how much you can put by for clothes and recreation. You will find out that it is worth while to wait for the farthing change, that it is worth while to walk a mile to save a penny, that a glass of beer is a luxury to be indulged in only at rare intervals, and that a collar can be worn for four days. (30)

Jerome reports that one becomes used to being hard up, as one becomes used to everything else, but that what troubles one most is the fear of one’s misery being discovered by others: one is “in a constant agony of fear lest he should be found out” (32). As Jerome describes further:

> There have been a good many funny things said and written about hardupishness, but the reality is not funny, for all that. It is not funny to have to haggle over pennies. It isn’t funny to be thought mean and stingy. It isn’t funny to be shabby and to be ashamed of your address. No,
there is nothing at all funny in poverty – to the poor. It is hell upon earth to a sensitive man; and many a brave gentleman who would have faced the labors of Hercules has had his heart broken by its petty miseries. (31)

The depiction of the three protagonists finding the body of a woman who had drowned herself in the Thames sharply contradicts the generally comic tone of Three Men. Jerome focused less on poverty in Three Men than he had in Idle Thoughts. However, this minor plot reveals Jerome’s sympathy to those who suffer from wrenching poverty. Jeremy Lewis points out that Jerome’s view of the world is nowhere near as carefree or as cheerful as readers have interpreted his novels to be (x). Jerome depicts the severe financial situation of the dead woman: “For a while she had kept both herself and the child on the twelve shillings a week that twelve hours’ drudgery a day procured her, paying six shillings out of it for the child, and keeping her own body and soul together on the remainder” (146). He continues: “one day, I suppose, the pain and the dull monotony of it all had stood before her eyes plainer than usual, and the mocking spectre had frightened her” (146). The sudden and abrupt insertion of this serious episode into the novel suggests that Jerome never forgot the misery of poverty and that he was on the side of people who work hard but have to live in harsh conditions just to keep body and soul together. Because the idleness that Jerome praises is the flip side of hard work undertaken to escape from poverty, the insertion of these two chapters into the book and the episode of the discovery of the woman’s body is essential to his works.

The depiction of poverty and the virtual necessity of overwork accurately reflect the daily reality of late-Victorian-period clerks. The growth in the numbers of clerks meant that clerks were not blessed with the job stability and strong pay that their predecessors had enjoyed. The widespread primary-level education of the public since 1870 brought forth huge numbers of literate would-be clerks; hence, the clerical market became oversaturated (Heller 85). At that point, it had become nearly impossible for clerks to climb their way up the job ladder to a partnership in the companies for which they worked. Salaries were frozen and sometimes fell. Job precariousness became rampant; clerks came to suffer from serious status anxiety (Heller 85). This anxiety compelled many of them to overwork and to improve themselves by taking evening courses. Clerks frequently studied shorthand, bookkeeping, and foreign languages after office hours (Heller 70). The overcrowded market for clerks enhanced the perceived value of hard work and the prevailing self-help ethos during the late Victorian period.

III. Idleness Enables Hard-work

To keep productive and work hard to secure a job in such a competitive clerical market, one becomes
overwork and as a result suffers from health problems. That is why the three protagonists proposes:

‘What we want is rest,’ said Harris.

‘Rest and a complete change,’ said George. ‘The overstrain upon our brains has produced a general depression throughout the system. Change of scene, and absence of the necessity for thought, will restore the mental equilibrium.’ (5)

Thus, the affection for idleness is the result of overwork, but it is also for work: the enjoyment of idleness reinvigorates tired-out clerks and gives the vigor to work hard again. After enjoying idling, those who are exhausted from work become ready again for hard-work. One has to have time for enjoying idleness to keep working.

V.S. Prichett insists that “[i]dleness is no longer a joke” and that “work-joke has the intricacy of a conceit in Jerome’s skilful hands” (636). We should carefully examine Jerome’s characters’ remarks, which will reveal that the affection for idleness and being idle are totally different. The affection for idleness is not a joke in Jerome’s works since it is one serious way to overcome one’s plight. The jokes lie in the depiction of idleness at work, not in the affection for idleness. The first day of boating trip is set on Saturday, but George, who is a bank clerk, has to go to office to work. Then Harris, his friend, says of George:

‘I never see him doing any work there,’ continued Harris, ‘whenever I go in. He sits behind a bit of glass all day, trying to look as if he was doing something. What’s the good of a man behind a bit of glass?’ (57)

This caricature of idle bank clerk is a joke. On the other hand, the affection for idleness, although it sounds funny, is not a joke but a heartfelt yearn derived from overwork.

This explains the reason Three Men is filled with “an innocent, inconsequential idyll, crammed with digressions and irrelevancies and authorial asides and all the other garrulous pleasuntries of the picaresque novel” (Lewis xviii). Since the boating trip stands for the affection for idleness, it does not have to have linear sequential plot or final destination. The protagonists decide that they should start the trip on the following Saturday from Kensington, but the itinerary is not arranged; the destination is unknown. The protagonists take much time preparing things they should bring with them for the boating trip, but do not tell readers the activities they would like to do during the trip and the places to visit. The readers do not know when and where the three men finish their boating trip until they read the last chapter. Their trip abruptly ends half way during the course of the river. The three go up the river and reached the place named Pangbourne, where they suddenly remember their favorite music hall and restaurant. Then, in one instance, they make up their mind to take a train to leave for London (168). Coming back to London, they go to the music hall and have a nice dinner at a restaurant and the story ends. Not having any plan and not setting the final destination well reflect the purpose of the trip. Because it was for the affection of the idleness, it is natural that the trip go arbitrarily.
The aim of the boating trip is to restore vigor for work through enjoying idleness. In the last scene, Harris says, “we have had a pleasant trip, and my hearty thanks for it to old Father Thames - but I think we did well to chuck it when we did. Here’s to Three Men well out of a Boat!” (169). The toast is given to the end of the trip and to themselves who are now off the boat, not to the idle days. This toast well shows that the affection of idle days is for refresh from, and for work. The three protagonists now have enough rest. It is time they spontaneously go back to London, where their offices are. In Three Men, the protagonists do not gain any new experience or attain new skills or knowledge that would be useful for their work at office. Three Men as a whole offers the clerical readers what they need most in their busy daily lives: the impetus to work hard again.

Thus the affection for idleness is the indicator of hard-work. Jerome’s works reveal that those who can enjoy idleness could make good clerks. Idleness should be added to the list of clerks’ efforts to improve themselves outside office along with attending evening classes and joining book clubs. In Jerome’s works, to praise idleness is to praise the work ethics.

Works Cited
【Abstract】

Jerome K. Jerome の作品における怠惰

井上美雪

本論は、ジェローム・K・ジェローム（Jerome K. Jerome）の『Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow』（1886）と『Three Men in a Boat』（1889）を通して、怠惰であることへの憧憬がいかに機能しているかを探究するものである。ヴィクトリア朝研究においては、怠惰であることとは他者性と社会的劣等性を示す指標とされていた。たとえば、自助に励み階級上昇を目指す者に対する怠惰で救済に価しない者や、勤勉なイギリス人に対する怠惰な外国人という対立において、怠惰な者は常に他者でありかつ劣った者であるというレッテルを貼られていた。しかし、ジェロームの作品に描かれた事務職員たちを検証することで、ヴィクトリア朝後期に拡大したこの新たな職種においては、怠惰であることは勤勉の裏返しとして憧憬の対象となっており、勤勉と怠惰を同時に志向する価値観が存在していたことが確認できるのである。

ジェロームの作品においては、怠惰であることはセルフ・ヘルプを構成する一つの要素となっている。たとえば語り手の一人は、仕事量が多い時こそ怠けたくなるものだと述べ、怠惰への憧憬がハードワークを前提としていることを明らかにしている。実際、事務職の市場が飽和していた後期ヴィクトリア朝において雇用を維持するために、事務職員たちは、ジェロームの作品に登場する事務員たちと同様に、オーバーワークによるストレスや鬱にさらされていたのである。だからこそ、ジェロームの作品の登場人物たちは、精神の均衡を保つために完全なる休息が必要だと判断し、テムズ川での休暇に出かけるのである。完全なる怠惰な日々を送ることこそが目的であるため、彼らが旅程表を作成することも、生産的な活動をすることもない。旅の目的は、唯一、怠惰な日々を楽しむことで気力を持つめ、再びハードワークに備えることであるのだ。ジェロームの作品は、怠惰な日々を楽しむことができるものこそが勤勉な事務員たが得ることを示している。怠惰への憧憬こそが、ハードワークの指標となっているのである。