

***The Wheels of Chance* and the Discourse of Improvement of Health**

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The Wheels of Chance occupies a peripheral place in Wells's fiction, and only a few analyses have been made of this novel: a few studies of the representation of Jessie from the viewpoint of feminist criticism.¹ John Hammond considers *The Wheels of Chance* from the viewpoint of nature writing, as well as feminist criticism. Hammond finds 'a deep love of rural England' in Wells's novels, and continues: 'Again and again in his writings we find that the English countryside is described with insight and affection, offering further evidence of the author's deep feeling for pastoral scenes.'² The view of Wells's wave of nostalgia for his boyhood, when he enjoyed lovely landscapes of unspoiled nature, as having been caused by urbanisation would generally be accepted, but it leaves the cultural meaning of the cycling tour at the turn of the century unexplained.

In 1896, when cycling was in fashion, and Hyde Park and Battersea Park were full of cyclists, *The Wheels of Chance* was published. A good many cycling journals were being published at that time; *Cycling* sold over 41,000 copies a week in 1896. David Rubinstein estimates that London had about 300 cycling clubs in 1898.³ We should put *The Wheels of Chance* in the context of the increasing vogue for cycling at the turn of the century when the problems of urbanisation were recognised as serious. The point at issue is that social discourses on urbanisation as well as Wells's nostalgia are behind *The Wheels of Chance*, and no attention, as far as I know, has been given to this topic. The main thrust of this paper will be to place cycling in the countryside in the context of late-Victorian discourses of urban degeneration and

¹ See John Hammond, *A Preface to H. G. Wells* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001), who regards Jessie as an 'embodiment of the New Woman', and argues that 'her attitude and behaviour must have caused some raised eyebrows among the genteel readers of 1896' (122-23). On the other hand Kawamoto Shizuko points out Jessie is ironically described as a naive girl (Kawamoto Shizuko, *Atarashii Onna-tachi no Seikimatu* [Tokyo: Misuzu-shobo, 1999], 197-98).

² Hammond, 87.

³ David Rubinstein, 'Cycling in the 1890s', *Victorian Studies* 21.1 (1977), 48-50. In 1894 cycling achieved popularity among both sexes in Britain, and in 1895 it was a leading new fashion (49). According to Rubinstein, 'Though unable to think of £30 bicycles, shop assistants and clerks found in cycling a blessed release from the tyranny and drudgery of daily life' (60). Women also derived three benefits from the bicycle; 'The first was participation in active forms of recreation', '[s]econd, through the bicycle, girls in the property-owning classes began to escape from chaperonage and other forms of control over their movements', and '[t]he third benefit of cycling was the most important. This was the defeat of conservative opinion symbolised by a woman riding a bicycle' (61-62).

improvement of health. I will explore this topic from the viewpoint of the relationship between the class problems and the mobility provided by the bicycle; in other words, how the cycling tour affects the mental and physical representations of Hoopdriver.

Discourses of Urban Degeneration

I will start by making a brief survey of the increasing number of discourses of national degeneration at the turn of the century in England. From the latter half of the nineteenth century, national degeneration, which was caused by the poor health of the working classes living in an environment of deprivation, aroused much anxiety in the British Empire. In *The Dangers of Deterioration of Race from the Too Rapid Increase of Great Cities* (1866), John Edward Morgan referred to a want of physical power in city dwellers:

The pulse, that faithful index of the heart, tells of a want of power in the great propelling organ. The most trivial exertion, no less than the slightest excitement, renders the variations in its beat unnatural and rapid. The irregularity of the circulation is further evinced by the coldness of the extremities, the attacks of vertigo, and the prominent and tortuous veins. [...] In others, again, the teeth are no sooner developed than they begin to decay, enlarged glands protrude from the neck, the skin looks dry and parched, and the hair scanty and withered.⁴

Poverty-stricken areas of London were the most unsuitable environments for living. The East End was, according to Andrew Mearns, characterised by pollution and a lack of fresh air, as described in the following passage:

[R]eeking with poisonous and malodorous gases arising from accumulations of sewage and refuse scattered in all directions and often flowing beneath your feet; courts, many

⁴ John Edward Morgan, *The Danger of Deterioration of Race from the Too Rapid Increase of Great Cities* (London: Longmans, 1866), 5-6.

of them which the sun never penetrates, which are never visited by a breath of fresh air, and which rarely know the virtues of a drop of cleansing water.⁵

Charles Booth was concerned about the contemporary social problems, in particular the problem of poverty in London, and surveyed the life of labourers. He concluded that about thirty-five percent of Londoners lived in extreme poverty.⁶ At the turn of the century, numerous attempts were made to show the physical deterioration of the lower classes in London: James Cantlie's *Degeneration amongst Londoners* (1885), John Milner Fothergill's *The Town Dweller* (1889), Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903) and others. Jack London described the working classes as suffering the bitterest poverty and dying in that environment:

The population of London is one-seventh of the total population of the United Kingdom, and in London, year in and year out, one adult in every four dies on public charity, either in the workhouse, the hospital, or the asylum.⁷

Whether these statistics are correct or not, industrial London was recognised as a place causing deterioration and degeneration.

During the very period when the discourses of the decline and fall of national health aroused much fear and alarm, the increasing discourses of Darwinian social theory, which promoted discrimination against the 'unfit', were also widely prevalent, even fashionable. In

⁵ Andrew Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (London: James Clarke, 1883), 4. See also William P. Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture, and the Novel, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 48.

⁶ Greenslade, 49.

⁷ Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* [1903], ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1982), 116. London represents 'the London Abyss', which sucks every possible energy for life out of workers, as 'a vast shambles': 'And day by day I became convinced that not only is it unwise, but it is criminal for the people of the Abyss to marry. They are the stones by the builder rejected. There is no place for them in the social fabric, while all the forces of society drive them downward till they perish. At the bottom of the Abyss they are feeble, besotted, and imbecile. If they reproduce, the life is so cheap that perforce it perishes of itself. The work of the world goes on above them, and they do not care to take part in it, nor are they able. Moreover, the work of the world does not need them. There are plenty, far fitter than they, clinging to the steep slope above, and struggling frantically to slide no more. In short, the London Abyss is a vast shambles. Year by year, and decade after decade, rural England pours in a flood of vigorous strong life, that not only does not renew itself, but perishes by the third generation. Competent authorities aver that the London workman whose parents and grandparents were born in London is so remarkable a specimen that he is rarely found' (28).

1883 Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, coined the word ‘eugenics’, which helped produce racial, class and other discriminations. In 1865, before he coined the word, Galton first published his ideas about eugenics.⁸ At the turn of the century, such ideas based on a misunderstanding of Darwinian theory helped social Darwinists to accuse poor labourers and unhealthy people of being the ‘unfit’. In *The Problems of a Great City* (1886), Arnold White, another social Darwinist, remarked ‘the East is corrupted by want and failure’⁹ and strenuously insisted on ‘Sterilisation of the Unfit’:

If it be monstrous that the weak should be destroyed by the strong, how much more repugnant it is to instinct and to reason that the strong and capable should be overwhelmed by the feeble, ailing, and unfit?

To prevent such a catastrophe it is needful that society should recognise as essential [...] that the propagation of diseased or infected constitutions shall be condemned, or even regarded as criminal. [...] A moderate expansion of this idea would lead to the extermination of the unfit as a class.¹⁰

As we have seen, from the latter half of the nineteenth century Darwinian social theory in the form of eugenics, which intended to prevent national degeneration, cast a dark shadow over Britain.¹¹ At the turn of the century when eugenicists believed that heredity governed physical

⁸ Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3. Galton, in *Hereditary Genius* (1869), insisted on the idea that ‘a man’s natural abilities are derived by inheritance, under exactly the same limitations as are the form and physical features of the whole organic world’ (Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences*, 2nd ed. [London: Macmillan, 1892], 1). Galton calculated that only one-quarter of the children of desirable marriages were as well endowed with natural ability as their parents. It was thereby extremely important, he argued, to make desirable matches between young couples. Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 63. Karl Pearson was one of the earnest advocates of eugenics, who analysed numerous data and made a modification to Galton’s eugenic theory. For Pearson, the ideal of eugenics was centered in ‘the middle, and particularly the professional, class’. Unlike Galton, Pearson considered the working classes ‘marked by a clean body, a sound if slow mind, a vigorous and healthy stock, and a numerous progeny’ as the fit (Kevles, 32-33).

⁹ Arnold White, *The Problems of a Great City* (London: Remington, 1886), 12.

¹⁰ White, 30-31.

¹¹ As Kevles states, at the turn of the century eugenic ideas were not monolithic, and various eugenicists insisted on their own ideas. However, they can be classified into two main groups: positive eugenics, which urged ideal marriage, and negative eugenics, which insisted on sterilisation of the ‘unfit’ (85).

features and mental power, some social reformers, against the physical deterioration of the lower classes, considered physical training as an effective means of improving national health. They argued that the environment should be improved to overcome the crisis. In the next section, I will discuss *The Wheels of Chance* from the viewpoint of contemporary physical training and consider how cycling in the countryside functioned as effective training.

***The Wheels of Chance* and Cycling in the Countryside as Physical Training**

Hoopdriver, the lower-middle class young man in *The Wheels of Chance*, works at a draper's shop in Putney Hill, a London suburb. Hoopdriver makes a cycling tour in the countryside, leaving the suburbs. Wells describes full details of the ravishing English countryside. Here, for example, are some of his impressive descriptions of the beautiful pastoral scenes:

The sun shone, and the wide, blue hill views and pleasant valleys one saw on either hand from the sand-scarred roadway, even the sides of the road itself, set about with grey heather scrub and prickly masses of gorse, and pine trees with their year's growth still bright green against the darkened needles of the previous years, was fresh and delightful to Mr. Hoopdriver's eyes.¹²

In a matter of two days he had crossed that spacious valley, with its frozen surge of green hills, its little villages and townships here and there, its copses and cornfields, its ponds and streams like jewellery of diamonds and silver glittering in the sun. (135)

It is reasonable to suppose that Londoners, impressed by the lyrical descriptions, conjured up the image of an unspoiled rural England quite different from London. Hoopdriver, pretending to be a polite gentleman in his romantic dream, makes a cycling pleasure-tour on the country roads as if he were a knight in the Middle Ages. One of the main pleasures of cycling tours was to enjoy the fine views in the countryside, which gave tourists a sense of freedom. Stephen Kern points out

¹² H. G. Wells, *The Wheels of Chance: A Holiday Adventure* (London: Dent, 1896), 92. All further references to this story will appear parenthetically in the text.

that the sense of freedom produced by such a cycling tour helped give all classes a chance to meet each other, and functioned as a social bridge between classes.¹³ An article in *The Minneapolis Tribune* in 1895 highlighted such an important social effect of cycling and noted, ‘the bicycle is the “most democratic of all vehicles” and allowed all ranks to entertain themselves in the same fashion’.¹⁴ The bicycle as revolutionary leveller helps Hoopdriver to reduce the social distance between himself and Jessie. Jessie is so naïve that she cannot, at first sight, identify Hoopdriver’s class accurately (57), although Bechamel puts the label of ‘working class’ on Hoopdriver, and calls him with malice a “Greasy proletarian” (52). The label brings Hoopdriver, who pretends to be a polite gentleman in his romantic dream, back to reality, although it is clear at least that cycling compresses the social distance and helps to bridge the gap between Hoopdriver and Jessie.

Next, I will extend the argument about the mental effects of cycling into the topic of its physical effects, because Hoopdriver’s sense of inferiority is connected with his weak constitution. In a hotel room, Hoopdriver, looking himself, feels disgusted with his poor constitution:

He put his knuckles on the toilet-table and regarded himself with his chin lifted in the air. ‘Good Lord!’ he said. ‘*What a neck! Wonder why I got such a thundering lump there.*’

He sat down on the bed, his eye still on the glass. ‘If I’d been exercised properly, if I’d been fed reasonable....’ (185-86)

¹³ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918: With a New Preface* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 216. The cycling tour, a fascinating way to escape easily from the spatial framework of everyday life in cities, provided people with a feeling of freedom, and an opportunity to reduce the social distances between the sexes and between the classes and to bridge both of these gaps. In Maurice LeBlanc’s *Voici des ailes!* (1898), during a cycling tour two women take off their corsets and blouses and cycle bare-breasted. As a result of such sexual liberation, at the end of the tour they exchange their partners. A drawing on the title page of the book, that of a bare-breasted woman with her arms open, pedalling a winged bicycle, ‘suggests the sexual, social and spatial liberation that the two married couples of the book experience during a bicycle tour’, and its wings represent those who ‘escape from the narrow spatial framework of their former city lives, the constricted social world of their ill-suited marriages, the physical confinement of corsets and tight clothing, and the emotional restrictions of their sexual morality’ (Kern, 111-13).

¹⁴ Kern, 216.

Hoopdriver has a severe inferiority complex about his poor constitution and physical weakness. Considering the label ‘Greasy proletarian’ applied to him by Bechamel, Hoopdriver has the appearance of the working classes rather than the middle classes, which seems to be the root of the complex. However, when several cads cast ridicule on Jessie and Hoopdriver, he overcomes his feelings of physical inferiority, and has a brave fight with them. Hoopdriver says, ‘It was nothing more than my duty – as a gentleman’ (251). It is most important for Hoopdriver to overcome the physical weakness which prevents him from becoming a gentleman.

His physical inferiority and working-class-like appearance are, for social Darwinists, signs of the danger of decline, or physical degeneration. The physical representations of Hoopdriver should be compared with the physical degeneration of the working classes in London. Several social essays, which discuss the cause of the physical deterioration of Londoners, particularly attribute this degeneration to the want of fresh air in London. John Milner Fothergill, for example, thought the want of fresh air had bad effects on health:

One of the first requirements for a perfect physique is plenty of fresh air. My own experience supplies numerous instances of families of which those members who remained in Westmoreland lived healthy lives, and died at a ripe old age: while those who migrated to London died comparatively young of pulmonary phthisis. Yet these last have the advantage in the matter of food, and non-exposure to bad weather. They were not exposed to the elements – worse luck. If they had been, their span of life would have been extended. It was just the want of fresh air that made the difference.¹⁵

In the field of literature, the view that want of fresh air caused physical ailments was also shared. For instance, in ‘Under an Umbrella’ George Gissing, who dealt with social problems and the everyday life of poor people, depicts Milly living in Lambeth, one of the poorest areas in London, in a manner characteristic of contemporary social discourse; ‘She was very thin; there needed a twelvemonth of good food and air to develop the beauty latent in her slight form.’¹⁶

¹⁵ J. Milner Fothergill, *The Town Dweller* (London: Lewis, 1889), 20.

¹⁶ George Gissing, ‘Under an Umbrella’, *Today*, 6 (Jan. 1894), 2.

In the age of such social problems, the question of how to improve the health of Londoners in the most efficient way was a principal concern of social reformers, except for eugenicists. Fothergill considered cycling in the countryside as the most efficient way to fill the lungs with fresh air and improve health:

To my mind the cycle is a great boon to town dwellers. By its means it is possible to reach the country in a little time without fatigue or expense. Hours can be spent with it in the course of the day far from the haunts of men, breathing an atmosphere containing ozone, while drinking in sunshine.¹⁷

In *Degeneration of Londoners*, James Cantlie also recommended cycling in the countryside, which promised healthful benefits for Londoners: ‘By the bicycle and tricycle men and women can be carried rapidly out of town to country lanes and open air. [...] It allows of really beneficial exercise when it carries its rider out of an ozoneless region.’¹⁸ The mobility provided by the bicycle offered physical exercise in the fresh air as well as new freedom to city dwellers. Arthur Conan Doyle’s ‘The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist’ is a story full of exaggeration of the good effects of cycling.¹⁹ Sherlock Holmes makes a meticulous observation of Violet Smith, his client, and, from her appearance, penetrates the secret of her good health:

With a resigned air and a somewhat weary smile, Holmes begged the beautiful intruder to take a seat and to inform us what it was that was troubling her.

‘At least it cannot be your health,’ said he, as his keen eyes darted over her; ‘so ardent a bicyclist must be full of energy.’

¹⁷ Fothergill, 82.

¹⁸ James Cantlie, *Degeneration amongst Londoners* (London: Field and Tuer, 1885), 54-55.

¹⁹ Some doctors warned cyclists against bicycling. “Bicycle face” was characterised by a strained facial expression, a result of continually trying to maintain balance while pedalling hard. “Bicycle throat” was a malady brought on by gasping for air that was dirty, dusty, and full of bacteria. “Bicyclist’s heart” was a disorder that supposedly occurred because of the high pulse rates strenuous riding, or “scorching,” incurred’ (Harvey Green, *Fit for America* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988], 232). These discourses should be regarded as pseudo-science, and intended to attack bicycling itself.

She glanced down in surprise at her own feet, and I observed the slight roughening of the side of the sole caused by the friction of the edge of the pedal.

‘Yes, I bicycle a good deal, Mr. Holmes, and that has something to do with my visit to you to-day.’²⁰

Holmes discovers that Violet is a cyclist from her appearance. After Holmes points out, ““In the country, I presume, from your complexion.”” Violet replies, ““Yes, sir; near Farnham, on the borders of Surrey.”” What the passage makes clear is the fact that Violet improves her health by cycling in the countryside, following the discourse of physical culture which insisted on the healthful benefit of cycling, and the social discourses furnish Holmes with a substantial clue for identifying Violet as a female cyclist. In a later scene, Watson describes a lovely pastoral landscape surrounding a country road where Violet bicycles, as follows:

A rainy night had been followed by a glorious morning, and the heath-covered countryside, with the glowing clumps of flowering gorse, seemed all the more beautiful to eyes which were weary of the duns and drabs and slate-greys of London. Holmes and I walked along the broad, sandy road inhaling the fresh morning air, and rejoicing in the music of the birds and the fresh breath of the spring.²¹

This description, which highlights the contrast between London and the countryside, is based on the increasing number of discourses, at the turn of the century, which enthusiastically recommended physical exercise in a countryside full of fresh air. Putney Hill, a suburb of London described in *The Wheels of Chance*, was not an urban slum, although no one could deny the fact that, to the northeast, on the other side of the Thames, lay unorganised, sprawling slums full of ‘poisonous and malodorous gases’, as Mearns explained.²² On his bicycle tour, Hoopdriver

²⁰ Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist’, *The Strand Magazine*, 27 (Jan.-Jun. 1904), 3.

²¹ Doyle, 9-10.

²² In *Tono-Bungay* (1909) Wells describes London as the absolute centre of every kind of decay. Its malignant tumour-like image finally becomes a cancerous image: ‘All these aspects have suggested to my mind at times, do suggest to this day, the unorganised, abundant substance of some tumorous growth-process, a process which indeed bursts all the outlines of the affected carcass and protrudes such masses as ignoble comfortable Croydon, as tragic

enjoys the English countryside which is filled with fresh air, as Cantlie, Fothergill and other social reformers recommended. Hoopdriver's bicycle tour in the countryside creates the same impression as the contrast between the countryside and London in 'The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist'. The descriptions of various plants that spread through the countryside would also have inspired contemporary readers' imaginative visions of the English countryside:

There were purple vetches in the hedges, meadowsweet, honeysuckle, belated brambles – but the dog-roses had already gone; there were green and red blackberries, stellarias and dandelions, and in another place white dead nettles, traveller's joy, clinging bedstraw, grasses flowering, white campions, and ragged robins. One cornfield was glorious with poppies, bright scarlet and purple white, and the blue cornflowers were beginning. (95-96)

Putting the colourful descriptions of the countryside in *The Wheels of Chance* in the context of contemporary health problems, we find that the novel shares its discourses of London and the countryside with contemporary social criticism. Hoopdriver's cycling not only provides readers with the image of beautiful countryside arousing a sense of freedom, but also, in the context of the improvement of health, with a means to prevent the physical degeneration of the working classes in London, as social criticisms also did.

In the latter half of the Victorian age, when the discourses of urban degeneration became increasingly prevalent, the preservation of the countryside and its wildlife began; in 1865 the Commons Preservation Society, the pioneer in protecting the environment, was set up. This society, which intended to prevent enclosure and protect commons, adopted a declaration stating that recreation and improving health were necessary for the preservation of commons and open spaces around London. After the foundation of the society, various kinds of societies for environmental protection were organised in Britain.²³ Excessively idealised beautiful images of

impoverished West Ham. To this day I ask myself will those masses ever become structural, will they indeed shape into anything new whatever, or is that cancerous image their true and ultimate diagnosis?....' (H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, ed. Bryan Cheyette [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], 108-09).

²³ Hiramatsu Hiroshi, *Igirisu Midori no Shomin Monogatari* (Tokyo: Akashishoten, 1999), 112-14. On the history of the Open Spaces Society see *Open Spaces Society*, <http://www.oss.org.uk/>.

the English countryside in novels and social reviews were, we may say, a part of the ecological movement, and the same discourse was, consciously or unconsciously, introduced into writings about the improvement of health.

Conclusion

The bicycle encouraged people to make cycling tours in the countryside. Hoopdriver's feeling of freedom during the cycling tour provides him with a chance to make friends with Jessie despite the difference in their class-backgrounds, and diminishes the social distance between them. Cycling also provided town dwellers with a chance to take exercise in the countryside which was full of fresh air. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, social discourses about bad hygienic conditions in great cities causing degeneration in the working classes, emphasised the value of inhaling fresh air in the countryside as an efficient means of improving health. The story in which Hoopdriver, during the cycling tour in the countryside, removes his complex about physical weakness shares the framework of such topographic discourses.