

## **Not at All Foggy: An Examination of Fogg's Obsession in *80 Days***

by Kaytlin Jacoby

What do *Moby Dick's* Captain Ahab and Odysseus from Homer's *The Odyssey* have in common? While their stories were written centuries apart, both feature protagonists who are focused on one thing: achieving their goals. It is a story everyone knows so well. A great adventurer sets out on his journey bound and determined to succeed no matter what. The trope of an obsessed adventurer is equal with the likes of the mad scientist or the girl next door. An adventure novel does not feel complete without the protagonist being obsessed with the goal they are trying to achieve.

Clearly this trope works, as it keeps showing up. Almost all great adventure literature features an obsessed protagonist. Notably, these protagonists have largely been strong, white men that are the perfect picture of masculinity pursuing their goals at any cost. Yet, as these obsessed men are the protagonists and the focus of these stories, readers seldomly consider the effects this obsession has on the other characters of the novel. Readers are swept up in the grandeur that is the adventure of these white men, and very little consideration is given to the damage left in their wake.

This is what makes Meg Jayanth's reimagining of a great adventure novel, Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*, so notable. In Jayanth's telling of events, the reader does not become Phileas Fogg - they instead become Jean Passepartout. Having to experience the classic adventure story through the eyes of a sidekick highlights the experience of the men who are pulled along on an obsession-fueled journey. While the obsessed hero is esteemed in traditional

literature, Jayanth's game, *80 Days*, encourages the reader to be critical of this trope and forces them to see the drawbacks of obsession.

In *80 Days*, the reader or gamer, playing as Passepartout, makes choices that direct where the storyline will go. Part of this includes making Fogg happy by progressing around the world, finding the quickest and most affordable routes, but players are also tempted by other storylines they can follow within the game that may not help Fogg achieve his goal. In fact, Jayanth herself encourages the idea that "winning" the game may not really be the point at all. She says that, in not winning the game, the reader might actually experience a richer gaming experience than they would if they made it back to London in 80 days ("Leading Players Astray").

Further, this stance on its own is a revolutionary idea for games of all sorts. The purpose of any game is to win. Gaming itself encourages the player, playing as the main character, to become obsessed with the end game. There is no glory in losing. The idea that the value in *80 Days* may not come at winning Fogg's bet is revolutionary and implies that there is more value to a story than simply building up to the ending. *80 Days* invites the reader to mosey along through the game and to explore whatever they feel compelled to explore. There are no real consequences for losing, but the reader can discover compelling storylines if they do not win. Instead of forcing the reader into becoming an obsessed protagonist themselves, Jayanth has created a game in which the pressure to win is mostly absent.

This absence of urgency largely stems from the player experiencing the game as Passepartout. If the gamer played as Fogg, this freedom to explore the world could not exist, at least, not while preserving the integrity of the novel. Fogg is so fueled and so consumed by his bet that he can circumnavigate the globe that he has little time for anything else. Jayanth's decision to make the reader play as Passepartout greatly impacts the way the reader engages with

*Around the World in 80 Days*, allowing them the freedom to explore the world rather than simply rush through it as quickly as possible. Passepartout is separate from Fogg's obsession, and, as a result, has much more freedom to explore the world around him.

In the original text, Phileas Fogg is very much the stereotypical obsessed protagonist. He cares about nothing outside of achieving his goal of circumnavigating the globe, except for his romantic conquest, of course. Fogg has one motivation only: to win his wager and make it around the world in less than 80 days. Following suit, Fogg in the game adaptation, *80 Days*, is hyper-focused on his goals, too. While Passepartout explores the cities they find themselves in and talks to other passengers on the transportation they take, Fogg tends to be more reserved. He often stays at the hotel or in his own compartment. Passepartout serves as a foil to Fogg. While Fogg is obsessed with circumnavigating the globe, Passepartout can be whoever the player wants him to be. Overall, though, Passepartout comes off as curious about the cities he encounters on their voyage, as he frequently interacts with other people and questions the events he witnesses. As a curious character, the gamer sometimes feels frustrated or off-put by Fogg's impatient nature. While he is incapable of slowing down for even one moment, the reader often feels pulled in many different directions by the places they can experience and the storylines they can follow.

To understand the significance of *80 Days* and its portrayal of an obsessed protagonist, it is crucial to understand the way canonical literature supports these characters. Some of the novels that are considered to be the greatest examples of American fiction center around an obsessed protagonist. Odysseus from *The Odyssey* by Homer displays many of the traits a stereotypical adventurer does. Primarily, he goes boldly into war and takes his time to come back home. Odysseus is so fixated on fighting in the war and having adventures that he seems to

forget the family he has left behind. His wife misses him dearly and refuses to take a new lover, as she is waiting for him. She spends her days weaving and unweaving a tapestry to keep her suitors at bay. His son has grown up mostly without a father. Odysseus's mother even dies of sadness from her son being away for so long (Homer). In typical obsessed protagonist form, Odysseus does not consider what his actions will do to other people, only how they will help him become a better man.

Another example is that of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Captain Ahab and his fascination with the whale, Moby Dick, depict a very clear image of obsession. Captain Ahab is consumed by his desire to kill the whale in retaliation for the loss of his leg. Instead of moving on and being grateful for the life he had, Captain Ahab brings an entire boatful of men on a journey that he is entirely unwilling to give up, even when it becomes too dangerous to continue. The men of the *Pequod* encounter several other ships that had run into Moby Dick, with dead men and destroyed ships to prove it. Starbuck attempts to persuade Captain Ahab to give up on killing the whale, but he still refuses. In the end, everyone save the narrator dies in the wreckage caused by one man with an obsession with a whale (Melville).

Notably, the reader is not presented with the thoughts of the men helping Captain Ahab as things begin to go south. The focus lies almost entirely on Captain Ahab getting his revenge. Even Starbuck begins to seem sympathetic towards Captain Ahab and his obsession. *Moby Dick* does not present the reality of every other man on the *Pequod*, nor ask them if they thought the ends justified the means. The other men are used somewhat as props, only there to help Captain Ahab find the whale and get the retribution he feels he needs. When it comes down to the final action, they are not important to the story anymore, so they fade into the background.

It is also important to note that the obsessed protagonist trope can only exist with male characters. Obsessed female characters are often viewed as pathetic or creepy, where male characters with an obsession are seen as driven or passionate. In Stephen King's novel, *Misery*, for instance, the protagonist, Annie Wilkes, is obsessed with Misery Chastain, a fictional character in Paul Sheldon's novels. When Sheldon kills Misery, Wilkes takes him as a hostage and forces him to write an alternative story (King). Wilkes commits acts of horrible brutality against Sheldon over the course of the novel. Perhaps Wilkes is seen as crazy because her actions are fueled by a fictional character. It is important to note, however, that Wilkes felt something had been stolen from her, the same way Captain Ahab feels his leg has been stolen from him. Both are capable of committing utter savagery on another living being, but Captain Ahab gets a pass where Wilkes does not. This is largely because of her gender.

Further, obsessed female protagonists are also often ridiculed for the things they become obsessed with. Isabella Swan in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga is a prime example of the discrepancies between female obsession and male obsession. Edward Cullen, Swan's love interest, is obsessed with her. He breaks into her room and watches her sleep. He follows her when she goes shopping in a town two hours away. He even goes so far as to kill another vampire to keep her safe. Meanwhile, Swan becomes obsessed with him. She notices when he is not at school. She is willing to sacrifice her safety, and perhaps even her life, to be with him (*Twilight*). When he leaves her in the second book in an attempt to keep her safe, Swan is absolutely devastated (*New Moon*). While fangirls all over the world swooned over Edward Cullen, the character of Isabella Swan faced scathing criticism over her obsession with Cullen. Although he had committed many acts that infringe on Swan's privacy and safety, Cullen was still elevated in the eyes of many fans while Swan was ridiculed for sharing the same obsession

Cullen did. Within the same piece of literature, two characters that were very similar earned opposite reactions. Because Swan is obsessed with wanting Cullen to love her and stay with her, she is seen as a bad role model or an anti-feminist character.

Inequalities aside, the way obsessed female protagonists are viewed aligns more with the clinical view of obsession. While obsession can be praiseworthy in literature, it is seen as a serious problem when it occurs in real life. Experts in psychology see obsession as a serious problem that people need help overcoming rather than a noble character trait. In fact, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* explains that the difference between obsession and passion lies in the inability of a person to escape obsessive thoughts, where thoughts stemming from passion do not always consume a person (American Psychiatric Association). For once, criticism of female protagonists is actually coming from the right place. The issue is that people who study literature and those who decided what would be part of the canon did not criticize obsession when it appeared in white male protagonists. A culture that favors men uses canonical literature to justify a continued admiration for the obsessed protagonist while being quick to point out where obsession goes too far in literature that focuses on women. All literature with obsession-based themes needs to be evaluated and considered from this lens, as it plays a significant role as to the meaning of a story.

While Jayanth's game does not go so far as to openly criticize Fogg's obsession and imply that he needs some sort of help to overcome it, it does display the ways in which his obsession is damaging. Primarily, Fogg comes off as rude because he is entirely uninterested in other people unless they can help further his journey. When Passepartout warns Fogg about a rude woman on an airship, telling him not to approach her, Fogg responds, "And why would I approach her? She clearly has no airship of her own" (Jayanth). This conversation clearly

demonstrates that Fogg has no interest in those that cannot help him achieve his goal. If a person cannot help him get farther faster, he does not even care to talk to them.

Further, when Fogg and Passepartout find a route to the walking city of Agra, Fogg is unimpressed with the fact that a city can walk. His only concern is with how quickly it can move. He asks Passepartout, “Do you suppose that a city can walk *quickly*?” (Jayanth). Throughout the entire journey, Fogg prefers to avoid people unless they can help him. This highlights the selfishness of Fogg as a result of his obsession. His drive to circumnavigate the globe diminishes the gentlemanly good qualities any proper English gentleman would pride himself on. Fogg becomes selfish and rude, displaying that obsession can have a seriously negative impact on the character of a man who was raised correctly and has a place of status within society. Obsession makes Fogg a worse person than he would be if he simply stayed home and played whist with his friends.

Even worse than the effects obsession has on Fogg’s character is the impact Fogg’s fixation has on Passepartout. While Fogg’s indifference for people he had never met could be overlooked, his treatment of his devoted servant is inexcusable. Fogg often puts Passepartout in situations of danger because he sees an opportunity to further his quest. For example, on a train across the United States of America, Fogg enters Passepartout into a fight with a professional boxer. When Fogg coaches Passepartout as to what to do in the fight, Passepartout loses and much of their money is gone. Fogg then becomes angry with Passepartout because he lost their money (Jayanth). Instead of being concerned that his valet has been beaten by a professional boxer and has likely sustained physical injuries, Fogg’s concern lies with the impact this turn of events will have on their journey.

Another example comes when Fogg leads Passepartout to the North Pole. While the gamer as Passepartout typically makes decisions as to where they will travel, Fogg insists upon going to the North Pole when he is given the option to. The journey proves to be treacherous, as Passepartout expected. This is the one area of the game in which Fogg can die. When Fogg dies, Passepartout's story is also over. More importantly, the North Pole is just one example of Fogg leading Passepartout into very dangerous situations without considering what could happen to them. The fact that Fogg can die in the arctic demonstrates the dangerous world Passepartout and Fogg are exploring, but Fogg constantly reassures Passepartout that "everywhere is safe for an Englishman." Fogg is so blinded by his obsession that he cannot realistically assess the situations he encounters and realize that he and Passepartout are not automatically safe everywhere just because they come from Europe.

The personal relationship the reader forms with Passepartout is essential in conveying the anti-obsessive message Jayanth is aiming for. Passepartout is an average guy who is trying his best to make his boss happy. In return for his service, his boss puts his life in danger and blames him when things go wrong and their journey is slowed down. Passepartout does not ever really earn the criticisms Fogg throws at him, because even when he takes his time in plotting a route, he is still furthering Fogg's journey. Most decisions the gamer can make as Passepartout force them to move onward and to push Fogg towards achieving his goal. As Passepartout, the reader feels the full impact of never living up to an obsessed protagonist's expectations because no course of action would be quick enough. The reader feels Passepartout's inability to change his situation as they are dragged along by Fogg and forced to endure confrontations that are a threat to Passepartout's life and physical wellbeing. By forcing the reader to become Passepartout, Jayanth ensures the gamer feels the powerlessness supporting characters feel when they become



part of an obsessed protagonist's quest. While *80 Days* is a choice-based game, Jayanth presents the idea that oftentimes choices are taken away when they matter the most. Because of Fogg's drive to complete his mission, Passepartout is stripped of his ability to choose in the situations where readers would most like to choose.

Ultimately, with *80 Days*, Meg Jayanth begins to reclaim the idea of the obsessed protagonist being a figure to look up to. By forcing the player to become a character that is at the mercy of their master's obsession, Jayanth forces the reader to understand the consequences of obsession in ways that a traditional text cannot. In this text, Passepartout cannot be relocated to the sidelines whenever Fogg's obsession begins to become damaging to him. As the gamer shares Passepartout's experiences, it is almost impossible to avoid feeling the desperation and frustration that an average man on Captain Ahab's ship would feel. *80 Days* takes the narrative of an obsessed protagonist being interesting and praiseworthy and turns it upside down, showing the effects these protagonists have on other people. With Jayanth's interpretation of *Around the World in 80 Days*, a door is opened in which other great texts can be critically examined and reimagined. If Phileas Fogg's reputation can be diminished when shown through the right lens, other obsessed protagonists can be critiqued. Instead of continuing to glorify white men obsessed with their goals in literature, perhaps more authors will find ways to be critical of the adventure genre as it exists. Simply by acknowledging that the obsession shown by protagonists is not normal or healthy could lead to exciting and innovative storylines in adventure stories, as most currently focus on obsession-based goals. Essentially, *80 Days* could serve as the tipping point into a more balanced sort of adventure novel: one that has room for passion, but also does not ignore the effects passion can have on other people.

Works Cited

American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013.

Homer. *Odyssey*. Norton, 1993.

Jayanth, Meg. *80 Days*. Inkle, 2014.

King, Stephen. *Misery*. Scribner, 2016.

“Leading Players Astray.” *GDCVault*. Uploaded March 2015,

<http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1022101/Leading-Players-Astray-80-Days>.

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. Barnes & Noble, 2003.

Meyer, Stephenie. *Twilight*. Little, Brown, and Company, 2006.

Meyer, Stephenie. *New Moon*. Little, Brown, and Company, 2008.