

Breaking Boundaries: The Representation of Women in *80 Days*

by Erica Mooney

As talented author G.D. Anderson once said, “Feminism isn’t about making women stronger. Women are already strong. It’s about changing the way the world perceives that strength” (G.D Anderson). Anderson’s words carry a lot of weight in a variety of capacities, but Meg Jayanth is one game creator who incorporates Anderson’s ideas in her interactive fiction game *80 Days*. Through her creation of an alternate history in which women fill perceived power positions, she challenges traditional depictions of women in literature and gaming, and she completely disregards established gender roles. Although society still limits women across the globe, Jayanth allows players of *80 Days* to see the functions of women in a new light. Society has marginalized women in the past as well as in cultural mediums today, but Meg Jayanth challenges this widely accepted norm, and players’ surprise when observing the actions of women in *80 Days* reveals the troubling common denominators woven into civilizations of the modern world.

In Jayanth’s game *80 Days*, two characters embark on an adventure across the globe in the hopes of returning to London, England within eighty days. Jayanth adapts the characters, Passepartout and Phineas Fogg, from Jules Verne’s prominent novel *Around the World in Eighty Days*. What distinguishes Meg Jayanth’s game from most others is the player’s ability and obligation to steer the course of the storyline within the game. Rather than watching the game unfold and playing the role of a spectator primarily, each player must make choices along the way that affect Passepartout and Fogg’s experiences and destinations. Jayanth often places the player in some sort of dilemma where he or she can insert the characters in tricky circumstances or avoid the circumstances entirely. The most beneficial selection is usually to explore the riskier

situations because players experience more themes of the game by following this route. The possibilities are endless in this case, and the options make the game more interesting and tempt gamers to play repeatedly in order to uncover new, exciting paths. In spite of the game branching out in numerous directions, players will likely confront issues about the underrepresentation of women each time they play through it; the issues appear in varying forms but consistently prevail.

Before analyzing the representation of women in *80 Days* and a variety of settings in general, becoming familiar with basic concepts of feminist critical theory can prove extensively helpful and will establish the necessary background knowledge to analyze works effectively. In Lois Tyson's textbook *Using Critical Theory: How to Read and Write About Literature*, she focuses on five major elements of feminist theory: patriarchy, traditional gender roles, the objectification of women, sexism, and the cult of "true womanhood." Patriarchy is associated with societies in which men hold almost all the power, and these societies often enforce traditional gender roles that they have assigned to men and women for hundreds of years. These societies sometimes objectify women as well, encouraging men to view women as objects to own and control rather than independent beings who can function alone. Sexism, which is the false notion that women are inherently and unavoidably inferior to men, fuels this patriarchal foundation that is present within many societies. In addition, a model of "true womanhood" promotes the idealistic picture of what a "true" woman should embody in patriarchal societies: sexual purity, a delicate and fragile existence, willful submission, and an attitude befitting of a family caretaker who remains in the home to fulfill her duties. According to this twisted model, women should exemplify obedience and dependency in marriages as well as their everyday lives, and they should not be permitted to attain a career. Instead, their sole purpose in their lifetimes

should be to raise a family and do household chores such as cooking and cleaning without complaint.

Although remnants of “true womanhood” linger today, the concept stems from the Victorian ideals of 1872 when *80 Days* takes place. During this year, in the midst of the Victorian era, women did not possess an identity outside of their functions as wives and mothers. They did not spend much time out of their house and could not be leaders in their communities because their assumed job was to take care of the children and clean their homes. Society instilled these limitations early in every girl’s life and conditioned her to believe her confinement was normal. Author Lesley Delaney states in her article “Little Women, Good Wives: Victorian Constructions of Womanhood in the *Girl’s Own Annual* of 1927” that “the ideal young girl should prepare herself to be the perfect wife... who can create a perfect home (a domestic paradise) and conduct her life in a completely self-sacrificing manner (serving her husband’s needs)” (36). As the quote demonstrates, the Victorian period created a world for women in which they handled an unchanging list of menial tasks and endured a steady routine that did not challenge them to reach beyond their comfort zones whatsoever. Author Marion Amies also explains this point further in her article “The Victorian Governess and Colonial Ideals of Womanhood” when she states that “women were thought to be substantially weaker; indeed, in physical and mental development they were thought not to have reached the superior stage achieved by men” (542). Because people assumed that women were unavoidably delicate and that their talents could not possibly extend outside the home, society also minimized women in other areas of life, and they had no method of speaking against their oppression or stepping into a legitimate occupation.

In terms of real examples of women who faced underrepresentation and judgment, history contains plenty. One individual who epitomizes the marginalization of women is Rosalind Franklin, a chemist who contributed extensively to the understanding of the molecular structures of DNA and RNA and whose findings changed the future of science forever. In writer Michelle Gibbons's article "Reassessing Discovery: Rosalind Franklin, Scientific Visualization, and the Structure of DNA," Gibbons declares that "Franklin did not receive due recognition for her work and played a more significant role in the discovery than is often acknowledged" (64). Franklin's research was critical, but two other male scientists took credit for her findings instead, and they never faced reproof for doing so. Franklin was instead shoved to the background as scientists Watson and Crick basked in the fame and achievement that should have been hers to claim. In addition, Elizabeth Blackwell was the first person to receive a medical degree in the United States, but the public was not very supportive of her during this time, and most people certainly did not celebrate her accomplishments. In Regina Morantz-Sanchez's essay "Feminist theory and Historical Practice: Rereading Elizabeth Blackwell," the author says that "medical scientists... constructed medicine and the natural sciences in a manner that reinforced the subordination, exclusion, and marginalization of women" (52). The topics of science, medicine, and doctoring was especially a business strictly designated for men, and the public's hesitance to accept female physicians should come as no surprise. The pattern of underrepresentation obviously resurfaces in this instance as well with the unfair treatment of countless other smart, groundbreaking women in history.

Although events in history are one aspect that definitely minimizes the importance of women, readers will also observe this issue in books. Many works of fiction that incorporate elements of travel and adventure rely primarily on a male character to steer the course of the plot.

For example, in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which Tom Sawyer released in the Victorian era, Huckleberry Finn leaves his family and embarks on a hazardous journey independently. While Huck explores away from home, other men join him, but females are basically out of the picture completely, or they do not influence the course of the novel. Aunt Sally, the Widow Douglas, and Miss Watson are three of the rare female characters in the novel, and they all exude a maternal and emotional ambiance throughout the course of the story. In particular, the Widow Douglas disciplines Huckleberry Finn by civilizing him and teaching him how to behave with proper manners. Twain writes in the beginning of the novel that she “sivilizes” him, “puts [him] in new clothes,” and “[rings] a bell for supper” (3). As the passage shows, the Widow Douglas completes all the housework and cooks for the family while simultaneously addressing Huckleberry Finn’s lacking sophistication, but readers do not attain a sense of who she is as a person outside of this minimal context. The reader does not ever see another layer to her because Twain does not elaborate on their growth to the extent that he does with Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer, and Jim.

Besides these restrictions, Twain also sets the tone for the rest of the novel when he emphasizes the Widow Douglas’s emotional, sensitive side in the first chapter. From the perspective of Huckleberry Finn, Twain explains that “the widow she cried over me, and called me a poor lost lamb” (3) after Huckleberry fled from his home and returned again. When the Widow Douglas lost control of Huckleberry Finn, the reader can assume that she seemingly made no serious effort to reclaim him because he went home on account of his own will. Rather than demonstrating levelheaded determination to resolve the crisis, she probably wallowed in her sorrows and simply wished for his coming home. She could have looked for him herself or simply drawn more attention to his leaving, but she lets her feelings trump the calm part of her

mind instead. Her heightened emotions continue during his homecoming as she acts them and cries in the presence of Huckleberry Finn. The Widow Douglas's reaction to Huckleberry Finn's escape reinforces the conventional ideology that the fickle emotions of women impact their daily lives too much and that women are insignificant and worthy of pity because they are not authoritative in nature. Because women do not drive the action, they do not represent stability or vigor like men do, and fiction tends to minimize their roles in the stories.

Unfortunately, even after several years have passed since the Victorian period and the publication of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the same unchanging injustice persists. Gaming today has formulated a culture in which women are vastly underrepresented and illustrated as largely insignificant to game play. Since the majority of game players are male, one can infer that most games are probably geared toward a male audience. The stereotype that men are innately more violent and aggressive could explain why males take on the major roles in games and enjoy a more dominating force. While males exercise a strong presence within these games, women are pushed to the margins or do not have any sort of existence at all. In video games such as *Halo* and *Call of Duty*, the main characters are mainly male, and they encapsulate an emblematic version of the idealistic man. Both of the games revolve around shooting, and the players can easily access a plentiful arsenal of weapons; furthermore, the games display these men as tough, resilient, threatening, and commanding. They consciously enter into dangerous situations fearlessly and battle with the enemy in order to come out of the combat on top. If someone were to play these games through the lens of a female character, the gaming experience could be completely different. Whether he or she would admit or not, the gamer might feel less formidable and courageous as a woman in the game. Most people do not expect to see female characters in gaming and have turned a blind eye to their underrepresentation because they do

not want to confront it or do not perceive it as unreasonable. Through this practice, gaming culture has created a norm in which women are not relevant.

While conspicuous illustrations of the marginalization of women have sprouted in video gaming, players of *80 Days* will certainly see that all of Tyson's fundamental ideologies relating to underrepresentation apply directly to Meg Jayanth's creation, too. Rather than following typical standards and norms, Meg Jayanth portrays most women in the game in a completely opposite fashion. One might expect to encounter more men in the game than women, but *80 Days* largely dispels that common expectation. When Fogg and Passepartout travel across the world, many of the pilots and captains they encounter are female, and they usually execute their jobs successfully and with a level-headed confidence that does not ever waver. On a banana boat from Hawaii to San Francisco, one of the female captains even gives birth, and Passepartout and Fogg watch her return to her regular obligations almost immediately following the birth of her child. Considering birthing of a baby causes the body to endure a lot of stress and pain, one might anticipate that a new mother would absolutely need time to recover and relax, but the aftermath somehow does not impact her substantially. She seems nearly unaffected by the trauma and does not express any striking worries. Through the female captain's excellent coping and quick recuperation, Jayanth speaks to the part of the player that is shocked to witness this behavior from a woman.

In another instance, Fogg and Passepartout embark on the Bedouin Expedition in the desert, and they both show surprise when they notice that a few women are accompanying the group of men on their dangerous journey. A couple of the women eventually begin to drill into the sand in hopes of finding groundwater, and one of the ladies reveals that the women built the useful contraption and declares that extracting the water is "women's work." Jayanth again

pushes the boundaries in this scene by reversing expected gender roles and showcasing women who are strong, competent, and self-assured. They do not need validation from men in order to know that what they are doing holds importance, and they indirectly take a stand against their persecution simply by executing a task as a collective group of women; furthermore, Jayanth's representation of them exposes a bolder side to the stereotypical image of women that exists now. The banana boat episode and the Bedouin Expedition are two specific examples of excellent female representation within *80 Days*, but a multitude of similar occurrences will develop depending on each player's chosen path.

Due to the unique depictions that Jayanth creates and her formation of an alternate history that contrasts sharply with the reality of the Victorian era, *80 Days* sends many powerful messages in regards to the representation of women. The situations that Jayanth includes serve as a lesson for players, and she actively disregards the usual underrepresentation of females in literature and games to demonstrate that women are equally competent to males, and they should not be limited in almost every facet of their lives. Instead, they should be able to utilize their own voices in a world that is constantly forcing them to submit to patriarchy and remain silent. Because of the woman who gives birth and rebounds rapidly in order to keep navigating, players will recognize that women are physically and emotionally strong and are able to perform the same tasks that are prescribed mostly to men. Likewise, Jayanth challenges gender roles and emphasizes the strength of women when she includes the scene including the expedition and the groundwater drill. Rather than painting the women as weak and submissive, she displays them as assertive and dominant. This perception and her methods of showcasing the female characters proves that she intends to change players' mindsets about women.

Although Meg Jayanth's motives are obvious within the game itself, she has also specified her particular intentions and contextual opinions in past interviews and discussions. As a woman of color who is one of the main masterminds behind *80 Days*, Jayanth herself has faced a lot of judgment and scrutiny about her physical appearance. In an interview with *Nerdy But Flirty*, for interest, she explains that a recent *80 Days* game review made note of how she looks and caused her to ask herself "What does that have to do with my writing?" (Jayanth). Jayanth also states in the interview that "it's part of a prevailing culture where women's appearances are routinely scrutinized and given disproportionate value as compared to, say, professional achievements" (Jayanth). People should place a significance on an individual's accomplishments and contributions to the world rather than shallow matters such as external features, but this is not always the case. Men often objectify women and value them for their sexual appeal only; the bigger picture is not always a factor that people take into account with female leaders in the world today, and Meg Jayanth can probably attest to that fact. Many people blindly assume that women are not as intelligent as men and thus should not enjoy equal representation, but this sentiment could not be farther from the truth, and Meg Jayanth proves that through her own success as a brilliant game developer. Not only is she representative of a minority as a woman, but she is also representative of a racial minority and must deal with the complications and criticisms of both these elements combined. As someone who is a personal victim of ruthless discrimination and bias, Meg Jayanth likely tied in her own encounters when she began constructing *80 Days*. Her unique point of view definitely underlies the game, and it adds to the authenticity of her motivations.

With Jayanth's own experiences in mind, players can reasonably conclude that she utilizes *80 Days* as a method of channeling her own stance about the underrepresentation of

women. In the *Nerdy But Flirty* interview, Jayanth also states, “It’s really great to be able to write an alternate history that is full of women... I think that’s probably my favorite part—people like me don’t often get to be heroes, they don’t often get to captain airships and lead automaton armies and incite rebellions in games” (Jayanth). Clearly, Jayanth took advantage of her freedom to craft the game however she wants, and she anticipated for players to actually hear the stories of women and minorities who are limited in most forms of popular culture and media. Jayanth’s aspirations are respectable because they could possibly open players’ eyes to the problem with underrepresenting women, and she could open the door to a new beginning for women in the near future. While most people who want to make a change do not have the resources to launch their plans into action, Meg Jayanth sits in a perfect situation. As the mastermind behind a game that has the potential to reach a multitude of audiences, Jayanth has used her position to work towards a positive goal and immensely impact all players of *80 Days*.

When taking into account Jayanth’s goal, the public’s responses to *80 Days* and the messages that it sends about women becomes exceedingly thought-provoking. Jayanth allots power roles to a large amount of women within the game, and this element still surprises many people today; moreover, taking note of this detail can prompt players to formulate interesting conclusions about the state of the current world. Even after all the prejudice that haunts the histories of the United States as well as other countries across the globe, few have apparently learned enough from those mistakes and unquestionable biases. Fluctuating reactions of shock, astonishment, and disbelief to *80 Days* tells of an underlying prejudice and expectation that perpetually lives within mankind. Society and culture everywhere has programmed every mind to believe that women are less deserving and less competent than their male counterparts because of supposedly inherent qualities, and the baby steps that countries have taken forward have not

been adequate up to this point. While changes are arguably occurring, they are not likely permanent, and the problem requires more attention than it is receiving. If the cultural foundation behind the underrepresentation of women does not evaporate soon, a negative predisposition will continue to boil underneath the surface and will never disappear. Simply saying that the unfairness will stop is not satisfactory; community leaders and citizens alike must actually act on their words in order to verify their validity. Societies may be reluctant to revolutionize the way in which they represent women because the modification will drastically defy cultural programming, but collaboration between people, both male and female, will be advantageous to the world and will bring civilizations together in harmonious unity.

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