

# Solitary Man: But what made this man solitary?

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*Directed by Brian Koppleman and David Levien*

With few exceptions, recent American movies tackling social problems have lacked either sufficient historical or political perspective; witness this year's embarrassing and retrograde Oscar-winning *The Hurt Locker*.

Sadly, *Solitary Man* continues this trend. There are several credible performances, and the cinematography underscores the main character's narcissism and resulting isolation from the rest of the world. But one looks in vain for any understanding of the sources of the character's narcissism, either familial or societal. Finally, the motivating event for the movie, as well as much of the main character's behavior, turns out to be little more than a plot device.

An opening flashback shows us Ben Kelman (Michael Douglas), six years earlier, being told by his doctor that he may have a heart problem and should have further tests done immediately. Flash forward to the present and Kelman, one-time East Coast car dealership king and possessor of a mammoth ego, has ignored his doctor's orders, lost his dealership, due to unscrupulous behavior that is never clearly revealed, and his wife, Nancy (Susan Sarandon), due to an obsession with younger divorcees and rich widows. Kelman's on-and-off relationship with his married daughter, Susan Porter (Jenna Fischer) constitutes a subplot.

Much of the movie takes place on a snooty East Coast college campus where Kelman is using his past fortune and influence—he is an alumnus who endowed the college with its main library—to help Allyson Karsch (Imogen Poots), the 18-year old daughter of the rich divorcee currently in his life, Jordan Karsch (Mary-Louise Parker), gain entrance.

The dynamics of Kelman's narcissism are on full display. He meets and genuinely likes a shy, studious student by the name of Cheston Daniel (Jesse Eisenberg), whom Kelman mentors on the finer points of landing a woman; but later in the film, Kelman uses practically the same lines he taught Cheston in an effort to bed Cheston's girlfriend.

Kelman also both uses and is used by people, and he seems to know no boundaries; after the collapse of a deal that would have made him the head of new car dealership, Kelman is practically destitute and willing to take a job at a campus diner owned by his old (and only) friend, Jimmy Marino (Danny DeVito).

The movie's conclusion hints that Kelman has learned from his experiences at his alma mater, implying that he has finally received the "education" that might serve him well for the rest of his life.

Michael Douglas gives a credible, even complex performance—e.g., during a final party scene at the campus, Douglas subtly conveys his 60-year old character's growing realization that he does not belong at this party with these people; but there are times when his character's situation calls for greater emotional expressiveness, which the actor does not seem to possess.

Susan Sarandon appears briefly as his ex-wife, Nancy, who has carved out her own life in real estate and acts as her ex-husband's counselor on several occasions. Sarandon ably plays a character who has become a little too commonplace (and easy) for her.

Mary-Louise Parker plays Jordan Karsch as a woman who probably loves Kelman (we don't see them together in situations where love would be more naturally expressed) until he betrays her trust; she then becomes a no-nonsense, protective mother who will (and does) use her connections to make sure Kelman

never sees Allyson again.

Imogen Poots is superb as her daughter, Allyson. Smart and sexually precocious, Allyson uses all of her personal tools, plus her knowledge that Kelman is using her as well as her mother, to get what she wants from her mother's partner. Poots perfectly balances the disappointment and hard crust of a young woman who has been forced to grow up too soon.

Several high angle camera shots of Kelman standing alone amidst open, empty space, and the motif of the character waking up alone to his ritual of morning aspirins reveals the isolated, insecure man behind a gregarious veneer.

For a movie about a narcissistic character, the filmmakers' failure to explore and examine the source of Kelman's narcissism sorely undermines *Solitary Man*. While American capitalism has always rewarded those willing to exploit others, and attributed any personal failures—financial, emotional, or otherwise—to individual flaws, the ideological bombardment of the past few decades along these lines has become unbearable. So has the explosion in self-involvement evident in the maddening, but ultimately pitiable personalities regularly trotted out and celebrated by the media.

Surely there is a connection between the social situation in America and the rise in narcissism waiting to be explored critically?

Yet, *Solitary Man*, much like the college campus that provides its location, remains oblivious to the ongoing economic crisis and its disastrous effects on the human psyche. The only “explanation” offered for Ben Kelman's narcissism—a warning from his doctor—comes at the end of the movie, but this explanation doesn't hold water, and on several counts.

First, people receive such warnings every day without forgetting the needs and feelings of others. Second, other than the morning aspirins, Kelman has done nothing to make himself healthier; in fact, one could rightly argue that his lifestyle for the past six years has been an invitation to a heart attack. However, there is no mention in the movie of any health episodes during this time period, even while Ben parties with 18-year-olds on a college campus. The motivating event for the movie's (as well as the main character's) actions is therefore nothing more than a plot device.

The failure to explore the source of a widespread

problem is hardly unique to *Solitary Man*; with few exceptions, American filmmaking has grievously lagged behind life in recent decades. The question is: how and under what conditions will the artists begin to portray conditions more fully and honestly?



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