

No Man Is an Island, or Is He?

A review of the film



Solitary Man

(2009)

Brian Koppelman and David Levien (Directors)

Reviewed by

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After receiving an abnormal electrocardiogram (EKG), Ben Kalmen has no choice but to face the fact that he is aging. *Solitary Man* reveals how Kalmen (Michael Douglas) tries to defy the natural aging process and how his relationships suffer as a result. Kalmen shows signs of a midlife crisis despite his successes as a car dealership owner, grandfather, and husband. Kalmen seeks out opportunities to affirm his youth at any price to those around him.

A midlife crisis is defined by Weaver (2009) as “an emotional state of doubt and anxiety in which a person becomes uncomfortable with the realization that life is half over. It is a potentially stressful period as it usually involves reflection and re-evaluation of one’s accomplishments” (p. 69). Kalmen is clearly unsettled with both his professional and personal choices. Professionally, Kalmen had made risky decisions that transformed his dealership empire into nothing. To try to reestablish his career, he develops a relationship with a middle-aged woman, Jordan, whose father is a key player in car sales in the city.

Jordan's father arranges numerous interviews with car dealerships that all eventually turn Kalmen down for a job, a consequence of his poor decisions.

Freud explained the midlife crisis as a result of conflicting drives or parts of the psyche (Weaver, 2009), and this conflict can be seen clearly in Kalmen's choices. Kalmen's poor decision making in his professional life and the consequences that result are symptoms of his midlife crisis, in which he struggles with different aspects of himself: being a solid provider and businessman versus feeling young and carefree. Weaver (2009) noted that many individuals in midlife crises are actually seeking more meaning and purpose in their lives, but, for Kalmen, his crisis results in numerous poor choices that have severe consequences, such as losing his business.

Personally, Kalmen leaves a stable and loving relationship with his wife of many years (Susan Sarandon) to pursue countless sexual encounters with much younger women. He shows a strong preference for younger women, which may be his subconscious desire for status (Hayes, 1995). As Hayes (1995) noted, "Men with physically attractive partners are often evaluated more favorably than those with less attractive partners," and "men tend to judge younger women as more attractive than older ones" (p. 126).

Kalmen uses these young women not only as a source of status but also as a way to deny his own aging process. He even goes as far as sleeping with Jordan's 19-year-old daughter, stating that their affair made him forget his age and was worth the consequence of ending Jordan's and his relationship.

One by one, Kalmen's relationships end: first his marriage, then his relationship with Jordan, and next his daughter refuses to speak to him after he sleeps with her friend. Finally, when Kalmen has no one to use as an escape, he moves in with an old friend in a small college town, where he begins to reflect on "concern[s] about the legacy one will leave behind and growing awareness of mortality" (Weaver, 2009, p. 74).

However, the consequences of his earlier actions follow him to the small town. Jordan tells him he must leave the town or she will inform people about his actions with her daughter. To deal with his anger and inner conflicts, he again resorts to sexual conquests with young women, but he is unsuccessful.

Finally, Kalmen begins to reflect on his life and his actions toward others. With the help of his ex-wife, the viewer comes to learn that Kalmen's professional and personal actions were a result of his abnormal EKG and his desire to "cheat" aging and death. He now realizes that he cannot avoid the inevitable process of aging and his eventual death, no matter how many young women he beds. Now he is faced with the choice of returning to the city and facing his mortality directly or staying at the college, living a life of hedonism but avoidance of the inevitable. If you were in a similar circumstance, which would you choose?

References

- Hayes, A. F. (1995). Age preferences for same- and opposite-sex partners. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 135*, 125–133. doi:10.1080/00224545.1995.9711415 
- Weaver, Y. (2009). Mid-life: A time of crisis or new possibilities? *Existential Analysis, 20*, 69–78. 
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