

*Men* Review : Alex Garland's Failed Venture Into the Real World  
Hayley Croke

Since his 2014 directorial debut, Alex Garland has made films that have questioned how the potential of the present can corrupt the future. In *Ex Machina* (2014) he explores how the growing capabilities of life-like robots can turn machines against man. In *Annihilation* (2018) he looks at the human race's inclination for self destruction by putting its characters in a futuristic horror-scape of a rapidly evolving alien environment. However, in his newest feature, *Men* (2022), Garland attempts to bridge his signature world of fantastical thrillers with the everyday horrors of toxic masculinity.

*Men* is undoubtedly his most stripped back film in terms of concept. Harper Marlowe (Jessie Buckley) rents a home in the English countryside to heal after her husband, James Marlowe (Paapa Essiedu) has a fatal fall off a balcony following an argument where she tells him she wants a divorce. Through flashbacks of the argument we see his response once she asks for a divorce is threatening to kill himself, gaslighting her into doubting her need to leave him and punching her in the face when she refutes his claims that if anything happens to him it's her fault.

It seems as if she has found an idyllic countryside escape, until she meets the men of the community. The man she is renting the home from, Geoffrey (Rory Kinnear), seems harmless enough, but makes noticeably off putting comments to her. He insists several times the drive out to the country *must* have been hell, grabs her bags from her car even though she tells him she can do that all herself and refers to her as Mrs. Marlowe repeatedly even though she corrects him multiple times that she prefers to be referred to as Harper.

After she takes a walk in the woods where she is finally alone and able to unwind, she discovers a naked man is following her. While the police originally detain him, the male officer makes it clear that he takes the side of this naked man who stood outside her house staring at her through the windows. She later meets a young boy who calls her a “bitch” for not wanting to play with him, followed by a vicar who continuously insists that God will forgive her for “driving” her husband to kill himself.

Geoffrey, the young boy, the vicar and all other male characters outside of James are all played by Rory Kinnear in an obvious ploy to make the point that all men are the same. While most of his characters are more outward with their malicious intentions, the reveal that Geoffrey is actually a bad guy is intended to be more impactful than it is.

This is a note that fits all the thematic elements of the film: intention to be more impactful than they actually are. *Men* struggles to say something unique or intelligent like the other major feature films of Garland’s do.

The gist of the film is that men are bad, women can’t do things on their own because men always ruin it and even when women may think they’re in a safe space no man is to ever be trusted. This film lazily packed in and over simplified all the types of standard lessons protective mothers would teach their daughters.

The imagery of her taking an apple from the apple tree when she first arrives and the slow motion shot of the naked man blowing a dandelion at her, spreading its seeds, are derivative shots that barely challenge the audience to connect the dots regarding the literary parallels Garland is using in an attempt to make the film more poetic.

Garland's misfire with this film is unfortunate considering how he's proven himself as a masterfully intricate storyteller over the years. The film is a definite shift for him as it forces him to dial back his standard complex settings and heavy focus on present day technology.

With *Men*, Garland tries to show how the current culture of toxic masculinity leads to a cycle of bad men breeding yet another generation of bad men. However, instead of working to convey this in a new way, he pays more attention to the fantastical, yet uncomplicated, visual representation of these trite concepts.

### **Film Credits:**

#### **Men (2022)**

100 minutes

#### **Cast:**

Jessie Buckley as *Harper Marlowe*

Rory Kinnear as *Geoffrey*

Paapa Essiedu as *James Marlowe*

Gayle Rankin. as *Riley*

#### **Written & Directed by:**

Alex Garland

#### **Produced by:**

Andrew Macdonald

Allon Reich