

# **The End of the F\*\*\*ing World's Powerful Portrayal of Gender, Sex, and Consent**

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Writer Charlie Covell's teen comedy drama *The End of the F\*\*\*ing World* has received a lot of buzz for its pitch-black humor, complex characters, and fast paced plot of love and murder. A British TV show based off of the graphic novel by Charles S. Forman, originally airing on Channel 4 in the UK, *TEOTFW* reached the screens of US teens in a massive way when it aired on Netflix in January of 2018. The first season featured eight episodes, each 20 minutes in length, making the show highly "bingeable" and more movie-like in character than most TV series. *TEOTFW* is more than just a murderous teen love story with a quick plot and fantastically dark humor; it is a complex coming of age story with its most notable breakout moments in scenes that honestly and powerfully use the relationship between sex and consent to explore and demonstrate the complexities of gender.

The first scene that deals with the issue of consent appears in Episode 3 of the series. Main characters and complicated love interests James (played by Alex Lawther) and Alyssa (played by Jessica Barden) find themselves squatting in an empty house while on the run together. Alyssa becomes angry with James and decides to go out for a walk, stumbling into Topher (played by Alex Sawyer), and invites him back to the house to have sex. As the viewer we are aware of a few things as this scene plays out before us: 1) Alyssa has never had sex before, 2) She is quickly falling for James, 3) It is safe to assume Alyssa is only bringing Topher back to the house to make James jealous. Upon arriving back to the house Alyssa starts to hook up with Topher

upstairs while James sits quietly downstairs on the couch. As Topher aggressively kisses Alyssa, she quickly becomes disinterested, even blaming James for her inability to enjoy it, "It's no good. Thanks, James" ("Episode 3"). Alyssa pushes Topher off of her offering the simple statement, "I changed my mind ... I'm not into this." Topher does not respond well to this and offers a last-ditch effort to guilt Alyssa saying, "It's not fair." Alyssa responds matter-of-factly, "Yes it is." Upon realizing his first effort of coercion failed he resorts to flattery, "I think you're amazing." Alyssa then responds back with the most powerful response of the encounter, "Well, then respect me changing my mind and f\*\*k off, please ("Episode 3"). The scene offers a realistic look into a situation that so many inexperienced teens have found themselves in. A lot of teenagers do not understand that consent can be given or taken back at any second, even if the sexual encounter has already started.

This scene is also thematically important in its portrayal of Alyssa as a character. It builds on her complexity. While on one hand she is a powerful teenager who handled an escalating sexual situation in a really mature way that many teenagers don't find themselves capable of doing, she was also the one who invited Topher back with the intentions of using him sexually to anger James. When interviewed about the scene, Jessica Barden made this important point about being a woman, "You see men being the people who lead women on in pop culture, but she did that to Topher. She uses him ... Women are like men as well, we make mistakes, but then you can fix it just as quickly. You don't have to go along with it" (qtd. in Romero 3). Throughout the series Alyssa could be described as sexually aggressive, however, it is the desire to love and be loved that motivates her. Unfortunately, even in

the age of more complex female leads, it can still be hard to find a realistic portrayal of what it means to be a young woman, both confident and insecure, sure and unsure, mean and vulnerable, but *TEOTFW* does Alyssa's character justice in showing her complexity in an honest way.

It is not just through Alyssa's character that we see the themes of sex and consent played out, but also through James's character. While on their journey of running away together, James and Alyssa are hitchhiking when they catch a ride with a man named Martin. The group makes a pit stop at a diner and when James goes into the bathroom, Martin forces James to touch him at the urinals. It is a painful scene to watch but wildly important. Sexual assault experienced by men is largely underrepresented in media. However, this scene does not only give representation to that issue, it also heavily plays around with gender roles and the concept of masculinity itself. James's assaulter is a veteran. The show makes a point to place a small storyline or at least an identity to the man to demonstrate how male homosexuality is often placed in contrast to the ideas of traditional masculinity, especially in an environment like the army, and how the fact that parts of this man's identity have only ever been allowed to exist in secret endangers people left vulnerable around him.

The conversation on gender does not end there with this scene but is made even more complex when it is Alyssa who suspects something is off, rushes into the bathroom, catches them, and "saves James." The trope of a woman being saved from a creepy man by another man is so common in media, it seems like it is featured in every other movie, but I cannot think of a single time I have seen a male saved

from a predatory situation by a female on TV or on any other form of media other than on this TV show. All James needed in that moment was for someone to speak up for him as the act had left him speechless and powerless and that is what Alyssa did. The situation had nothing to do with physical strength or being overpowered physically, but instead it was about power dynamics and vulnerability. Alyssa provided the strength James did not have when she screamed at Martin, grabbed James's hand, and ran them out of the diner. Upon leaving the diner, Alyssa offers this simple yet powerful piece of advice to James, "You know that if people want to do stuff to you, you don't have to let them" ("Episode 2").

I mentioned earlier the interesting dynamic the viewer finds themselves in when relating to and appreciating the characters of this series as they are, of course, murderers. In the episodes leading up to the murder, the teens are seen squatting in a man's (later identified as Professor Clive Koch) home when they find video tapes recorded by the professor of himself violently abusing young women. Unbeknownst to the teens, the professor arrives home to find Alyssa asleep in his bed. He is about to violently rape her when James runs into the room and stabs him. The murder scene pries at some complex and conflicting emotions for the viewer. On one hand, the murder is arguably unnecessarily gruesome, but on the other hand it is obvious that the gruesomeness of the scene is a product of the palpable rage inspired in James in response to the professor's attempt to commit sexual violence against Alyssa. This scene occurs chronologically after the other two sexual encounters we see the two characters go through and at this point in the show there has been a strategic build-up of both anger and

dismay, felt both by the audience and by the main characters, at the frequency of which humans in this world have to deal with sexual violence. I say the build-up is strategic because the timing of the rape/murder scene within the series is at a point where the audience is prompted, as uncomfortable as it may feel, to say things like, “Good, the world is better off without people like that man” or “I can’t believe I am thinking this but that murder may have actually been a noble act” or even just simply “Enough! I cannot see, or hear, or experience anymore sexual violence.” It is natural to want to see serial perpetrators of this kind of violence be brought to justice and although this is a dark and morally unjust way to do so, there is also something about it that feels kind of fair and satisfying.

Season 2 of TEOTFW follows the characters in the aftermath of the murder, the focus of the season, however, is not the murder but instead, “Season 2 of *The End of the F\*\*\*ing World* is a more meditative piece on the spanning effect of Professor Koch’s abusive behavior. This is how the world feels in the Post-#MeToo movement” (Whyte 4). The season received more negative reviews than positive because people missed the excitement and romance of the first season:

Sadly, that plot is largely redundant, reworking the story beats from Season 1 to make explicit everything that was implied. What happened before may have been ugly, sad, and awful, but all of those emotions were used to highlight the love these two messed up kids discovered — which was truly special. (Travers 2)

I really respect the writers of the series for taking this angle, however. It is an important message to get across in this era of #MeToo: the

effects of sexual violence do not end with the ends of the perpetrators. I completely agree with Travers that the love story between James and Alyssa is the highlight of the series but to say it is the only thing that makes the series special is seriously underselling it. The way *TEOTFW* uses the conversation around sexual assault and consent to display complexities in gender is “truly special.” The way the series highlights the aftermath of sexual violence is “truly special.” Alyssa’s character in Season 2 is seen spiraling after the incident, and her past spills into all aspects of her life, including her relationship with James and others. It is a timely and seriously relevant concept: While there may be justice, there is also still pain. A character in the second season asks Alyssa an emotional question upon reflecting on the death of the professor, “But what do I do with all of the pain?” (“Episode 4”) Alyssa doesn’t have an answer for her because she is just trying to figure that out for herself.

The show also does a really good job of displaying how James and Alyssa’s own sexual relationship has been shaped by the sexual trauma they have each experienced and been witness to in each other’s lives. In the final episode, James and Alyssa have significantly progressed in their relationship and they are laying together on the beach when they start to make out. Alyssa has a flashback to the sexual violence she experienced in an earlier episode and asks James if they can wait, “Just for a bit, I don’t know. A few days. Is that ok?” James simply responds, “Yeah, of course.” This scene shows the writers’ dedication to highlighting, through this series, not only what it looks like to get consent *wrong* (which they do often) but also what it looks like to get consent *right*, which may be even more powerful.

Charlie Covell and the producers of *TEOTFW* series prove revolutionary in their investigation of gender through several powerful scenes tackling sexual assault and consent. It is clear how intentional they are when crafting dialogue, chronologizing the events of the series, and portraying complex multi-dimensional characters in order to elicit a whole gamut of emotions from the audience from anger to sadness to happiness. Above all, the writers somehow manage to create relatable characters in a seemingly relatable storyline, when in reality the main event of the series (murder) is highly unrelatable to its viewers. *TEOTFW* fosters empathy and awareness around the unfortunately ever-present theme of sexual assault and urges viewers to love, hate, and ultimately relate to two complex and very human characters with nuanced perspectives on gender.

## Works Cited

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