

Passengers (2016)



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What's the film about?

[Spoilers]

The future: on a spaceliner taking 5000 hibernating passengers to a world called Homestead II, an engineer, Jim Preston, is woken from sleep after a meteor strike to the ship causes his hibernation pod to malfunction.

Unfortunately, he discovers, that he is not only alone and unable to return to hibernation, but he is 90 years from his destination, meaning that he will live alone on the ship for the rest of his life and die on the ship.

He spends a year trying to change his fate. A message sent back to Earth for help will take 19 years and even longer to get back to him. There is no one to help. So what can he do?

He uses his skills as an engineer. He gets the instruction manuals and learns about the pods and discovers that he cannot go back to sleep. He learns to spacewalk outside the ship. He discovers that some areas of the ship are closed off to him. He 'upgrades' his living arrangements and discusses his fate with the only 'person' he can talk to, an android bartender, who serves him drinks and makes enigmatic responses to his existential questions.

After a year in isolation, he forms the idea that he will wake another person to keep him company. But he is aware that he would be condemning that person to die on the ship with him and put that person in the same position as himself. He asks the android what he should do. The android agrees

that it would be very good for him not to be alone, but that it would be a very bad thing to do to condemn the person whom he wakes.

Jim wakes a female journalist, Aurora Lane. He doesn't tell her that he's done so and lets her think it was an accident. He asks the bartender not to tell her what he's done. Aurora is horrified by her fate at first, but joins Jim in trying to think of ways to change their situation. Together they find that there are no solutions. She begins to write a book about their fate to be left as a legacy for when they are gone. Jim offers her a 'date' which she accepts. They play, swim, jog, eat in restaurants and work together. Inevitably they fall in love and sleep together. They create things: Aurora writes her book. Jim, makes a ring for her and plants a tree.

Jim plans to propose to Aurora with the ring he made. But the android tells Aurora what Jim did. Aurora is horrified that Jim woke her up and condemned her to die on the ship. She tells him that he is committing murder and is repulsed by his actions.

The spaceliner starts to malfunction and fall apart. Another person, a crew member, also wakes, and Jim and Aurora are briefly companioned by another person. He is able to get them access to the deck and determine that the ship is going to fall apart and kill them all. But he is also fatally injured and soon dies. In him, Jim and Aurora see their own fate mirrored.

The spaceliner starts to fall apart as Jim and Aurora's relationship falls apart. Yet if they want to live, it must be repaired. Together they find the source of the damage and set about mending it. They can't do it without each other's help. Jim is prepared to die to save Aurora (and the remaining passengers), by venting the over-heating reactor into space manually and taking the blast. The vent works, but he is blasted into space and his lifeline to the ship is broken. He dies in the vacuum.

Aurora now goes to save Jim. She spacewalks to collect him and bring him back. The Autodoc medical facility tells her he is dead, but she overrides it to resuscitate him and restore him to life. They are reunited and their relationship is restored.

Jim then tells her that he noticed the Autodoc has a suspended animation facility. If she chooses, he can put her to sleep and she can have her dream of Homestead II after all. But there is only on Autodoc. He will have to return to being alone. Aurora chooses to spend her life with him and give up her dream of travelling to a new planet and then back to Earth.

At the end of its journey, the passengers awake to find the ship full of trees and plants, like an Eden. They wonder what has happened.

Moral Issues

The film received some terrible reviews mainly centred around the moral issues in the story. Some felt that Jim's actions amounted to 'date rape' and showed both stalking and exploitative behaviour. For many, this meant that the plot could not be a love story, because the relationship was not only equal but 'creepy'. However, it is worth thinking about the themes involved.

Loneliness: Jim is alone for a year before the idea of having a companion becomes overwhelming. What happens to a person who is forced to live in isolation, without hope of rescue or change, and knowing that he will live out his life in the same way (even in luxury) without proper conversation, companionship or comfort? What would you do in such a situation?

Condemning another person to your fate: if you decide that your needs overwrite the needs (and rights) of everyone else, what does that imply? Jim knows that his needs are selfish and he knows that it is wrong to put another person through his experience. But he does it anyway. Would we do the same? Aurora tells him that his actions are murder. Is she right?

Choosing another person as a companion: this is the most questionable issue perhaps. Who do you choose? Jim chooses a beautiful female, but about whom he knows nothing much except that she's a journalist who loves stories. He spends a lot of time listening to her speak on her profile. Why does he choose her? Is it because he is attracted to her (recorded) profile or because she is a 'sleeping beauty', one to whom he is sexually attracted? This is problematic, because it suggests that an important motive in his choice is her physical attractiveness rather than anything else about her, because her body is all he can see. He only 'knows' her via her recorded profile. Why not choose a male companion? Or several companions? Why not choose a crew member? Or the oldest person he can find who would have the least time to suffer? What is his ulterior motive in choosing her – so he can sleep with her? Supposing she was a lesbian, or hated him on sight? He can't know before waking her that they will, actually get along and be able to work together. He can't know how she will react to discovering her fate. Supposing she fell into depression, despair or committed suicide?

Love and relationships: Jim and Aurora are castaways, but they are not on an even footing. Jim chose Aurora from all the other passengers, but Aurora has no other choices. He courts her and they fall in love, but their relationship inevitably hits the rocks when she discovers that he has lied to her and deceived her. Her free choices and his are not the same. The damage has to be repaired, but even though they get back together, is the relationship always flawed because of its beginnings or can their subsequent choices cancel it out? To this extent, their relationship is 'arranged' and although they don't know each other in the beginning and although their relationship was contrived, they have to find out what love means by working alongside each other for their mutual good.

Dreams and goals: Jim and Aurora joined the spaceliner for a dream of another life in a distant future. When that dream disappears, they have to realign their goals to what they can do with the life they have now. They have destructive episodes when they rail against their fate, but they also find refuge in creativity and making their confined world beautiful. When Aurora is offered the chance to go back to long term sleep, she decides to stay in the life she has made with Jim rather than return to her dream of a new future. Was this a good choice, or the inevitable choice of love and commitment? You don't leave the person you love because the grass is greener?

Theological issues

In many ways, this film explores the themes of the Garden of Eden story in Genesis. Jim discovers he has skills which can enable him to live comfortably. He has 'dominion' over his environment although he also discovers that there are places which are 'forbidden' to him. He has food and drink whenever he wants it. He is 'naked'. Yet the man finds himself alone and longs for companionship.

The bartender android has a strange 'god-like' power – giving the man what he wants, advising him that selfishness is good for him and very bad for everyone else. It has a gnomic discourse, pushing decisions back on to the operation of the man's free will and ability to think morally and make moral choices. When the man 'sins' by waking the woman and cutting across her choices and free will, and tries to make the android complicit, it rejects this by telling the woman what the man did.

So Jim and Aurora become like Adam and Eve in the Eden of their spaceliner. They are 'male and female' together. Their world, however is broken, fatally flawed and heading for complete destruction. Death comes into their world and they see the meaning of human existence – they are not sleeping until they wake in 'heaven' but forced to live in the now, in a world which is falling apart. Love can redeem this brokenness. They can choose to create Eden around them, planting trees and tending plants and making the ship beautiful or they can break everything up and destroy everything. They have to choose how to make the best of Jim's choice for a life companion and put their creativity to work.

Some excerpts to watch:

- Jim discusses waking Aurora with the android
- Jim and Aurora's first date
- The android tells Aurora what Jim did
- The passengers' discovery of the forest in the spaceliner

Some conversation starters

- What responsibility do you think Jim has for *all* the passengers on the ship (not just Aurora)?
- What do you think it was like for Jim during the first year he was alone?
- Assuming you would choose to wake a companion, who would you choose?
- How do you think Aurora made sense of what Jim did?
- What do you think the role of the android was?
- What does the film tell us about relationships?
- How do you feel about the accusations that Jim's actions were 'creepy' stalking behaviour?