The White Lotus Seasons 1 and 2: Satirizing the wealthy and privileged

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Mike White's mini-series *The White Lotus* recently concluded its second season on HBO.

The first season, set in Hawaii, was a sharply drawn, satirical picture of the conflicts that erupt when a group of wealthy guests arrive at a luxury resort and set into motion a tragicomic series of events. The second season, set in Italy, ends on a much weaker note, but also takes on elements of social status and privilege.

White is a perceptive observer of American social relations, and he treats his characters with a degree of depth and complexity. He previously directed *Beatriz at Dinner* (2017), in which a Mexican American immigrant massage therapist unwittingly ends up at her affluent client's dinner party (where things go wrong), and *Brad's Status* (2017), a comedy about an upper middle class man's career crisis as he compares his life to that of his even more successful friend. White's *Enlightened* (2011-12), another HBO series, canceled after two seasons, also has intelligent moments as it examines the frustrations and self-delusions of certain white-collar professionals in their corporate environments.

The first season of *The White Lotus* offered a refreshing and amusing social critique. It effectively portrayed the clash between the psychologically miserable, monied visitors and the hotel staff, as the lovely resort turns into a living hell for the workers. The show received a number of Emmy nominations and also won an award for outstanding limited series.

Season 1: "It's all about the money"

The first season opens at a Hawaiian airport as a departing Shane Patton (Jake Lacy) looks out the window to see a corpse being loaded onto his plane. We learn from a visibly perturbed and irritated Shane that this was a honeymoon vacation but that his wife is not with him.

In a flashback, we see a boatload of insufferable, rich American guests—including newlyweds Shane and Rachel (Alexandra Daddario)—arrive at the lavish resort, the White Lotus. The mood is lighter, with Louis Armstrong's "On Coconut Island" playing in the background.

Also on the boat are the affluent Mossbachers—the emasculated Mark (Steve Zahn), his careerist wife Nicole (Connie Britton), their sharp-tongued college sophomore daughter Olivia (Sydney Sweeney) and their alienated teenage son Quinn (Fred Hechinger). We learn later Nicole is the CEO of a Google-like search engine company, but that she only got the position by utilizing the reactionary atmosphere of the #MeToo campaign to her advantage.

Olivia is with the equally insufferable, but less privileged Paula (Brittany O'Grady), who has been brought along to entertain and accompany her wealthier friend. The last passenger on the boat is Tanya McQuoid (Jennifer Coolidge), a lonely alcoholic and an emotionally troubled heiress who ends up later starting a fling with hotel guest Greg (Jon Gries).

On shore are the hotel workers, along with manager Armond (Murray Bartlett), who urge the staff "to disappear behind our masks" as a form of "tropical kabuki" where the goal is to ensure the wealthy guests get everything they want. Conflicts ensue—among the guests and between the guests and the staff.

The cinematography is alluring, and the music in the opening credit sequence is striking, as is the soundtrack overall. The cast is generally exceptional, including Bartlett (with shades of John Cleese's Basil in *Fawlty Towers*), Coolidge, Britton, Daddario, Sweeney, and Zahn. Lacy as Shane effectively captures the spoiled, born-with-a-silver-spoon type, with all the emotional vapidity and arrogance. Molly Shannon as Shane's mother Kitty, in a scathing depiction of "old money," is exceptional throughout.

A number of scenes and interactions stand out in the first season that highlight how individuals, no matter how well-intentioned, are ultimately shaped by social relations. And the rich in the first season of *The White Lotus* live up to Fitzgerald's apt characterization: they smash up things and people and retreat into their money or vast carelessness.

The most intense conflict occurs between the entitled Shane and Armond the hotel manager. A former alcoholic, Armond is driven back into substance abuse while on the job, losing his equilibrium and cheerful exterior. At his lowest point, Armond tells Dillon (Lukas Gage), a staffer with whom he begins sexual relations in a drug-fueled night, "You make shit money. They exploit me. I exploit you."

White effectively captures the hypocrisy of upper middle class politics as well in a number of interactions, including between Olivia and her mother Nicole. The latter declares that "Hillary Clinton was one of the most influential women of the last 30 years." Olivia scoffs, "She was a neolib and a neocon." Nicole responds to the taunts, pointing out that "most of these activists" and armchair critics like her daughter, "don't really want to dismantle the systems of economic exploitation, not the ones that benefit them, which are all global by the way. They just want a better seat at the table…. What's your system of belief, Olivia? Not capitalism? Not socialism? So just cynicism?"

We also see the cutthroat politics of "corporate feminism" and #MeToo efforts at work. Seeking to flatter Nicole, the search engine CEO, Rachel explains that she had written a profile about the other

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woman, "Not just you. It was 'Ten Power Women in the Tech World.'" Nicole is angered, "That was a hatchet job….You made it out that I got my promotion because of my optics. 'She rode the #MeToo wave.' … You didn't have to make me come across like some kind of Machiavellian gorgon using the victimization of other women in my company just to further my own craven ambitions." White has taken the true measure of the toxic and careerist politics of the #MeToo movement here.

Later, Rachel, who accepts that she only does "clickbait journalism" for online publications, tells Shane and his mother at dinner, "I wanna do something meaningful," such as working for a non-profit. Shane's mother, Kitty, who's never had money concerns, dismisses Rachel: "Oh, but those jobs are so awful, honey. They make no money." Shane concurs, "But what's even the point? Those jobs are just asking wealthy people for their money. Your job would literally be to ask yourself for money. *It's all about the money!*" Kitty chimes in grotesquely, "Money, money, money, money, money! And if you have money, then that's what you bring to the table."

Season 2: Sex and money

The second season of *The White Lotus* reprises some of the same general concerns. However, White said he wanted to focus much more on the relationships between the sexes in this season, and as a result the second loses much of the coherence and sharpness of the first.

The new set of episodes begins again with a dead body washing up on the beaches, a far less-satisfying plot device this time around. Wealthy guests arrive at another White Lotus resort, in Taormina, Sicily. Tanya turns up with Greg, to whom she's now married, along with her aide Portia (Haley Lu Richardson). Tanya and Greg's relationship has now frayed considerably.

Also arriving are two married couples, Daphne (Meghann Fahy) and Cameron Sullivan (Theo James) and Harper (Aubrey Plaza) and Ethan Spiller (Will Sharpe). Ethan is a newly affluent tech entrepreneur being pursued by the cocky, womanizing Cameron, a wealth portfolio manager and Ethan's former college roommate. Their unlikely friendship is largely rekindled thanks to Ethan's rise in social status and the opportunities this now provides Cameron, who previously looked down on the other man as his inferior.

The third set of guests are the DiGrassos, including the patriarch-grandfather, the boorish and lusty Bert (F. Murray Abraham), his sex-addicted Hollywood producer son Dominic (Michael Imperioli) and Dominic's sweet but awkward son Albie (Adam DiMario). Albie is constantly embarrassed by his father and grandfather's sexual peccadilloes.

The dynamics among the trio, and with various women, produce numerous amusing moments. White, perhaps somewhat critical of the puritanical #MeToo atmosphere, which treats men as sexual predators, points to a deeper complexity when Bert says, "Women aren't all saints, Albie. They're just like us." Abraham and Imperioli are excellent in their roles.

The hotel staff include the sexually frustrated and testy manager Valentina (Sabrina Impaccioatore) and a number of hotel workers. Interlopers in the hotel include Lucia (Simona Tabasco), a sex worker seeking out wealthy clients, and Mia (Beatrice Granno), an aspiring singer. At one point, Mia sings a lovely rendition of "The Best Things in Life are Free," which of course they are not.

The second season has many standout moments and scenes, but the show unfortunately veers into hackneyed territory by the end.

The relationship dynamics and power struggles between Cameron, Ethan and their wives generate some of the best lines of the series. Cameron with his alpha male sex drive and Daphne live in social circles far above the troubles of the world, disconnected from the "apocalyptic" news cycle, they claim. Ethan and Harper, a lawyer, both "socially conscious" to a point, are sanctimonious in their attitude toward contemporary events, which apparently keep them up at night. One scene where Daphne takes Harper to a plaza surrounded by leering men makes a visual allusion to Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, a film about rich Italians living empty lives.

Coolidge is once again humorous and sympathetic in her role. She reminds Portia she's happy to be among people of her own social status as "it's a good feeling when you realize that someone has money, 'cause then you don't have to worry about them wanting yours." Her wealth, however, becomes the prey of a gay entourage led by an old-money dandy Quentin (Tom Hollander) and his supposed working class nephew Jack (Leo Woodall).

The acting is again mostly terrific. The cinematography is stunning, and once again the soundtrack is entertaining. White can make a paradise for the wealthy come across as truly suffocating and grotesque. His eye for the natural, elemental beauty of the world—moonlights, volcanoes, sunrises and waves—is striking, especially in contrast to the social rot and ugliness of the wealthy who dominate the social landscape.

But the second season gets by much more on individual moments. It lacks the inner artistic unity of the first season, which more satisfyingly moves the various social interactions to their logical conclusions. Season two of *The White Lotus*, unfortunately, falls prey to cliched television tropes, with sensationalist plot devices that become increasingly outlandish. There's also a flatness and falseness to some of the character arcs, including the fates of Mia and Lucia, as well as those of Tanya and her gay friends.

Mike White is sharpest when he examines the hypocrisies of American class society, tracing out its corrosiveness in an artistically convincing manner. In an interview with the *New Yorker* about the success of the first season, White said, "I constellated the show with many people grappling with ideas about money. Who has the money can really create the dynamic of a relationship. Money can really inform and pervert our most intimate relationships, beyond just the employee-guest relationship at the hotel." Both seasons bring this out with varying degrees of success.

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