

“Eat the Rich”: Moral Entanglement of Class and Gender in *The White Lotus*

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Abstract

The White Lotus is renowned for its satirical depiction of wealthy, upper-class individuals. The show deliberately invites its viewers to reflect on a set of moral/ethical questions about ambiguous characters and their behaviors. This study investigates viewers’ responses to this invitation to morally deliberate in relation to class. First, a narrative analysis traces the moral plotlines in Seasons 1 and 2 of *The White Lotus*. Building on this, thematic analysis is used to examine viewers’ moral discussions on the online platform Reddit. In this way, both the show’s invitation and how viewers navigate this invitation are unraveled. Results show a relation between characters’ class and gender, the amount of empathy the characters evoke among viewers, and viewers’ deliberation on moral issues these characters are involved in. Viewers actively engaged with the moral plotlines concerning female and middle-class characters. The male and upper-class characters received remarkably less attention, and their immoral behavior was taken as a given characteristic of the upper class. We argue that these patterns show a connection between empathy felt for a character and readiness to engage in moral deliberation of their actions. This finding contributes to our understanding of narrative imagination, its connections to class and gender, and its manifestation in an online context.

Keywords

class; empathy; gender; moral deliberation; Reddit users; *The White Lotus*; TV series

1. Introduction

The White Lotus (White et al., 2021–present) is pitched as a “sharp social satire” (HBO, 2022). Each season tells the story of the vicissitudes at a luxury resort chain, called *The White Lotus*, located in exotic corners across the globe, in which wealthy hotel guests pursue rest and peace while their underlying issues inevitably come

to the fore (Mangan, 2022; Travers, 2021). The series' three seasons are known for leaving its viewers with a set of moral/ethical questions, due to many ambiguous characters and their behaviors. Season 1, for example, introduces us to the manipulative character of Tanya McQuoid, a spoiled, rich woman who promises the world to a resort employee, the superficial Shane Patton, who is unable to convince his just-married wife Rachel he loves her for more than her good looks, or the lying hotel manager Armond, who finds himself in a tight spot he needs to save himself from. *The White Lotus* deliberately introduces us to morally ambiguous protagonists, while simultaneously putting forth some satirical critique. In an interview, director Mike White states:

The first season was a lot about privilege and a kind of upstairs/downstairs thing with the employees and the guests....When we were in Italy [for Season 2], the theme was more about sex and the dynamic between men and women. (Halterman, 2025, para. 3)

The White Lotus thus presents a narrative that invites moral deliberation amongst its viewers (Birthisel & Martin, 2013; Krijnen, 2011; Shafer & Raney, 2012). The deliberate attempt at doing this is what makes the series exceptionally interesting to investigate: Do viewers engage in moral deliberation about the issues proposed by the producers to do just that?

In this study, we examine how viewers respond to this invitation for moral deliberation and how class is involved, pursuing the research question: How do Reddit users construct moral evaluations of the upper-class characters in Seasons 1 and 2 of *The White Lotus*? A narrative analysis of moral plotlines in *The White Lotus* formed the basis for the examination of naturally occurring discussions between audience members on Reddit. Reddit stands out from other platforms because it is structured according to topical communities, or “subreddits,” making it a favorite for users sharing thoughts on popular culture (Proferes et al., 2021).

Most research on the relation between morality and TV has taken up one out of two angles. The first is a focus on content, in which scholars map types of moral value systems (Daalmans et al., 2014), moral norm violations (Bilandzic et al., 2017), or moral messages, modes of reasoning, and subjecthood (Krijnen & Meijer, 2005) across TV genres. Other studies take a media audiences perspective, asking how the moral messages presented in TV content can trigger moral intuitions (Prabhu et al., 2020), form the cognitive schemas used in moral reasoning (Schnell & Bilandzic, 2017), or expand audiences' moral reflections about a TV narrative (Krijnen, 2011). These studies examine the stimuli and the results of moral reflection, but not the actual process through which audiences deliberate about a story and come to a moral judgment. In other words, there is knowledge about the “before” and the “after” of moral deliberation, but none about the “how.”

To address this “how,” we tap into the abundance of naturally occurring data available on Reddit. Enthusiastic viewers often turn to Reddit and other platforms immediately after, or even during, viewing a TV show. As such, examining online discussions is an ideal way to study how contemporary audiences engage with TV narratives. Furthermore, by sharing their opinions online, viewers are prompted to explicate their thought process. To convince others that an antagonizing character is not truly evil but only misunderstood, they must explain and justify their reasoning. In this sense, these online platforms resemble Pardales' “literary community of inquiry” (Pardales, 2002, p. 435), where individuals come together to discuss stories. Through interaction and discussion, they practice forming moral judgments and hone their moral sensitivities. Obviously, the limitation of this approach is that only audience members who do engage

in online discussions are part of the study. Yet, though the results might be limited to a certain viewers group, we believe that our results form a strong indication of how viewers engage in moral deliberation in some instances and not in others.

2. Moral Deliberation and Narrative Imagination

Moral deliberation is the process of deciding which course of action is the best within a specific situation (Johnson, 1993). In this process, our general goal is to protect the welfare and promote the personal fulfillment of ourselves and others (Johnson, 1993). A narrative construction about *why* a situation is of moral quality, what the different options for taking action are, and what the consequences for each course of action are, is carefully curated. For instance, one storyline in Season 1 of *The White Lotus* revolves around Shane Patton, a wealthy guest at the resort, and Armond, the resort manager. When newlyweds Shane and Rachel arrive at the resort, Shane quickly notices that the room they are assigned to is not the Pineapple Suite his mother booked on their behalf (S1E1). Rachel, however, points out that their current room, the Palm Suite, is beautiful and enormous and equal to the other room. Still, Shane believes that they ought to have the room his mother chose and paid for. Imagine, then, Shane's confusion when Armond informs him that there was no mistake in the room assignment, and that other guests are staying in the coveted Pineapple Suite for the coming week. Yet, later Armond confesses to a coworker that he has double-booked the Pineapple Suite, and that he hopes Shane will forget about the issue entirely (S1E1). This storyline develops in an ongoing argument between Shane and Armond about who is right: Should Shane accept that he did not get what he reserved and be happy with the equivalent, or should Armond own up to the mistake and propose a better solution?

The first step of moral deliberation is the process of identifying a situation as of moral quality. In this example, the moral importance may be somewhat dubious; Rachel and Armond both believe that having the exact room that was booked is unimportant, considering that the Palm Suite is an equivalent alternative. Shane's behavior, however, suggests that the choice of room does have an impact on his happiness—his emotional well-being. Details are of importance. For instance, Shane's mother carefully selected the Pineapple Suite and offered the holiday to her daughter-in-law and son as their wedding gift (S1E1). The emotional investment in the gift matters for our judgment. This type of moral reasoning is called care-based reasoning by Gilligan and Attanucci (1988); it involves viewing humans as fundamentally interdependent, and focuses on how we can best care for each other in instances of vulnerability or need. Context is key in this approach to moral reasoning, which Gilligan and Attanucci (1988) contrast with another, more justice- or rule-based moral reasoning. In the latter, thinking about the specific characteristics of a situation is less important, because individuals are seen as independent with an obligation to treat others fairly. Universal rules that can be applied in any situation fulfill the obligation for fair treatment (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988). For instance, through the lens of rule-based moral reasoning, Shane has the right to pursue a correction to his booking.

This storyline evolves into an ongoing hostility, in which Armond tries to make Shane's stay miserable, and Shane attempts to have Armond fired from his job. Based on this description, you might conclude that Shane's retaliation was completely justified, given that Armond acted maliciously. However, context is key here. Shane speaks to Armond in a dismissive, condescending tone, making it clear that he believes the manager is beneath him and ought to immediately accommodate his every request (S1E1). Instead of enjoying his honeymoon, all Shane's attention and energy is geared towards getting Armond fired. Additionally, we find out that Armond is already in a difficult situation at the beginning of the series, experiencing stress that he tries to alleviate with

drugs and alcohol in later episodes. Every confrontation with Shane leads Armond to this coping mechanism. As Johnson (1993) and Pardales (2002) argue, no moral judgment can be extricated from its own set of unique circumstances. In moral deliberation, and especially the care-based approach, the details of a situation—the individuals' background and sensitivities—all come into consideration as we think about what the best possible resolution is (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988; Johnson, 1993; Pardales, 2002). The struggle between Shane and Armond reaches an absurd end, offering no straightforward resolution to the moral dilemma posed to viewers.

This example demonstrates the extent to which moral deliberation depends on an individual's ability to situate themselves and evaluate all of the possible options for moral action (Johnson, 1993). For this reason, moral deliberation is deeply intertwined with the process of consuming fictional narratives, including TV narratives (Johnson, 2016; Krijnen & Meijer, 2005). Nussbaum (1997) has highlighted how fictional narratives offer us a way to think about potential moral choices without suffering the consequences ourselves. Indeed, Hakemulder (2000) has described literature as a “moral laboratory” for readers, and Krijnen (2009) and Krijnen and Verboord (2016) have argued to extend this concept to the consumption of TV narratives. TV narratives function as a moral playground, enabling the viewer to follow along a story, experimenting with various courses of action, without suffering real consequences (Krijnen, 2009). Engaging with the narrative, we think alongside characters and develop opinions on how a character should behave; or rather, we arrive at moral judgements. Moral judgments can be distinguished from mere options by what Rachels and Rachels (2023) call the minimum conception of morality. First, a moral judgment is aimed at conduct (Rachels & Rachels, 2023): You may find yourself wishing that Armond had stayed sober in his interactions with Shane. Second, a moral statement contains a positive or negative evaluation (Rachels & Rachels, 2023): Perhaps you think that Shane's overall treatment of Armond was rude, excessively vengeful, and wrong. Third, moral statements are characterized by their use of the word “ought” or a variety thereof (Rachels & Rachels, 2023): Your thoughts on the show might take shape in statements such as “Shane ought to have been more polite and less demanding” or “Armond ought to have remained professional, and refrained from taking personal vengeance on a customer.” The fact that such diverse moral statements can be formulated from this conflict again highlights how the ambiguity present in *The White Lotus* invites viewers to engage in moral deliberation. It is difficult to designate either Armond or Shane as being solely at fault; as viewers, we are forced to accept the characters' complexities.

It is this complexity of characters that is vital in how narratives stimulate our capacity for compassion and empathy (Nussbaum, 1997). Nussbaum calls this the narrative imagination: the capacity to deeply identify with a character, feeling connected and similar to them, without losing grasp of the differences. Our capacity to feel connected to another person, through narrative imagination, may be applied to a relatively familiar figure: We might read about a character who could be our neighbor, gaining insight into another possible inner life and feelings. However, narrative imagination can also represent a bond with a character who is different from ourselves. For instance, someone who has never worked in a hospitality or customer service position may still empathize with Armond's frustration, through the process of watching his interactions with clients on screen. *The White Lotus* capitalizes on the wealthy (upper) upper class, a group that, for the average viewer, is distinct from the self.

3. Class and Morality

As in the example above, several storylines in *The White Lotus* involve the characters' class as a key element. Shane's wealth is omnipresent in his interactions with Armond and with Rachel. In this research, we examine the characters' class as a key factor in the viewers' moral deliberations. Media research addressing the upper class is very rare. Existing research focuses on the portrayal of the working class (Hirdman, 2016; Wood & Skeggs, 2008), and it is believed that "film and television often celebrate the rich and powerful" (Kellner & Share, 2019, p. 3). However, representation of the upper class and the moral stories they are involved with is uncharted territory. In terms of nonempirical academic work, scholars have noted a broad spectrum of portrayals of the upper class, ranging from positive images of refinement and style to negative ones of avarice and greed (Deery, 2019; Kendall, 2011).

Outside the field of media studies, several psychological studies have identified a link between class status and perceived moral agency. Sainz, Martínez, Moya, and Rodríguez-Bailón (2019) found that the way in which different groups are dehumanized is associated with their socioeconomic status: Low socioeconomic status groups tend to be portrayed as animalistic, while high socioeconomic status groups are depicted as mechanistic—cold, calculating, and intelligent, but unfeeling. Furthermore, the traits wealthy people are generally not perceived to have—such as warmth, emotionality, and openness—are linked to a conception of people as capable of performing morally good acts and as deserving of protection from immoral acts (Bastian et al., 2011; Sainz, Martínez, Moya, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019). Meanwhile, traits like refinement and higher cognition, which wealthy people are perceived as possessing, are associated with higher blameworthiness for immoral acts (Bastian et al., 2011). Sussman et al. (2014) found that individuals consistently view wealthy people as less virtuous than they are competent. Overall, these studies suggest a general view of upper-class people as disinclined to perform morally good acts.

Interestingly, Horwitz and Dovidio (2017) found that while the participants in their study certainly expressed this as their explicit attitude, they also had an implicit preference for the wealthy over the middle class. Researchers theorize that outwards criticism of the upper class as machine-like and amoral serves as a coping mechanism, enabling individuals to avoid comparing themselves with the wealthy and subsequently feeling inferior (Horwitz & Dovidio, 2017; Sainz, Martínez, Moya, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019; Sainz, Martínez, Rodríguez-Bailón, & Moya, 2019). Barbalet (1992) refers to a similar dynamic in his argument that the structure of class relations prompts individuals to feel resentment towards those who are higher up on the social ladder, as they feel that these others are robbing them of possible opportunities and resources. Although we consider that viewers may be biased against upper-class characters and tend to evaluate them as less moral, we are not arguing that upper-class people are unfortunate scapegoats with whom we should sympathize more. Being upper class remains an immense privilege, beyond the material aspect: Not only is the upper class associated with ideals of success and competence (Horwitz & Dovidio, 2017), it also carries anonymity and neutrality. It is crucial to distinguish between upper-class people themselves and their collections of values, norms, and worldviews. Although individuals may caricature upper-class people as machine-like and amoral, upper-class ideology is implicitly accepted throughout society. Its class-based origin is made invisible, and upper-class ideals are simply accepted as good values, proper norms, and a correct worldview (Kellner & Share, 2019). TV shows such as *The White Lotus* might contribute to a hegemonic dynamic in which the wealthy are disliked, yet, also form the norm to aspire to.

4. Method

To answer our research question—How do Reddit users construct moral evaluations of the upper-class characters in Seasons 1 and 2 of *The White Lotus*?—we followed a two-pronged approach: (a) a narrative analysis to manifest the moral plotlines available for the audiences to reflect upon; (b) an analysis of discussion threads on Reddit to see if and how viewers engaged with these plotlines.

The narrative analysis focused on Seasons 1 and 2 of *The White Lotus*. A method of analysis developed in previous studies guided the analysis. Focusing on the resolution of a plotline forms the starting point of analysis (Krijnen, 2007). The resolution is then assessed on whether it is of moral quality or not, adopting Rachels and Rachels' (2023) minimum conception of morality. Next, moral plotlines are subjected to a moral content analysis, tracing each plotline's sequence of events and unfolding consequences (Reissman & Speedy, 2007). Considering that satirical TV narratives often do not offer explicit, unambiguous moral closures (Krijnen, 2007; Test, 1991), each plotline's closure was examined in relation to its overarching structure, focusing on the characters' actions and the narrative consequences (Birthisel & Martin, 2013).

4.1. Reddit: Data Gathering

The results of the moral content analysis provided a foundation to analyse the discussions about each plotline. The subreddits [r/TheWhiteLotusHBO](https://www.reddit.com/r/TheWhiteLotusHBO) (<https://www.reddit.com/r/TheWhiteLotusHBO>) and [r/WhiteLotusHBO](https://www.reddit.com/r/WhiteLotusHBO) (<https://www.reddit.com/r/WhiteLotusHBO>) were selected, because they are the largest subreddits dedicated to discussing the TV series (Subreddit Stats, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Subreddits are user-created and moderated forums (Reddit, 2023), offering an excellent opportunity for researchers to examine naturally occurring data surrounding specific topics (Proferes et al., 2021).

Six hundred discussion threads (an initial post and its subsequent comments from other users) that were active between December 2022 and February 2023 were saved. This time period was chosen due to its proximity to the release of Season 2 (in October 2022), when both subreddits experienced a peak in activity (Subreddit Stats, n.d. -a, n.d.-b).

Filtering the discussion threads to retain those that contained at least 15 comments engaging in moral deliberation resulted in a final sample of 30 discussion threads. To determine whether a comment engages in moral deliberation, we used Rachels and Rachels' (2023) description of moral language, along with inductive modifications based on familiarity with the Reddit data. The minimum conception of morality (Rachels & Rachels, 2023) was, again, leading this analysis. Furthermore, we only counted a comment as a moral statement when the user also pointed to some reasoning behind their evaluation. Having concrete reasons behind an evaluation is a key aspect of moral deliberation (Johnson, 1993; Rachels & Rachels, 2023).

4.2. Reddit Analysis

The data from the 30 Reddit discussion threads were coded with a thematic analysis approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first round of (open) coding sorted comments based on which plotlines they engaged with; the moral plotlines identified in the moral content analysis were applied as deductive codes.

In the second stage of analysis, axial coding, each set of comments, grouped by plotline, was examined to identify patterns in the ways that users explained their moral evaluations. When using care-based reasoning to construct moral judgments, the users re-tell parts of the story, as they interpret it, to justify their evaluations. When individuals tell a story, the way in which they organize and connect events creates meaning and serves to fulfill the teller's rhetorical ends (Johnson, 1993). The very process of selecting which aspects of a story to recount is part of building an argument (Carranza, 2015). By including an event—an interaction, a choice, even a glance—in their justification of a moral judgment, a user positions that event as morally relevant. Therefore, a narrative approach was useful to examine how users re-narrated the plotlines and how these retellings served to construct their moral evaluations. In addition, inductive codes were used to track the moral judgments that were justified by applying universal moral statements corresponding to the rule-based reasoning defined by Gilligan and Attanucci (1988). To track whether users did make any statements of moral quality without offering justification by re-telling parts of the story, we also used inductive coding.

In the final step of analysis, selective coding, the users' deliberations were compared across plotlines and in relation to the results of the moral content analysis, enabling the identification of the common ways in which these constructions were associated with both class and gender across all of the plotlines (Parcell & Baker, 2017). Finally, comparing the users' deliberations with the results of the moral content analysis yielded insight as to how the users reacted to the moral questions put forth in the series, incorporating their own insights and values in their assessments.

Considering the privacy and comfort of research participants is key to an ethical study, even when using data that are publicly available online (Zimmer, 2018). In the results section, the Reddit users' names are included to signal quotations and distinguish between different users (with the exception of users whose accounts were deleted; these are referred to as "a user"). We consider that the format of Reddit provides sufficient anonymity to the users: Participation on the platform is inherently pseudonymous. Individuals self-anonymize by creating a username when they sign up, and Reddit discourages individuals from using their real names (Proferes et al., 2021).

5. The Morality of Class, Money, and Entitlement

The analysis of *The White Lotus* Seasons 1 and 2 reveals that, indeed, there are ample plotlines that invite moral deliberation. In total, 13 plotlines were identified as moral, with Season 1 containing six and Season 2 containing seven moral plotlines. Two of these plotlines were excluded from further analysis as they did not contain characters explicitly presented as upper class. Interestingly, though 11 plotlines invited viewers to engage in moral deliberation, only nine were substantially discussed by Reddit users. Pronouncing moral judgments, and engaging in both care- and rule-based reasoning, viewers tended to center some characters more than others in their deliberations. These patterns are related to the class of the characters, but also to their gender. Reddit users engage less in moral deliberation towards the wealthy male characters than towards female or middle-class characters. The discussions suggest that the users' narrative imagination seems to only be activated when the user is able to have empathy with the character.

Users who actively discussed and defended their moral assessments typically engaged in care-based deliberation. When engaging in care-based deliberation, viewers pay attention to and assess a character's vulnerabilities within a specific context (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988). In order to justify their moral

evaluations in relation to that context, the viewers must convey their own interpretation of what has occurred within a plotline. This resulted in one or more prevalent reconstructed narratives for each plotline, co-created by many users across the discussion threads.

Across all of these plotlines, those involving female middle-class characters stand out as being subject to particularly extensive moral deliberation. Reddit users engaged deeply with these characters, effectively reconstructing the stories in order to support their moral assessments. This process of reconstruction and argumentation represents an important investment of time and imagination.

The aforementioned characters, Shane and Rachel, serve as an example here. Crucially, Rachel is not from the same socioeconomic background as Shane: She still has college debt and is struggling to establish herself as a freelance journalist (S1E1). The two clash about Rachel's desire to continue working after marrying Shane, and about Shane's focus on the physical aspect of their relationship; all of this culminates in Rachel reconsidering her marriage (S1E2–6). This plotline was extensively discussed on Reddit, and users re-constructed several different narratives to support their assessments. Notably, every one of these plotlines focused on Rachel, centering her agency and perspective over Shane's.

Users debate her choice extensively, offering different care-based narratives to defend or condemn her decision. In one narrative, Rachel is morally defended for her choice: She has been overwhelmed by her husband's unkind actions, feels isolated, and does not have the emotional strength to stand up for herself and leave the marriage. User Wonderbarsm emphasizes this: "To find the courage and determination to leave that douchebag, she just needed a little push and above all, validation." Replying to Wonderbarsm's post, Sufficient_Cat_3645 echoes this sentiment and connects it to their own experience:

I was in almost the exact same situation as Rachel....The few times I tried to open up about what was really going on in my marriage (or life in general), I wasn't taken seriously at all or was told I was being dramatic. It was pretty devastating. Eventually, I worked up the courage on my own to leave, but damn, it was a long process, and wish I had a bit more of a support system.

Both comments signal moral identification with Rachel: a deep understanding of her vulnerabilities and circumstances as she grapples with her situation.

The fascinating quality of this care-based reasoning is that different users construct several opposing narratives surrounding the same plotline. Another care-based narrative constructed by the users about Rachel morally criticizes her for making what is deemed a lazy, shallow choice. In this narrative, Rachel abandons her values and her personal ambitions, choosing a less challenging path by remaining with Shane. She is portrayed as a social climber. User orangefreshy describes her decision:

It was the easier choice. Have a cushy life she already has access to, or give it up and struggle or worse. She didn't really have a career yet, the road in front of her to get where she needed to go was long, and uncertain. But rolling over and being a rich man's wife was something she already had. Shane was the devil she knew.

Despite this portrayal of Rachel's choice as a self-abandonment, orangefreshy adds:

Like, would you rather be a lottery winner and figure your happiness and fulfillment stuff out later, or work really hard to be fulfilled and maybe never get there? I'm picking the former and figuring out how to be happy with myself later.

This illustrates a deep empathy for Rachel, even though her choice is depicted as less than ideal. Yet, other users constructing this narrative entirely condemn Rachel. For instance, user kackwa adds: "I could never, ever, ever decide to stay with such a jerk wad Mama's boy just for the money. What a miserable existence. The money just wouldn't be worth it." Users frequently relate their deliberations about Rachel to what they would have done in her position.

Rachel is most absolutely condemned in a care-based narrative that positions her as a self-involved, poor communicator. One user shares that they were "frustrated with Rachel's inability to just say what she wanted to say"; meanwhile, user SPFBH argues that Rachel "never communicated any of her concerns or feelings to him prior to the honeymoon," and "had an existential crisis that had nothing to do with him but rather her."

The users deliberating Rachel's choices go to great lengths to justify their assessments. They actively select and interpret details to reframe her story into particular narratives: surviving abuse, abandoning oneself, or social climbing. Across these reconstructed plotlines, Rachel's gender and class background are consistently foregrounded. Her position as a middle-class woman married to a wealthy man is treated as a morally relevant fact, necessary to account for when forming a moral opinion on her actions. Rachel's gender and socioeconomic background seem to hail the audience members to engage their narrative imaginations.

A different example from Season 2 further illustrates how characters with different gender and class backgrounds are subject to varying levels of moral deliberation. Harper and Ethan are a married couple in Season 2 who have middle-class backgrounds and only recently became wealthy through the sale of Ethan's company (S2E1). Throughout the season, they struggle with infidelity and with the loss of intimacy in their relationship, which prompted discussion on Reddit. For instance, user FozziwigChicken highlights one conversation between Ethan and Harper:

When Harper tells Ethan about Cam[eron] getting naked in front of her [Harper] earlier in the day when he was borrowing the swimsuit, Ethan completely dismisses her. She clearly was very upset by this, and it really bothers me that he shows no sympathy or asks any follow up questions....The way he dismisses her and she just shuts down is really heartbreaking to watch, and I think it makes it easier to understand why Harper inevitably cheats.

In this example, FozziwigChicken narrates that Ethan's dismissive treatment of Harper made her emotionally vulnerable, thus shifting some of the moral blame for the state of their relationship from Harper toward Ethan. However, users built opposing narratives surrounding this plotline. Replying to FozziwigChicken, User Staz777 presents a different account of the conversation:

She tells Ethan, he gives his opinion on the matter. They are both adults. What did you want Ethan to do or say? That he will talk to Cam and say it's not cool to do that? Why can't Harper do that? If it bothers

her she could say I don't wanna see that, can you change in your room? That's what I would do. If it was rape, or sexual assault, that would be a completely different situation. In my opinion Harper is 100% the bad guy in this scenario, she judges and projects all the time which already makes her unlikeable, but then she CHEATS???

This user also refers to details of the situation: that Harper and Ethan are both adults, that Harper possesses agency to speak up for herself, and that the situation does not present sexual abuse. However, Staz777 is referring to different aspects of the situation in order to persuade FozziwigChicken of a contrasting and far more negative moral evaluation of Harper.

Each of these comments feeds into two separate narratives which are constructed by the viewers in response to the moral plotline involving Harper and Ethan. In one narrative, users employ care-based reasoning to argue that Harper should be less severely condemned for her act of infidelity, because of Ethan's distant treatment of her and because she cheats in order to regain his attention. In contrast, the second narrative positions Harper as immature and passive-aggressive, lashing out with infidelity, while Ethan is "a typical guy 7 years into his marriage that is experiencing a lull in his sexual attraction to his wife" (according to user julallison). Within the narratives surrounding this plotline, therefore, both characters are subject to attentive care-based reasoning. Although different viewers may empathize with different characters, there is active imaginative work being done towards understanding both perspectives.

The discussions surrounding Portia, another middle-class female character from Season 2, showcase a similar level of enthusiasm on behalf of the audience. Portia is the personal assistant of Tanya, a wealthy guest at The White Lotus hotel in Sicily. Tanya is comically self-centered and repeatedly makes ludicrous requests of Portia. When Portia is separated from Tanya and realizes that Tanya is in danger at the hands of the Italian mafia, she follows another character's advice to stay out of the situation, and leaves Sicily as quickly as possible. In the meantime, Tanya ends up dead after a scuffle with those who are conspiring to obtain her fortune (S2E7).

Users debated this decision made by Portia, again constructing different narratives about her character and about the relationship between her and Tanya. For example, user Ok-Feeling-9552 lays out Portia's vulnerabilities, emphasizing why it is important to understand and forgive Portia's abandonment of Tanya:

If someone held you hostage in a foreign country then emphasized not to mess with the wrong people would you have reacted differently? Portia is in her 20s and didn't expect to be in this situation in the first place. She's vulnerable completely. The best scenario is for her to lay low, get back to the States, and then make moves to find out what is happening and how to help bring it to an end.

Ok-Feeling-9552 and other users employ care-based reasoning to justify their willingness to forgive Portia. This contrasts with the way that users engaged with Tanya in this plotline. The tone of the series is particularly sardonic when it comes to Tanya: She is selfish, stupid, and easily manipulated, but what kills her in the end is her own incompetence. Despite this, the series takes time to show us Tanya in moments of emotional distress that could invite viewers to feel sympathy for her. Yet any care-based moral reasoning in defense of Tanya is notably absent from the Reddit discussions. The only deliberation from users that positions Tanya as morally right in this situation stems from rule-based reasoning. User Jdubshack, for instance, writes:

Agree that Tanya is meant to be a diva/self-centered character, but you [referring to other users] act as though Portia was on vacation and was being oppressed by an evil ogre. Portia was paid to be there. Her job was to do whatever Tanya wanted. She was probably paid pretty well. And as part of her job, she was flown to Sicily and stayed on a 5 star resort and all things considered, was given a pretty generous amount of autonomy.

This user emphasized the professional aspect of the relationship between Tanya and Portia, framing their interactions as the exchange of services for money—a fulfillment of duty, as Gilligan and Attanucci (1988) describe rule-based reasoning, but nothing more. Users formulate no positive care-based moral evaluations towards Tanya, despite the fact that she ends up dead after being manipulated and pursued by men conspiring to steal her fortune. Again, we see a reluctance on the part of the users to engage their empathy and narrative imagination with the upper-class characters.

As we have shown so far, characters who are female and have a middle-class background—and whose identity as such is foregrounded within their plotlines—receive an extreme amount of invested, care-based reasoning. Characters like Harper and Ethan also receive care-based reasoning, though it is somewhat less extensive. Wealthy female characters, like Tanya, do receive some empathy from viewers, but are mostly found defensible through rule-based reasoning only. Finally, we reach the group of characters who receive the least investment and empathy from users: the wealthy men.

Three patterns stand out concerning users' engagement with the moral plotlines of the wealthy male characters. Users either morally condemn these characters without providing any explanation, ignore their plotlines entirely, or even use their gender and class status as justifications in themselves for a negative moral assessment. Firstly, some of the wealthy male characters are condemned by the users without any justification whatsoever. For example, Cameron is a wealthy, successful businessman from Season 2. His relationship with his wife Daphne is joyful on the surface, but Daphne knows that Cameron has been cheating on her with various people for years (S2E5). User heyguysitsmerob describes Cameron as “obviously a horrible person”; to user ahsah, he is a “sociopathic narcissist”; for user AltonIllinois, “Cameron is a monster”; and according to user Fogofit24, Cameron “is just a dog.” Of course, individual users do vary in how much time and energy they invest in explaining their thoughts, no matter which character they are discussing. But this overall pattern suggests that male upper-class characters such as Cameron may be perceived as so utterly bad that no explanation is needed; when other users read that Cameron is “obviously a horrible person,” they will immediately understand.

The second remarkable aspect of users' engagement with these wealthy male characters is, in fact, a reluctance or refusal to engage at all. In the case of Cameron, his character is depicted as despicable, effectively inviting users to dislike him, which they do. However, some plotlines do present wealthy male characters in a more favorable light. One such plotline involves the visiting Mossbacher family's father Marc and son Quinn. Marc's storyline, though comedic, involves him desperately trying to be a better father to his son. Quinn's storyline showcases the young man's loneliness and highlights his profound joy at finding companionship with a group of indigenous Hawaiian men. Marc and Quinn are both portrayed as deeply human, with complex inner struggles that invite the viewer to ponder them a little longer. Despite this, neither of their plotlines stimulated substantial discussion on Reddit. This lack of engagement implies that users are not interested in exercising narrative imagination towards these two characters. Again, the pattern indicates that users are reluctant to morally identify with the male, upper-class characters.

The third remarkable aspect of the audience's engagement with these wealthy male characters, using their position against them, can be illustrated by the plotline of Shane and Armond from Season 1. Users do engage in care-based deliberation to morally condemn Shane for his actions against Armond. What stands out, however, is that some users used Shane's upper-class male identity as part of their justification of his behavior as morally bad. For instance, user gnarrcan states: "My issue was Shane is a Uber rich dude who decided to like destroy [Armond's] life [because] he fucked up and tried to cover his ass." User Flaky_Efficiency_842 argues that Armond's retaliations were "not an excuse for Shane's self-absorbed, spoiled rich-guy behavior or lack of ability to see other people as less than existing for his own purposes." Within their justifications, both of these users rely on their readers' understanding that "rich-guy behavior" is inherently bad. User Designer_Curve echoes this sentiment as they write:

Literally the point is that bad things happen because of who he is and how he acts. You think if it wasn't the room he wouldn't have found another way to be a pompous nightmare and make sure everything was about him feeling special at every moment?....There is no pleasing people like this. Everything exists to serve them and the more it's fed the hungrier and more disgusting and entitled it becomes.

Shane's upper-class status even prompts viewers to speculate about his motivations, as in this comment by Salty-Rip-4010: "Even if he was right about the room, Shane wasn't pointing it out because he actually wanted the extra plunge pool, as Arnaud [Armond] said, he just wanted to feel special/exercise his power over Arnaud [Armond]." According to the moral content analysis, there is no direct indication in the show that this is the case; this is the user's inference. While Shane's actions do play a role in the users' moral condemnation, his status as an upper-class man substantially shapes the viewers' perception of his actions, motivations, and general moral character.

6. Conclusion

In their discussions, Reddit users consistently take up *The White Lotus* producers' invitation to engage in moral deliberation. Interestingly, they engage in less empathetic moral deliberation with the wealthy male characters than with the other characters. Although the users do condemn wealthy male characters, they only find them defensible through rule-based reasoning, rarely engage in moral deliberation from their perspective, and attribute them with little to no moral responsibility. Furthermore, upper-class men were often morally evaluated without justification, and two key plotlines which do invite empathy and engagement with the narrative imagination towards this type of character were generally ignored by users. Our results point to a connection between the viewers' capacity to empathize with the characters and their willingness to engage in moral deliberation. Identity markers such as class and gender impact the users' readiness to put themselves in the character's shoes and experience the story from their point of view. This corresponds to previous research about class resentment and stereotypes: The view of upper-class individuals as cold and exploitative effectively discourages audience members from feeling empathy for them (Bastian et al., 2011; Sainz, Martínez, Moya, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019; Sainz, Martínez, Rodríguez-Bailón, & Moya, 2019). Class functions here as a moral and cultural issue rather than an economic or structural one (Wood & Skeggs, 2008). The same can be said of the characters' gender; viewers are more easily inclined to empathize with the female characters.

Hence, it seems TV fiction can evoke moral deliberation amongst its viewers only when this narrative offers the opportunity to develop empathy for those characters entangled in the moral situations. Moral deliberation is vital to develop one's moral imagination: the capacity to recognize a situation as moral, to understand the different courses of action, while taking into account the feelings and consequences for all involved. A rich moral imagination is believed to contribute to decreasing pain and suffering at large (Nussbaum, 2001). Though this obviously overstates the relevance of this study, we do feel this study does contribute to understanding a little more about how TV contributes to viewers' moral imaginations.

One limitation of this study is its initial focus on class as the main relevant factor to moral deliberation in the context of *The White Lotus*. In the analysis, the characters' gender proved to be an equally crucial element. Considering that care-based moral deliberation is largely considered a feminine behavior (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988), it is unsurprising that male characters should be held less morally responsible than their female counterparts. Still, we want to highlight the fact that accounting for both gender and class was necessary for interpreting our results. Furthermore, it is possible that other factors, such as characters' age or ethnicity, are relevant to viewers' moral engagement. Though these dimensions did not emerge in this analysis, our results point to the importance of a well-considered intersectional approach. Taking an intersectional approach from the start would clearly be beneficial in future research on morality in TV.

The patterns in the users' moral deliberations were consistent throughout our results, yet, it is important to consider how the style and moral themes of the TV show influence viewers' conclusions. In the future, it would be valuable to carry out more studies using naturally occurring social media data in response to other TV shows of different genres. For instance, *The White Lotus* is satirical and cynical in tone and deliberately invites viewers to engage their narrative imagination. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the discussions involve condemning the characters, or assessing who is the least worst. Other genres of TV shows, ones that do not aim to trigger the imagination per se, should be examined in order to understand how class and gender can intersect with moral evaluations in other contexts.

Furthermore, the discussions on Reddit are shaped by the affordances that the platform provides to users and communities (Proferes et al., 2021). In the future, it would be valuable to look at how moral evaluations are constructed on other social media platforms. This could provide a more nuanced understanding of how online communities reflect on the moral content of TV.

A final major limitation of this study is that because of the online, anonymized nature of the discussions, it is impossible to know more about the individuals behind the usernames. The results show that users make connections between their own lives—the reality they perceive in the world around them—and the content of this TV show. Knowing the position that these people hold in their offline lives could therefore yield valuable insights as to how different audience members interact with this socially engaged media content. Moreover, getting insight into relevant identity markers such as gender, age, and class would potentially lead to a deeper insight into viewers' moral engagement with characters. In the future, cross-analyzing users' moral evaluations with their own gender and class, for instance, could yield insight as to whether users are engaging most with those characters who share their traits, or activating their narrative imagination to understand how people different from themselves move through the world.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

Data can be shared upon reasonable request.

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