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A Study of Moral Values and Scoundrels in Jane Austen’s *Pride & Prejudice* and *Sense & Sensibility*

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Introduction

Jane Austen was firmly rooted in her own society, a world ruled by clear and strict regulations of conduct and decorum far removed from our complex world. Yet her wit continues to appeal to new readers, even if it might be on a more superficial level. However, this essay argues that there is a different appeal under the surface. Her novels are sharp studies of human character and have a clear moral vision, which goes beyond Austen’s time and place. Furthermore, her seemingly so well-ordered society turns out to be full of false, deceptive appearances and her heroes and heroines suffer confusion just as much as her modern readers. She is able to display this well because of her ability to render character. According to Kenneth L. Moler, her strengths lie “in probing character, in analysing personal relationships, in studying the complex and intriguing business of the moral life” (6). It is this universality that makes her novels a worthwhile study, with dilemmas relevant to young readers.

This essay proposes a focus on Jane Austen’s moral vision through two of her male scoundrels, namely George Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and John Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). These men are handsome, well-mannered and well-liked, not only in society but also by the heroines. Yet the reasons why they are scoundrels are revealed with acts of selfishness, falseness and ruthlessness. The essay argues that Austen’s way of developing the scoundrels enables her to prove a point of morality to her readers, showing us the danger of trusting first impressions and appearances, warning us against the deceptive evil which presents itself disguised in charm and respectability. Thus she guides her readers towards a clearer vision of true worth and good morals – such as honesty and consideration for others – in a way that may be discussed and appreciated by young people of today.

It is therefore important to analyse the characters when reading these two novels. Most critics focus on the heroines and heroes, and this may also be the case for teachers in Swedish upper-secondary classes. In doing so, they are forgetting this goldmine of moral guidance.
Not only could a study of the scoundrels form a basis for learning about Austen’s novels and her society, it could also make young readers consider their own values. Therefore, this approach can make the novels more interesting, something that students do not often think about literary classics.

The essay is structured into three chapters. The first two will each deal with one of the scoundrels, and these chapters will be divided into three parts. Firstly, the positive first impressions of the scoundrels will be presented with all their good manners of Austen’s false image. This is followed by the revelation of their true characters. Here, their lack of morals will be presented and it will be shown why they should be called scoundrels. Finally, we will deal with the parts in the novels where the scoundrels are judged by the other characters and the author. The second chapter will also provide a suggestion on how to rank the two scoundrels in terms of wickedness. However, I have chosen not to discuss the novels and the scoundrels chronologically, for two reasons. Firstly, Willoughby is more complex than Wickham, and it is reasonable to start off with the less complex scoundrel. Secondly, *Pride and Prejudice* was written before *Sense and Sensibility*, but was released afterwards. Thus, the publication dates are not significant for the purpose of this essay. Therefore, Wickham will be analysed before Willoughby. The third chapter will focus on didactics, showing how Austen’s characters and moral vision may be conveyed to Swedish upper-secondary students and why we should study her novels, mainly based on the theme of morals.

Most of Austen’s critics focus on other questions. There are critics that handle the issue of morals in her novels, but not many see it as the most important thing to discuss. Some of them, such as Tony Tanner and Andrew H. Wright, discuss the scoundrels and their lack of morals, even though they do not focus on that topic and these two particular characters. This essay focuses entirely on the moral aspects of two of Jane Austen’s scoundrels, Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* and Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*, and furthermore suggests a
model showing how teachers can apply the findings of this analysis in a classroom situation.

In this way it differs from previous work in the academic field.
The Sly Soldier: George Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*

This chapter will deal with George Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*. At first we will see how Jane Austen portrays Wickham as a popular and well-liked member of society in the first part of the novel. This will be followed by the revelation of Wickham’s true character in the second part of the novel. We will see different aspects of his lack of morals, based on his actions and their effects on the other characters. These aspects will be important in the third part when analysing how the scoundrel is punished and/or rewarded for his actions and judged by the characters and the author.

One way of describing this novel is to use the original title, namely *First Impressions*. In the first part, Austen’s description of the men is based on Elizabeth Bennet’s first thoughts when meeting them, assisted by opinions and feelings from the society. They are judged on their manners and appearance, and Elizabeth quickly forms her opinions of people: they are exciting or boring, pleasant or unpleasant. However, as the novel progresses she learns that appearances can be deceptive and that it is important not to rely on first impressions. Let us now look at her first impressions of George Wickham, starting with his family situation and his occupation.

Wickham comes from a respectable family and his father was the steward of the estates of Pemberly. He and the father of the novel’s hero, Mr. Darcy, had a great friendship and their sons have known each other for a long time. When Wickham became an orphan the Darcy family meant to provide for him. However, we learn that Darcy refuses to give Wickham the help that his father intended for him. Wickham, who no longer wanted to study to become a clergyman and enter the ministry, instead became a military officer: a very respectable occupation and the perfect solution for him. According to Tim Fulford, a man without property could enter the military and conceal his true personality in a military uniform that automatically gave him respectable social status (157).
However, it takes more than that to charm the society of Meryton, and good looks can also be useful. Luckily for Wickham, he is blessed with them. When he is introduced in the plot, the readers learn the first positive quality he possesses, his appearance, before his name is even mentioned. This is further developed: “His appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address” (71). No one seems to match his looks, which is made clear during a dinner party: “The officers of the –shire were in general a very creditable, gentlemanlike set . . . but Mr. Wickham was as far beyond them all in person, countenance, air, and walk” (75).

When his attractiveness is combined with good manners, the positive first impression of Wickham becomes even more convincing for both Elizabeth and the readers. He appears as a gentleman who will not take revenge even when encouraged to do so. When Elizabeth argues that Mr. Darcy deserves to be publically disgraced, Wickham tells her: “‘Some time or other he will be – but it shall not be by me. Till I can forget his father, I can never defy or expose him.’ Elizabeth honoured him for such feelings” (78). However, it is important to realise that he is not well-liked by all. There are characters that either suspect (for example Elizabeth’s sister Jane) or openly argue (Miss Bingley) that Wickham should not be trusted.

Another powerful aspect is his verbal abilities. His good manners are mostly portrayed in his conversations with Elizabeth in the first part of the novel. In fact, we see little of his actions, so his linguistic ability becomes the main method for Jane Austen to render the character. As Reuben A. Brower points out, the dialogue “is dramatic in the sense of defining characters through the way they speak and are spoken about” (172). Not only is Wickham noble in his words; his manners and linguistic skills make Elizabeth “feel that the commonest, dullest, most threadbare topic might be rendered interesting”, a quality that not so many seem to have (75). This is one of the signs that we are dealing with a very intelligent man.
Wickham’s manners, looks and intellect make him gain credibility and sympathy from the person he talks to. This complete stranger can talk to the perceptive Elizabeth and present himself as a victim and Mr. Darcy as a scoundrel. Elizabeth accepts his story completely and motivates her trust to her sister, Jane, by his verisimilitude: “names, facts, every thing mentioned without ceremony” and his obvious sincerity: “there was truth in his looks” (85). Thus, she not only affirms her first impressions of him but also sympathizes with him. Wickham is able to make her believe in him because he knows how to make himself even more interesting and how to use his personal assets so that he can turn every opportunity into an advantage for himself.

The narrator sums up all these positive impressions of Wickham: “his manners recommended him to every body. Whatever he said, was said well; and whatever he did, done gracefully.” (82). He is displayed as the hero: the well-mannered gentleman, likeable and loveable. However, as the story progresses, we realise that the truth about him is not as pretty as his face. In the second part of the novel we find that Jane Austen has, on purpose, left out his true character in the beginning. Now, we are gradually made aware of his falsehood.

The first time we are introduced to the real Wickham is when Elizabeth reads the letter given to her by Mr. Darcy. Here we find out about some of Wickham’s faults; for example, the reason why Darcy stopped providing for Wickham is now revealed. The truth is that he contacted Darcy, explained his intention to study the law and asked for money for his studies. He received £3000, a substantial sum at the time. Three years later, he wrote a letter to Darcy stating that he had no intention of continuing his studies and asked for more money. Darcy refused, and this lead to Wickham’s slander of him to Elizabeth and the whole community. Finally, Wickham tried to elope with Darcy’s fifteen-year-old sister in order to acquire her fortune and, in part, to get even with her brother.
At first, Elizabeth does not believe Mr. Darcy, but after repeatedly reading the letter she sees the truth in his story. Regarding Wickham’s confidences, she is “struck with the impropriety of such communications to a stranger“, and sees “the inconsistency of his professions with his conduct” (200). Now she realises that she has been completely mistaken and cannot understand why she did not see this all along. The mistakes of judgement on Elizabeth’s part demonstrate how easy it is for an intelligent and unscrupulous man to mislead and exploit whomever he chooses.

He is able to deceive us all thanks to Jane Austen’s subtle presentation of his character and the heroine’s prejudiced point of view. Even though there are hints of the truth, neither Elizabeth nor the readers can see through the layer of first impressions. John Odmark argues that she is deceived thanks to Wickham’s capability of taking on the role as man filled with every needed virtue (11). According to Andrew H. Wright, the credible portrayal of the character also makes him the most dangerous and evil of all Austen’s male scoundrels, because “he is handsome, persuasive, personable; disingenuous, calculating and dishonourable” (125). However, the debate about who is the worst villain must be postponed: there is more immoral truth about Wickham to be revealed.

In Darcy’s letter we become aware of the financial aspect which seems to be the dominant concern of Wickham’s life. He wants more money from Darcy even after receiving the £3000. We can only assume that he is wasteful with the money first given to him and uses it for his own amusement. Later on, when Wickham has left for a new military assignment in Brighton, Elizabeth learns that he is more than a thousand pounds in debt to his fellow officers, as well as to tradesmen in Meryton. His irresponsibility is shown in the amounts of money that he has wasted and his love of money turns him into a mercenary figure. The importance of money is a very dynamic issue in Austen’s society, and Wickham wants it so badly that he does not
care how he gets it. Unfortunately, we learn that trying to get money from Darcy a second
time is not enough.

His need for money also governs his matrimonial ambition, as we see in the attempted
elopement with Darcy’s sister, in order to obtain her fortune. His failure does not discourage
him, however. Right before reading Darcy’s letter, Elizabeth learns that he is courting Miss
King, who recently inherited a small fortune. She initially accepts this since she realises that
the financial aspect is important in a marriage, but after Darcy’s letter she realises that
Wickham’s “attentions to Miss King were now the consequence of views solely and hatefully
mercenary; and the mediocrity of her fortune proved no longer the moderation of his wishes,
but his eagerness to grasp at any thing” (201). It is acceptable to marry a wealthy woman for
love, but since his only object is money his attempt is indeed immoral.

After realising his mercenary ambitions, the readers are surprised when Wickham elopes
with Elizabeth’s young sister, Lydia. As Elizabeth says to Mr. Darcy: “She has no money, no
connections, nothing that can tempt him to”, meaning that Wickham has nothing to gain from
marrying Lydia. This can apparently take a nasty turn for her and the family, which is stated
in the continuation of this conversation: “she is lost for ever” (263-264). How can she be lost
and, if this is true, why should Wickham be blamed? The answer can be found if we look
back on his abilities and faults and place them in the context of society.

Once again, his manners and good looks have gained the attention of a young girl, blinding
her. Lydia agrees to run away with him and expects a speedy marriage, as was the custom in
society when there was an elopement. This does not sound so dangerous at first; however,
Martin Amis explains: “Should she neglect the wedlock end of it, however, the woman will
face an isolation far more thoroughgoing than . . . ostracism”, meaning that the girl will be an
outcast in society without marriage (87). Furthermore, the reputation of her family will endure
a severe blow. No one will respect them; no one will even marry any of the other daughters. It
would not matter that Lydia was deceived by false intentions or that the family had nothing to do with her decision. This scandal would be an enormous social tragedy for the family. Apparently, the worst tragedy of them all: society’s opinion of the elopement is made clear through Mr. Collins: “The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison of this”, and he recommends the family to relinquish all bonds with their daughter to save themselves from the shame (281-282). Death and lost family members seem like a happy solution if the alternative is a bad reputation.

However, the family is well aware that Wickham has no intention of marrying Lydia, and so are the readers. So, why does Wickham seduce her, knowing that by doing so he would ruin not only her but also her family’s reputation? It must be concluded that he does not care that his actions will destroy the family that has received him with kindness and trust. In this case, personal pleasure is the only objective. As Allison G. Sulloway puts it, he is an “egotistical seducer” who appears as a true gentleman both in appearance and conduct “but who promises nothing” (27). The selfishness and total disregard of other people is what makes him so dangerous to the other characters.

His elopement with Lydia reflects his sexual drive, making him even more dangerous. His pursuit of sexual satisfaction makes him one of Austen’s most wicked scoundrels. Alice Chandler discusses sex as an overlooked topic in Austen’s novels which in fact tells us a great deal about her society’s values and the individual’s moral development (390). This clearly applies to Wickham’s characterisation as a villain: his self-indulgence reveals his lack of values and maturity. In addition, D.W Harding argues that Austen’s “treatment of sexual attraction is in line with her general view that strong impulses and intensely emotional states should be regulated and controlled”, something that Wickham certainly does not (75).

Sexual satisfaction is one thing; but unlike Mr. Darcy, Wickham seems to lack the capability of falling in love, whether it is because he does not want to or is not able to.
Nevertheless, it is clear that he does not love Lydia. Shortly after their marriage, Mr and Mrs. Wickham return to meet her family. It is evident (and not surprising) to Elizabeth that only one of them is truly and happily in love: “Wickham’s affection for Lydia, was just what Elizabeth had expected to find it; not equal to Lydia’s for him . . . their elopement had been brought on by the strength of her love, rather than by his” (301). The fact that he does not fall in love, whether it depends on decision or incapability, relates to his original intentions and the events in the novel and this makes his lack of love part of the pattern of a scoundrel.

Wickham is probably aware of the fact that the family he married into reacted with horror when he eloped with Lydia. However, he does not stop playing the role of a gentleman after his marriage, which can be seen as hypocrisy and another sign of his bad character. If Elizabeth had not realised his wicked ways before the marriage, “his smiles and his easy address, while he claimed their [his and Lydia’s] relationship, would have delighted them all” (299). One could say that he simply does not realise what he has caused, but it is more likely that he knows that his actions are despicable but does not care about it. Either way, he does not seem to feel that he has done something wrong, since he never asks the people he has treated badly to forgive him. We are not given any hint of him realising his wrongdoing in the novel. Logically, it would be out of character for him to apologise to his victims, so the readers are left with the impression that this cold-hearted man will live the rest of his life without ever doing so.

Since Wickham is immoral in so many ways, it is worthwhile to find out about the personal consequences of his actions. Surprisingly, he seems to be rewarded rather than punished. First and foremost, he is given a large sum of money for his marriage with Lydia and, as we remember, money is very important to him. Not only does he receive money thanks to his marriage, his debts to military officers and tradesmen are also paid by Darcy. This shows the unfairness of the world: his lack of morals is mainly driven by his pursuit of money, and now
we assume that he will never have to worry about receiving more. The seduction of Lydia turns into a financial reward for him. Furthermore, we have already seen the scoundrel exploit Darcy over and over again. Now that he and Darcy have married into the same family, Wickham gains continued protection. History is repeating itself: he used Darcy for personal, financial and social gain. In the end, fate has given him another chance to take advantage of the novel’s hero.

He is given money and protection from Darcy, but he is forced to live his life with someone that he neither loves nor respects, which can be seen as a punishment. However, punishments are supposed to make a man suffer for what he has done. Is that the case with Wickham? It does not seem like it: a loveless life need not trouble a loveless man. It would be easy for the readers to claim that it would be an empty life, but we get the feeling that Wickham is content with the situation and there are no signs that proves that he suffers. In that respect, we can not consider him to be punished.

However, he is judged for his actions. First of all, it is important to mention that there is only one family member, besides Lydia, that actually likes Wickham at the end. Mrs. Bennet is horrified by the elopement and condemns Wickham more than the rest of the family, but when she gets the news about the marriage she no longer cares about the past: “This is delightful indeed! – She will be married! . . . How I long to see her! and to see dear Wickham too! . . . Mrs. Wickham! How well it sounds” (289-290). The mother’s opinion of him changes thanks to this socially accepted agreement and she seems to be the only family member that does not look at the situation soberly. The rest of the family still see Wickham for who he really is and condemn him for it.

The people of Meryton share the family’s opinion, even though they still would have ostracized the family had the marriage not occurred. They are now aware of Wickham’s true character and “declared that he was the wickedest young man in the world; and every body
began to find out, that they had always distrusted the appearance of his goodness” (280).

Austen’s irony illuminates a society fooled by appearances and unwilling to admit mistakes. However, does society, like Mrs. Bennet, forgive Wickham after the marriage? We are never told, but we may assume that they do. After all, he is now married into a respected family and will probably be well received. So, not only is society unwilling to admit a mistake, its judgment is based on social ranking rather than the lack of morals: therefore, he cannot be wicked if he is married. Austen’s portrayal of this hypocritical society tells us what she thought of its views on conduct; and this leads us towards her judgement.

Wickham is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. He uses his looks and manners to establish himself as a gentleman and is able to fool a society that seems incapable of seeing the truth: that he is a dishonest, immoral and selfish man who uses others to achieve success. Clearly to Austen, good manners are not the same as good morals, and she shows it with the development of his character. This brings us back to first impressions, since there is a reason why Wickham is so well liked by the majority of the characters and the readers at the beginning: because Wickham, like all immoral humans in Austen’s life “were tolerated, accepted, comfortably ensconced in the only human society she knew”. She describes a society deceived by first impressions and manners, and she considered the wicked people in her novels to be “society’s embarrassing unconscious comment on itself” (Harding 14).

Some readers might say that Wickham does not get judged at all, because he does not seem to be punished in the novel. However, this shows a disregard of one of Austen’s main concerns. The novel could not have a happy ending if Wickham did not marry Lydia and secure an income for the rest of his life, since Lydia (and her family) would not be respected in society without the marriage (Teachman 99). Thus, Elizabeth’s marriage with Mr. Darcy would not have been possible since the focus would have been on the Bennets’ lost reputation rather than the victory of true love. Moreover, Austen believes that punishing the scoundrel is
not as important as judging him. Instead, she “concerned herself with the ‘rules of good
manners and politeness’ and not with questions concerning ‘the laws of justice’” (Tanner 12).

Therefore, the focus should be on Wickham’s intentions and the fact that he is allowed to
be immoral (and be rewarded for it) because of the blind acceptance of personal charm and a
pleasurable appearance. This is the measuring stick that Jane Austen uses when judging him.
George Wickham is without a doubt the novel’s scoundrel, reflecting the lack of morals that
Austen tries to guide her readers away from. He is constructed as a warning of the danger of
trusting charm and looks. Austen tells us that if we are cautious and rational in our judgment
of others, we will realise that actions speak more clearly than words and manners when
finding out about a person’s principles. With all this in mind, the time has come to compare
Wickham with another scoundrel: John Willoughby from Sense and Sensibility. Does his
character also provide the lesson that Austen wants her readers to learn when reading Pride
and Prejudice? Chapter 2 holds the answer.
The Regretful Rake: John Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*

John Willoughby and his lack of morals is the topic of this chapter. It will be structured in the same way as the previous chapter: the positive first impression of Willoughby, the revelation of his true character, the effects of his actions and the judgment of others. These aspects will be compared with the previous findings on George Wickham, and the chapter will finish with a suggestion for two ways of ranking them based on their wickedness. This chapter will also take a stand, based on the rankings, and decide on the worst scoundrel.

In terms of the uncertainty of first impressions, *Sense and Sensibility* is not different from *Pride and Prejudice*. The first impressions of Willoughby from the heroine are assisted by opinions from others. He seems perfect but is later revealed to be wicked. At the beginning, Willoughby is portrayed as the most admirable of the novel’s male characters, but what can we tell about the first impressions of him? Let us find out, starting with family and economy.

Both Wickham and Willoughby are orphans. However, Willoughby has someone within his own bloodline that can provide for him. His wealthy aunt endows him with money and he is to inherit her fortune. In addition, he has an estate of his own. Because of this, money never seems to be an object for him even though there is “no reason to believe him rich” (*Sense and Sensibility* 72). He lives beyond his means and is able to do so thanks to his aunt.

Like Wickham, John Willoughby is good-looking. Furthermore, Willoughby is introduced in the same fashion as Wickham: readers learn about his appearance before they learn his name. This shows us that Austen stresses the importance of being handsome when it comes to positive first impressions. When he is introduced in the novel, he helps the injured Marianne back home, and her family looks at him “with an evident wonder and a secret admiration . . . sprung from his appearance” and his “manly beauty . . . were instantly the theme of general admiration” (44). However, looks are not the only thing that makes him admirable.
His manners are another thing that he has in common with Wickham. Willoughby is considered as a respectable and well-behaved gentleman. We see this when he carries the injured Marianne through the mud and rain. Furthermore, he declines to take a seat in her house because of his wet clothes, but he asks permission to return the next day (44). Society sees Willoughby as a fine gentleman because of his manners: Sir John Middleton calls him “as good a sort of fellow . . . as ever lived” (46).

Wickham and Willoughby are both well-liked. However, Willoughby seems to be the more likable of the two. No one has anything negative to say about him; no one expresses doubt as in *Pride and Prejudice*. This is interesting since his personality seems to be unknown. When Sir John is asked about Willoughby’s abilities, he admits that he is unaware of these things (45), and the silly Mrs. Palmer says “I know him extremely well . . . Not that I ever spoke to him indeed; but I have seen him for ever in town”, and she seems to believe that he is the most likeable man in every visited place (111-112). It must be concluded that everyone likes him because of his social position, manners and appearance.

Willoughby seems to appreciate the social life (much more than Wickham), and this makes Marianne’s first impression of him even more pleasurable. She admires him for his cultural taste and creativity, something that they seem to share. They read poetry together, they sing and make music together and seem to like the same aesthetic creations. In short; he is “exactly formed to engage Marianne’s heart” thanks to his manners, looks and cultural taste (50).

Like Wickham, he possesses great verbal ability. Willoughby is “smooth of tongue and shows an effortless mastery of the appropriate persuasive modes of talking” (Tanner 93). Just like Wickham, he uses his smooth tongue not only in conversations but also to slander another person. Willoughby’s target is Colonel Brandon. In the episode where Brandon has to leave a party, Willoughby mocks his departure and tells Marianne that he believes that the letter which called him away was written by Brandon himself, as an excuse for getting out of this
“party of pleasure”, and Marianne obviously agrees (65-66). This ridicule will prove particularly malicious when the reason for Brandon’s departure is later revealed.

At the beginning, readers might think more highly of Willoughby than Wickham. The possible explanation is that we actually get to see him perform a heroic act: the rescue of the injured Marianne. This event makes her compare him with her own thoughts of “the hero of a favourite story” (44-45), and Marvin Mudrick claims that saving the damsel in distress is enough to make her family and the readers think more highly of Willoughby (102).

Once again, we are faced with a young man with good looks and manners, this time combined with a cultural interest and the aura of a romantic hero. His courtship of Marianne is perfect in every way except for the omission of proposal of marriage, but everyone believes in an understanding between them. Willoughby is presented so that everything that he feels and does can be interpreted as virtues, something we can say about Wickham as well (Berger 532). However, as we might suspect after reading about Wickham, the coming revelation of Willoughby’s true character is neither great nor romantic. Seemingly, Jane Austen often deceives her readers at the beginning of her novels, showing her concern with the uncertainty of first impressions. Some critics see Austen’s male characters as being either black or white at heart, and Gilbert Ryle discusses this perspective. In addition, he claims that all of Austen’s characters either have or lack qualities such as “moral sense, sense of duty, good sense”, meaning that every character either has good or bad morals (120). Wickham and Willoughby display positive qualities but later their true colours emerge and we realise that they cannot be trusted because of their lack of morals. It is time to find out how black at heart John Willoughby is.

Willoughby’s transformation begins when he leaves Marianne and she does not hear from him. In the first part of the novel he courts Marianne intensively and all the signs indicate that he intends to marry her. Then suddenly he is cold and distant and he tells her that he has to
leave for London. Even though he promises to return and the devastated Marianne still believes in him, we start to feel that something is not right. When an opportunity appears for the sisters to visit London, they travel there. However, Marianne still does not hear from him even though she sends him several letters to let him know that she is in London. At one point they see Willoughby at a party. He does everything he can to avoid them, but a conversation between them is inevitable. However, he is cold and distant towards Marianne; he snubs her in public, humiliates her, and walks away without having said much at all. After the party, he finally responds to her in a cruel letter, stating that he never wanted to be with her since he is about to be engaged to Miss Grey.

We now learn that Willoughby has even more in common with Wickham: he, too, is dishonest and deceitful. As with Wickham, someone with a beautiful exterior displays an egotistic interior and the readers are not (fully) aware of Willoughby’s treacherous ways before they are suddenly, and painfully, obvious to them. Yet, the deception in Sense and Sensibility seems more obscured than in Pride and Prejudice. Obviously Willoughby’s deception, just like Wickham’s, is concealed by his appearance and his manners. However, it is possible that the rescue of Marianne makes it even harder to see beyond his surface, and this might be the reason why it is more difficult to expect the negative revelation.

Unfortunately, his betrayal of Marianne is not the only eye-opener. Colonel Brandon’s sudden departure from the party is now revealed to be a result of Willoughby’s wickedness. Prior to meeting Marianne, he has made Brandon’s 15-year old ward pregnant and then abandoned her. Like Wickham, he seduces a very young girl and furthermore leaves her impoverished and in disgrace. This proves that he is selfish and irresponsible without any regard for others. Paradoxically, he has behaved in the manner that Marianne liked about him (even if this obviously was not what she had in mind): “Whatever be his pursuits, his eagerness in them should know no moderation, and leave him no sense of fatigue” (46). Poor
Marianne, be careful what you wish for! Like Wickham, Willoughby’s sexual drive makes him a man that should not be trusted and he, too, does not control the impulses created by physical attraction.

We become aware that this scandal is the reason for Willoughby’s departure. His aunt was informed of his seduction of Brandon’s ward and when Willoughby refused to marry the girl, she threatened to cut him out of her will. He now wants to mend his fortune by courting and marrying the wealthy Miss Grey. This is another thing that he has in common with Wickham: the pursuit of money. The readers realise that this is the reason why he courts Miss Grey, and the critics agree. Judy Simons (61) and Tanner (85) recognise that he leaves his emotions for others behind, so that he can make a mercenary marriage in order to restore his economy. Money is more important than respecting others, as Mrs. Jennings reminds Elinor and the readers: “when there is plenty of money on one side, and next to none on the other . . . they care no more about such things [to treat a pretty girl well]! . . . nothing in the way of pleasure can ever be given up by the young men of this age” (184).

The results of Willoughby’s actions can be analysed by looking at the physical and psychological marks that he leaves, especially if we look at Marianne’s well-being. She is completely devastated by everything that has happened. Her emotional suffering grows on her, and she cannot eat or sleep because of it. Inevitably, she falls ill and her fever is so severe that she almost dies. Compared to Wickham, the things that Willoughby has done haunt the characters in a very dramatic way. His lack of morals turns into physical consequences.

However, Marianne’s illness affects Willoughby. He rushes to find her when he hears that she is dying, but only finds Elinor, who is reluctant to talk to him. However, a long conversation between the two takes place, showing a couple of surprising aspects about him that neither Elinor nor Marianne nor the readers expect to find. He tries to gain sympathy from Elinor by telling her his side of the story; the truth about his marriage with Miss Grey
and his intentions regarding Marianne. He claims that he was “forced to play the happy lover to another woman” (305). With this, we learn two important facts about this scoundrel that distinguishes him from Wickham in a major way.

Firstly, Willoughby actually has the ability to fall in love. He admits that he did not intend to marry Marianne because of her lack of money and that he did not intend to return her love, but that he never meant to hurt her. He also speaks of his continued attraction to Marianne, a stronger attraction than he had ever felt before: “I did not know the extent of the injury I meditated, because I did not then know what it was to love” (299). She was not just another girl to him, which might come as some relief to the readers.

Secondly, he is also able to feel sorry for the things he has done and the pain he has caused and he does feel remorse. This is obviously why he returns in the first place. He realises what he has done and is deeply saddened by it. He expresses his stupidity and blindness, and claims that he never intended to hurt anyone. Willoughby also asks to be pitied for his situation and the fact that he can never be with Marianne again. Finally, he says something that sums up both his love and his remorse: “Tell her [Marianne] of my misery and my penitence – tell her that my heart was never inconstant to her . . . at this moment she is dearer to me than ever” (307). These things help us differentiate the scoundrels. If Wickham had been in Willoughby’s situation, we would be unlikely to find any sign of remorse or acknowledgment of love.

This might be the biggest difference of all. We have previously mentioned the characters going from good to bad. This is completely true in Wickham’s case. However, after seeing these changes in Willoughby’s character, he becomes more of a mix of both good and bad in our eyes. He truly seems to have a black heart, but then “it turns out that he is only a bit grey at heart” (Ryle 116). Simons agrees, claiming that Willoughby does not “fit in either of the conventional literary roles, romantic hero or vile seducer”, since he is too complex (38).
It is important to acknowledge that Willoughby is rewarded at the end of the novel. Thanks to the marriage with Miss Grey and his remorse towards Marianne, his aunt forgives him. This means that she once again provides for him and makes him her heir. Both scoundrels are therefore financially rewarded. Furthermore, his status in society is also restored and the results of his lack of morals seem less significant, if not forgotten, thanks to his marriage to Miss Grey. Seemingly, the way to economic independence is through selfish, immoral and despicable acts, and the way to restore reputation is to marry a wealthy girl or marry into a wealthy family. This is emphasized by Louis Auchincloss, who claims that Austen “tosses cheap successes to her cheap characters. . . Willoughby can marry a fortune” and “Wickham can be established by the man he tried to ruin” (122). By rewarding her scoundrels, Austen shows her readers that the world is unfair.

Nevertheless, Willoughby can never be with Marianne and is forced to live with someone that he does not love. His wife is a nasty woman, which is shown when he admits that she wrote the cruel letter to Marianne. Like Wickham, a life with someone that he does not love might be considered as his punishment, even though it is important to realise that he too apparently did not live the rest of his life heart-broken or unhappy, but instead “lived to exert, and frequently to enjoy himself” (353). However, we will never know if he stopped thinking of Marianne with regret. Here, we have an interesting conflict. Christopher Gillie claims that the two scoundrels and most of the gentlemen in Austen’s novels that “take life easily and lightly achieve success for themselves, are commonly just those who are shown to be shallowest, least likely to achieve enduring happiness for themselves or for others” (39). In general, Gillie is right. However, we do not get the impression of Wickham and Willoughby being unhappy. On the contrary, they seem content with the situation that fate has brought them.
Does Willoughby’s remorse alter the judgment he is given? Some might say that it does, and it is interesting to see the heroine’s reaction. Elinor cannot forget what he has done but she actually sympathizes with him. In this novel the judgment of the scoundrel seems more focused on society’s responsibility for giving a man a chance to be immoral, something that was not a factor when Wickham was judged. This might be supported by Elinor’s thoughts during Willoughby’s confession:

The world had made him extravagant and vain – Extravagance and vanity had made him cold-hearted and selfish. Vanity, while seeking its own guilty triumph at the expense of another, had involved him in a real attachment, which extravagance, or at least its offspring necessity, had required to be sacrificed.

(308)

Here Austen seems to turn the heroine into her spokesperson: Elinor’s thought on society’s lack of morals proves Austen’s point. The minor human vices encouraged by society (extravagance and vanity) turn into major vices for Willoughby, such as selfishness. Claudia L. Johnson agrees, claiming that Willoughby’s “faults are explicitly related to the corrupt social practices of which he is himself in some senses the victim” (56-57). Even though we must realise that the individual has obligations to fulfil, his personality must surely be influenced by the lack of morals within society. Therefore, Elinor feels sorry for Willoughby, and if we compare with Pride and Prejudice, Elizabeth does not feel the same way about Wickham.

However, society judges Willoughby more harshly at first. As in Pride and Prejudice, the judgment is handled ironically. This time Austen’s satirical approach is underlined by the comments from Mrs. Palmer that Sir John reproduces: “She was determined to drop his acquaintance immediately, and she was very thankful that she had never been acquainted with
him at all” (202-203). As we remember, at the beginning she said that she knew this man very well. On the other hand, Lady Middleton’s reaction to the marriage is that she must leave a card to the new Mrs. Willoughby very soon since she must be a “woman of elegance” (203). Once more, marriage seems to abolish bad reputation and allows bygones to be bygones.

When comparing the novels, Willoughby can be considered more as a victim of the society, while Wickham can be seen more as a product of it. Simons claims that Willoughby’s plea for sympathy is a way for Austen to make the readers see that he has not been given moral guidance and therefore has become the man that he is. This outcome derives from the fact that he was introduced to the good life too early (55). However, it is important to mention that the narrator does not say anything that pardons Willoughby for his actions and lack of morals. Elinor also says to Willoughby that he has demonstrated himself “on the whole, less faulty than I had believed you”, but she still considers him responsible for his actions (307). Elinor’s thoughts about society (quoted above) seem to reflect Austen’s views. In this way, Austen does seem more merciful to Willoughby, but he is not excused for his lack of morals.

To sum up, John Willoughby is a dangerous man and not the romantic hero that he appears to be. Like Wickham, he uses his positive qualities for his own personal enjoyment without caring about others and he is also driven by economic and sexual motives. However, he does feel remorse, has the ability to love and is more affected by the norms of society, something that we cannot say about Wickham. Nevertheless, he still lacks the conduct that Austen guides us towards, which as previously stated is more important than punishment and the results of the actions. This is the same pattern used by Austen to judge Wickham, and that makes Willoughby a scoundrel as well. It tells us the same thing that Austen tells us about Wickham: first impressions can be deceptive and that we must be clear-minded in our judgment.

So, which of the two scoundrels is the worst one? Let us first look at the critics. As shown earlier, they seem to lean towards the less complex Wickham, even though both scoundrels
are aware of the implication of their intentions and the consequences for their victims.

Obviously, we must regard what Austen considered to be most important when debating the lack of morals. Wickham’s faults lie in his intentions and the fact that he does not feel any remorse for the damage that he has caused. When this is the most important perspective, Wickham is undoubtedly the worst scoundrel. Even though Darcy’s intervention ensured the happy ending of the novel, we must not forget Wickham’s original intentions. When analysing the critics, most of them seem to underline Austen’s thoughts: that selfishness, remorselessness and bad intentions are more important to focus on than actions and punishment. In addition, when critics analyse Willoughby they seem to find a factor that somewhat exonerates him: that he is grey at heart and not black, that he is influenced by society or that his complexity makes it impossible to distinguish him as a wicked seducer. No such factor can be found when the critics analyse Wickham.

Nevertheless, it is possible that some readers believe that the scoundrels should be judged in term of their actions and the consequences that they bring. It would be easy to claim that Willoughby is less wicked since he is the only one of them that regrets his actions and admits guilt. However, when comparing the results of his actions to Wickham’s, Willoughby causes more pain for others, both physical and psychological. As a result it would be logical if some readers rank him as the worst scoundrel, especially since his ability to feel pain should have prevented him from causing it, and since his ability to feel love should have made him reluctant to be cruel. The harsh judgment on egoism and cruelty is something that we share with Austen, even if matters such as pre-marital sex is treated and looked upon differently today. Society has changed in many ways since Austen’s days, and there are other economic conditions that govern our lives, for example the situation of women has changed drastically. Thus, this conclusion from those caring more about the results should make them consider Willoughby to be the worst scoundrel.
Even though both conclusions are relevant and worth considering, one has to decide who is the worst of the worst. This essay leans towards the more complex Willoughby, because of the results of his actions. As we remember, Elinor thinks somewhat better of Willoughby after his excuse, and this is a key factor. Even though she still considers Willoughby responsible for his actions, the fact that he was influenced by others seems to reduce his wickedness. Nevertheless, society cannot (or should not) always be blamed for the results of one man’s actions, such as a pregnant and abandoned fifteen-year-old girl, and sometimes an excuse is not enough. Thus, readers might react when Elinor finds a reason that somewhat pardons Willoughby, because “we can hardly forgive Jane Austen” (Wright 101). Frankly, neither can this essay.
Scoundrels and Students: Didactic Suggestions

Not many critics put Jane Austen in a contemporary context or discuss how to teach good morals by reading Austen in the classroom. So how can Austen’s studies of social and individual values be conveyed to young people of today? How can the stories of the two scoundrels and their victims be made relevant and interesting to students living in a different society with different rules and lifestyles? This chapter will convey a didactic perspective on teaching literature, showing why and how teachers could discuss Austen and the theme of morals with Swedish upper-secondary students in English classes.

In general, why should we study literature? Murat Hismanoglu lists four main reasons why it should be included in secondary language studies: authentic language material, language enrichment, cultural enrichment and personal involvement (54). While the first two mainly strive to make the students learn and develop English proficiency, the last two are more important to highlight in literary studies. Cultural enrichment means that the students, when reading, can focus on how English is used in a particular region (54). Personal involvement appears when students are drawn into the novel and can see similarities between themselves and some of the characters. This not only develops language skills, but also a sense of identity (55). The ability to discuss a phenomenon within an English-speaking context and compare it to one’s experiences is one of the requirements of the middle grade, C, in the course “English 6” (Skolverket). In addition to the curriculum and course objectives, it is also motivating and rewarding for students to study English literature.

So why should we study Jane Austen’s novels in general, and the theme of morals in particular? There are two other reasons for reading literature given by Hismanoglu suitable for answering this question: universality and personal relevance. Literature brings us themes that affect humans of all ages and readers are able to relate to those themes, making them more personal (55-56). Students often complain that they want to read newer and more relevant
books. It is up to the teacher to show the students that just because a book was written centuries ago it does not mean that it cannot be up-to-date. Austen’s wit and her studies of characters and society are perfect reasons to read her novels and the theme of morals is particularly suitable for young readers. Our ideas of good or bad morals change over time, but almost all of us have performed and/or been affected by selfish acts and can therefore relate to this theme. As J. B Priestley says: “Consider carefully . . . [the characters of *Pride and Prejudice*], and you will soon discover people not unlike them all around you” (96). Therefore, the universality of this theme is worth focusing on when teaching Jane Austen in the classroom, and her novels are suitable for developing language and knowledge.

This essay will now give examples of how to teach Jane Austen based on the theme of morals and scoundrels. However, it would not be realistic to expect the students to read both novels since the lack of time, the amount of pages and the level of difficulty are obstacles. Therefore, the exercises will be based on extracts from the novels, related to the questions put to the students. There are still ways of teaching Austen in an instructive and enjoyable way without making the students read every single page. Moreover, these novels have been interpreted in several movie versions which can also be used to provide answers and new perspectives for students, so clips from these movies will be included with the extracts from the novels.

This lesson plan is to be carried out in five or six lessons, depending on the length of each lesson, the amount of students in the class and the ability of these students. If each lesson is one hour, students will hopefully have enough time to look though the extracts, clips from the movies as well as completing the tasks and taking part in the discussions. However, it will be a lot of work since there are two novels involved. Therefore, it is important that the teacher makes sure that the work flows smoothly and, at the same time, is open to give the students
more time (more lessons) if necessary. If it takes too much time, the teacher should revise the lesson plan and try another approach in the future.

The exercises will be based on the student-centred model of analysing literature in a secondary language mentioned by Hişmanoğlu, consisting of three levels. The first part is general understanding. Here, questions regarding plot, characters and setting can be answered by referring back to the novel (57). The students can analyse the scoundrels, pointing out the positive and negative qualities they possess. They will read the extracts where Austen introduces them in the plot, since she starts mentioning their positive qualities directly. In addition, some statements made by the narrator about them could be included (such as Willoughby being perfect for Marianne or Wickham being the most handsome of them all). Then, parts from the movies where their true characters are revealed (e.g. Darcy’s letter and Willoughby’s meeting with Marianne in London) could be analysed, as well as other interesting clips that show Wickham’s and Willoughby’s lack of morals. This method can create a writing exercise, where the students should list the negative and positive qualities and compare the scoundrels and make a provisional ranking of them.

When finished with the general understanding, the students will move on to the inferential level, where they should take the author’s perspective (57). However, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to fully analyse Austen’s judgment without finishing both novels. This does not mean that they cannot get any insight at all; students can still see how Austen treats the matter by studying the differences in remorse and the ability to feel love, and how the other characters judge the scoundrels. In addition, it is possible to include textbooks about British literature to find information about Austen and her society. With extracts from the novels where judgment is cast by different characters and information about Jane Austen from textbooks, students can analyse how Austen treats the matter of judgement through her characters. Thus, they learn about Austen and her society, and can answer questions such as
why the scoundrels are rewarded and why society seems to forget the lack of morals when the scoundrel is married. When studying the remorse or remorselessness it is suitable to use clips from the movies, for example the return of Mr. and Mrs. Wickham after their marriage and the final conversation between Elinor and Willoughby. This can be the basis for written and/or oral exercises, and the questions can be about why Wickham seems cold while Willoughby is remorseful and why they both, nevertheless, are scoundrels. When combining this with the findings of judgment, the students will have to motivate their answers based on Austen’s perspective. If the students work in small groups, they will be able to share and compare their conclusions with each other.

It is important to realise that just because students are studying a novel it does not mean that all the answers have to be about the novel itself. This is why it is important to add perspectives of the 21st century. Therefore, the third step is the personal/evaluative level, which should be designed to make the students take new perspectives and create a more personal answer (Hişmanoğlu 57). This step is best carried out in oral exercises such as debates or discussions where the topic would be if the moral views of Austen apply in the 21st century. The students could talk about similarities and differences: which actions would be acceptable today that would not have been accepted in the 18th century and vice versa, when discussing examples such as Wickham’s elopement with Lydia or Willoughby’s ridicule of Brandon. They could also discuss if first impressions influence them as well, for example by talking about appearances; for instance if good looks are required for popularity. Another bullet point could be about the importance of money, since Wickham and Willoughby are financially rewarded for their actions. The teacher could ask “how far are you willing to go to become a millionaire” and give different scenarios where the students had to do something immoral to get hold of that sum, such as marrying someone they do not love or deceiving their best friend. The students would then have to think outside the novels and justify their
personal answer, as well as debating other opinions from their classmates. Furthermore, reflections could be made about how to abolish immoral values in their own society.

Finally, the students can look back at their earlier provisional rankings of the scoundrels and answer if their thoughts have changed after the discussions. As a result, they are required to look back at the facts that they have learned from the novels and combine them with their own thoughts and Austen’s perspective. Thus, all three steps are included in one final task; summing up the moral theme. This can be performed verbally or in writing, perhaps as an examination task (depending on the number of lessons spent on studying Austen).

It is possible to read only one of the two novels and still discuss the theme of morals. In this case, the ranking of the scoundrels must be sacrificed. Nevertheless, this is an alternative if there is not enough time to take on extracts from both novels or if the students cannot handle the level of difficulty. In this case, the most appropriate novel to analyse is *Sense and Sensibility*, since Willoughby is the most complex scoundrel. Basically, the same tasks mentioned above can be used here as well; a list of his abilities and shortcomings (the general understanding), how the other characters judge him (the inferential level) and debates about, for example, first impressions and the importance of money (the personal/evaluative level). Furthermore, it will still be possible to compare the scoundrels, even though they are not ranked. For example, the teacher can explain the characteristics of Wickham before giving them a task about Willoughby, and thus students have the possibility to search for similarities and differences between the scoundrels. Obviously, this is not the most favourable approach when comparing characters from different novels, but it does not mean that it is not worth to focus on at all. It is still possible to analyse the message of morals that Austen wants to teach us about, as well as thinking about the modern values of today. Therefore, this approach is a suitable alternative if it the lesson plan provided would turn out to be too difficult or too time-consuming for students.
Of course, there are many more examples of how to teach Jane Austen based on moral values. Nevertheless, these examples point out the possibility of making the students interested when studying novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. Teachers should not be afraid of focusing on one particular topic (such as morals) when teaching literature. As long as it is a major theme in the novel(s) and is important to the students, many different exercises that are educating and entertaining can be created for the students who wanted to read a contemporary book instead.
Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to show how Jane Austen uses her scoundrels to show the readers the danger of trusting in appearances and first impressions, where evil could present itself disguised in charm and respectability. It was also meant to prove that her guidance towards a clearer vision of good morals could be a great and motivating topic for students learning about literature and Jane Austen in a Swedish upper-secondary class. Thus, factors such as good and bad qualities, behaviour and judgment were important when analysing the scoundrels.

Chapter One dealt with George Wickham. It was shown that this well-liked man uses his charm, looks and social status to trick and use others for personal gain and does not care about the suffering of others. He is a dishonest and selfish man who turns into an economic and emotional villain. This proves that manners and morals are not the same thing and that a sober judgment cannot be made if first impressions are involved. In general, the same things can be said about John Willoughby, who was dealt with in Chapter Two. Both characters display the danger of trusting first impressions and manners alone. However, the comparison also revealed major differences in character, mostly based on the result of their actions. We never see any remorse nor love in Wickham, whereas Willoughby regrets what he has done and the grief he has caused to others. Nevertheless, their lack of morals makes them both scoundrels and Austen uses them as examples to guide her readers towards clear-minded judgment.

There were two unforeseen aspects that became clear as the essay progressed. Firstly, the judgment versus the punishment of the characters was shown not to be of equal importance to Austen. She (rightly) judges both of them harshly and recognises their faults, but both of them are financially rewarded. Thus, punishment is not something that Austen focuses on. Instead, the moral codes are more important since they confirm what is wrong with her society, showing that villains can be villains even if they are not punished legally or mentally.
Secondly, the critics seem to think that Willoughby is less evil than Wickham. In this essay, it has been shown that there are differences between them that could be the basis of different rankings of wickedness. The critics focus on Wickham’s intentions and remorselessness, and even if Austen herself focused mainly on these aspects, it is still logical if some readers think of Willoughby with more disgust since the results of the actions also reflect bad morals and affect other people. Furthermore, opinions on morals change over time. This is why it is important to recognise that there are more perspectives to consider and that it therefore would not be wrong to rank Willoughby as the worst scoundrel, and the essay supports this view.

The third chapter dealt with suggestions of topics and exercises based on Austen’s novels and the theme of morals to make literary classes more exciting for students. By explaining why literature in a secondary language should be studied in general, with reasons such as cultural enrichment and personal relevance, it was shown why we should study Austen’s novels and how to create interesting and educating exercises based on the theme of morals. The goal is to make Austen contemporary with a theme that students can relate to. This motivates them to learn about Austen, her scoundrels and her society, as well as creating an opportunity for them to share personal thoughts.

This essay discusses two of Austen’s most famous novels, analyses and compares Wickham’s and Willoughby’s lack of morals, and moreover it offers a didactic perspective that most critics do not focus on. But Austen’s novels can also provide a greater understanding of our own times and lives. As we remember from the beginning of our journey, her novels are studies of characters and morals, and the universality of the theme of morals ensures that *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* will never be out of date. This is one of the reasons why Jane Austen can be considered to be one of the greatest literary minds of all time.
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