

The Invisible Man Short Guide

The Invisible Man by H. G. Wells

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Contents

The Invisible Man Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	6
Social Sensitivity.....	7
Literary Qualities.....	8
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles/Adaptations.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15

Overview

The Invisible Man is a tale of suspense that focuses on an insane medical student, Griffin, who has discovered how to make people invisible. Because he is mad and invisible, Griffin poses a special threat to the community. He can steal from people and assault them as if he were a ghost. As the police close in on him, he becomes more desperate and more dangerous. A tale of gripping suspense, the novel also offers ample comedy. The townspeople are eccentrics who, in their own peculiar ways, are as strange as Griffin. The humor provided by their odd behavior makes for a wellbalanced novel—not too frightening, not too silly, but always entertaining.

About the Author

By the time he died on August 13, 1946, in London, Herbert George Wells was admired as a prophet and social philosopher who helped shape the modern world. But at his birth on September 21, 1866, in Bromley, Kent, Wells's future seemed likely to be one of little education, low-paying jobs, and anonymity. His father was a professional cricket player and shopkeeper, and his mother a maidservant. From 1874 to 1880, Wells attended Thomas Morley's Commercial Academy. At fourteen he was apprenticed in turn to a draper and a druggist, and he later tried to become a rural schoolteacher. He won a scholarship to the Normal School of Science in 1884, but left in 1887 without obtaining a degree and soon fell severely ill. Underweight, poor, and sickly, his future seemed bleak. In 1891 he married his cousin Isabell Mary Wells, but the marriage soon foundered.

Out of these unhappy experiences emerged Wells's passions for science and social reform. Too sick to pursue regular work, Wells tried writing. In 1891, the *Fortnightly Review* published one of his articles, and he quickly established himself as a promising new writer, even though editors often found his scientific speculations confusing.

The year 1895 was a significant one for Wells—he divorced Isabell, married Amy Catherine Robbins, and saw the publication of his first novel, *The Time Machine*. The novel was a best seller, and Wells's future as a successful novelist was assured, even though he was stung by suggestions that his scientific fantasies were not serious literature.

During the 1890s and early 1900s, Wells wrote the novels for which he is best known to young adult readers: *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *The Invisible Man*, *The War of the Worlds*, *The First Men in the Moon*, and *Food of the Gods*. Although these scientific fantasies were fabulously popular, Wells yearned to be taken more seriously. *Love and Mr. Lewisham*, a novel of social commentary, appeared in 1900, and was enthusiastically received by the critics.

Two other social novels—*Tono-Bungay* (1909) and *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910)—were equally successful. By the start of World War I, Wells's immense popularity and critical reputation made him one of the most powerful men of letters of his day.

Widely regarded as a sage, Wells took his eminence seriously. He devoted most of the last twenty-five years of his life to writing popularizations of science, advocating his evolutionary view of history, and trying to persuade world leaders to abstain from war. In 1933, Wells was elected president of the International Association of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, and Novelists (the PEN clubs). In this capacity, Wells worked to foster international understanding through the PEN clubs of various nations. The rise of Nazism and the coming of World War II disillusioned him. Increasingly cynical as he aged, Wells predicted that only a world-state capable of establishing peace and protecting civil rights could counter the effects of catastrophic world war. Such was

Wells's stature that many regarded his death in 1946 as the end of an era, and believed that the prophet died on the eve of the future he foresaw.

Setting

The action takes place in rural Sussex, England, in the 1890s. The people there are country folk whose concerns focus on their land and the weather. It is winter, and the snow on the ground provides an important method for tracking the Invisible Man; his footprints in the snow can give him away. Griffin spends much of his time in rented rooms above the local tavern, and his secretiveness makes him the object of curiosity and rumor among the tavern-goers.

Social Sensitivity

Wells's portrayals of country people are stereotypical, but not offensively so.

His Sussex natives come off as unintelligent and ignorant, but these characteristics support the novel's comic element. More likely to disturb some readers is the lack of appealing characters in the book and the uncompromising portrait of a society unable to cope with an outsider. No one comes off well in the novel, and Griffin is as much a victim as a villain. The Invisible Man has no characters whose courage or intelligence inspire admiration. The book does, however, teach that true maturation involves learning to deal with destructive desires.



Literary Qualities

A dark comedy, *The Invisible Man* has attained the stature of a modern myth in part because it addresses fundamental problems of Western civilization.

What price should people pay for knowledge? How much knowledge is too much? Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe addressed these questions in *The Tragedy of Doctor Faustus* (1592), in which a learned man sells his soul to the Devil in exchange for unlimited knowledge. Faustus uses his new powers for self-gratification. Having the knowledge of the universe at his command, he merely satisfies his animal desires. At the end, he despairs of salvation, having wasted his native intellectual powers.

The character Faust reappears in many forms after Marlowe. German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (Part I, 1808; Part II, 1832) investigates the blessing and curse of being at once an intellect capable of noble achievements and an animal given to base desires. A more modern incarnation of Faust, Wells's invisible man recognizes the world's potential for great scientific advances but does not understand to what purposes his own knowledge may be put.

The character of Griffin also owes some elements to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll of The Strange Case of Dr.*

Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886). Jekyll develops and drinks a potion that unleashes Mr. Hyde, an animalistic self that had been restrained by the intellectual and moral side of the doctor's character. Similarly, invisibility releases Griffin's irrational self—the side of him that wants instant gratification, is quick to anger, and is slow to understand its limitations.

The Invisible Man exemplifies one of Wells's principles for writing science fiction: introduce only one fantastic element into a story, but make the rest of the novel realistic. The Sussex of *The Invisible Man* is ordinary, filled with ordinary people during an ordinary winter.

From the outside comes the invisible Griffin. Much of the plot involves people responding to the mystery of the "strange man." No scientist or great detective is available to combat Griffin; ordinary people must make do. The large dose of realism in the novel adds to the force of Wells's conclusion. The brilliantly imaginative Griffin is destroyed not only by his own ambitions and greed, but also by a society that cannot tolerate his unusual nature.



Themes and Characters

In *The Invisible Man*, Wells works out the theme that nothing is gained without a corresponding loss. Griffin, the medical student, discovers how to make himself invisible, but as a result loses his sanity. The novel is a cautionary tale, warning that a person's intellectual achievement must still contend with more primitive drives.

The Invisible Man is also a social comedy, inviting laughter as the rural population of Sussex responds to the "strange man" all "wrapped up from head to foot." Instead of inspiring fear with his pranks as he had hoped, Griffin angers the villagers. Surrounded by colorful, stock English characters, all of whom have their own plans for him, Griffin loses everything: clothing, money, his notes, and his life. At the novel's end, a tramp, with ambitions for wealth and power that parody Griffin's own, hoards the scientist's notes and dreams "the undying wonderful dream of his life," even though he understands not a word of what Griffin has written.

The mad and foolish Griffin is the main character of *The Invisible Man*. A poor man, he seeks wealth and power. Although his motivation is understandable, he is a scoundrel who invites little sympathy. Gifted with a wonderful intellect, he degrades it by using it to serve his baser nature. The other characters are primarily stereotypes who populate a country village. Incapable of understanding the significance of Griffin's achievement, they respond to him as they would to a maddened animal. An exception is Dr. Kemp, who is enlightened enough to understand Griffin's accomplishment while recognizing that the medical student is a menace to society.

Critics have sometimes been puzzled by the popularity of a novel that for the most part presents unsympathetic characters. The Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges may have penetrated the mystery of the popular success of *The Invisible Man* when he noted that the story is "symbolic of processes that are somehow inherent in all human destinies.

The harassed invisible man who has to sleep as though his eyes were wide open because his eyelids do not exclude light is our solitude and our terror." Griffin's experience represents the unforeseen consequences that result from society's inability or refusal to comprehend technological progress.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why does H. G. Wells begin the novel with Griffin's arrival at the Coach and Horses, rather than with Griffin discovering how to make himself invisible?
2. What is the point of having Griffin's notes end up the hands of someone who sees them as a potential source of power, even though he cannot understand them?
3. Many critics of *The Invisible Man* have complained that it lacks appealing characters. Do you find any of the characters appealing? What about Dr. Kemp, who seems to have a good heart? Would *The Invisible Man* be better or worse if the characters were more heroic?
4. How frightening is *The Invisible Man*? How does Wells achieve his scariest effects?
5. Do you agree with Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges's suggestion that Griffin's loneliness and terror reflect every human being's inherent loneliness and fear of life?
6. Why does Griffin play pranks on the villagers? Do they fear him? Why or why not?
7. What is the significance of the dead Griffin's clenched fists and his wideopen eyes, with their expression of "anger and dismay"?
8. Does it bother you that Wells does not explain in detail the process by which Griffin becomes invisible? Why or why not?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The most famous adaptation of *The Invisible Man* is Universal Studios' 1933 motion picture version, also entitled *The Invisible Man*. Compare the motion picture and the book. What does the film leave out? Does it include anything that is not found in Wells's novel? How well does the motion picture capture the essence of the novel? Which do you consider the better work?

2. At first there would seem to be little similarity between Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) and Wells's novel.

Ellison's book focuses on a black man's experiences in a racist society that seems far removed from the quaint countryside of Sussex. Yet both novels focus on characters who are alienated from society, who are driven to desperation by their inability to cope with their environments. What other similarities do the two invisible characters share?

Compare Ellison's use of symbolism to Wells's.

3. The theme of a price being paid for knowledge is an important one in *The Invisible Man* and in Western literature.

Trace this theme from Marlowe's *The Tragedy of Doctor Faustus* to Wells's *Invisible Man*.

4. *The Invisible Man* is a dark comedy.

What kinds of humor—slapstick, puns, and the like—are to be found in the novel? How funny is the humor? What effect does the humor have on the story?

5. How would you classify *The Invisible Man*—as Gothic fiction, science fiction, or fantasy? Look up the qualities that are typical of each genre, and explain how well the novel meets each set of criteria.



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Related Titles/Adaptations

The abuse of scientific genius is a major theme throughout Wells's novels.

In *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, Wells portrays a scientist who abuses animals in his obsessive pursuit of knowledge; in *The First Men in the Moon* a character's discovery of extraterrestrial life causes him to turn against the human race.

Even the Martian invaders in *The War of the Worlds* can be seen as the evolutionary consequence of an arrogant, amoral pursuit of scientific knowledge. Wells emphasizes that scientific knowledge untempered by strong ethical constraints is self-destructive, and destructive of the human spirit, the natural world, and human society.

Dozens of motion pictures and television shows have used the motif of a man or woman becoming invisible. All owe their inspiration to Wells's novel and to the first important motion picture adaptation, Universal's *The Invisible Man* (1933). This black-and-white film, featuring special effects by John P. Fulton, was produced by Carl Laemmle, Jr., and was directed by James Whale.

Originally seventy-one minutes long, the film was later cut to fifty-six minutes.

The picture helped actor Claude Rains become an international celebrity, even though the *Invisible Man*'s face is hidden under bandages until his death scene. Rains is ably supported by a cast that includes Gloria Stuart and William Harrigan.

In 1958, the British ATV television network broadcast twenty-six black-and-white episodes of *The Invisible Man*.

Created and produced by Ralph Smart, the series was little more than a trite adaptation of Wells's ideas that strayed far from the novel's original plot. The series' star's identity was kept secret as a publicity ploy, although rumor has it that Tim Turner played the role of the *Invisible Man*; the supporting cast of Lisa Daniely, Deborah Waiting, and Ernest Clark may have wished for anonymity, too.

In 1975, NBC broadcast Universal's made-for-television motion picture *The Invisible Man*. The seventy-two-minute color film was directed by Robert Michael Lewis and starred David McCallum. A television series followed during the 1975-1976 season. In spite of much advance publicity and McCallum's popularity, the series failed in the ratings. In 1976, producer Harve Bennett revived the series as *Gemini Man*, starring Ben Murphy as a secret agent. It too failed to win a large enough audience to warrant its continuation.



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