



Depiction of Scientific Elements in H.G Well's *The Invisible Man*

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Abstract

This paper examines how both the primacy of the visual and the role of spectatorship are central to the interplay between revelation and the unseen in H.G Wells's scientific romance, *The Invisible Man* (1897). The novel poses the question: What might it mean to be invisible, and to pass through the world in a body that is in all ways corporeal yet remains unseen? Through an analysis of the text, the body and skin are considered as mediums invested with personal and social meaning. *The Invisible Man* is discussed as a literary figure that comes to represent how the human body may be read as a metaphorically laden site. Skin, body and clothing may be understood as rich media encoded with symbolic information that enables individuals to communicate visually within a social context. Elizabeth Grosz asserts that the body as an inscriptive text arises through acts of body-writing. Social, surgical, epistemic and disciplinary agencies mark bodies in particular ways, effectively producing a palimpsest upon which textual traces may be —written over, retraced, redefined.1 the body is produced as a network of meaning that functions to communicate culturally specific symbolic information. As an unvisualised body, the *Invisible Man* is an allegorical articulation of imaginative possibility, social and personal fears, highlighting the importance of the visualized body in enabling social connectedness. In this regard, wearable garments provide heightened visual clues as to an individual's lifestyle, habits, affiliations and desires, playing an important role in characterization and indi-viduation. Through the figure of the *Invisible Man*, the novel opens up discussions on



the nature of confessional culture, highlighting themes as relevant today as they were in the late-nineteenth century when the book was written. The unseen body—characterised by Wells not as transparent but as concealed, corrupt and transgressive—is a malignant presence that poses critical and moral problems. The interconnected relationship between revelation and the unseen in the text illustrates how the body may be loaded with meaning, and how literature might allow us to examine the body as a site of personal and social concerns.

Keywords: Science, Development, Experiment, Invisibility and Substances

Originally serialised in 1897 and published as a book in the same year, Well's novel uses a literary trope—the character of the Invisible Man—to speculate on what the physical realities and psychological ramifications of living in an unseen state might be. The relation between the visualisation of the body on the one hand, and its visual absence on the other, plays a pivotal role in the novel, particularly in terms of the social isolation of the protagonist. He embodies the desire to move freely, unseen and unjudged by appearance. Yet at the same time the trope epitomizes the base fear of being observed by an unseen presence, and of inadvertently revealing a hidden nature to an unknown audience. In his introduction to *The Invisible Man* (2005), Christopher Priest discusses how invisibility in literature is generally treated in one of three ways: with an irrational or fantastical approach where invisibility is often supernatural; through psychological means whereby invisibility is felt or perceived at a social or personal level; or through a scientific approach with an established internal logic that explains the issues of invisibility.²

It is evident in the text that invisibility is treated in all three of the ways outlined above. The simple townspeople are inclined to think of illogical explanations for the events in their midst until scientific reasoning takes hold; the protagonist made invisible is outcast from society and experiences a psychological disconnection from humanity; and the Invisible Man develops a way of lowering the refractive index of substances to that of air, rendering them unseen. Regarding the latter, the Invisible Man explains that —visibility depends on the action of visible



bodies on light. Either a body absorbs light or refracts it, or does all of these things. If it neither reflects nor refracts nor absorbs light, it cannot of itself be visible.¹³ Invisibility is rendered plausible through the known phenomena of light refraction and absorption, using explanations that draw on established scientific reasoning. This helps to situate the work as a scientific romance with a scientifically realistic treatment of highly imaginative scenarios. The story is established with a believable internal logic that accounts for the ways that the Invisible Man can remain unseen or be revealed. While the novel can be understood as an early form of science fiction, it can be argued that it has a gothic body at its heart. This is perhaps unsurprising given that as a scientific romance, it grew out of similar concerns to the gothic novels of the late nineteenth century. Both genres deal with romantic notions of the fantastical and with bodies as sites reflective of personal and social morality.⁴

The 1880s had seen a revival of the gothic in literature with the release of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), all of which are contemporary to *The Invisible Man*. These works have long been associated with the gothic literary canon, and the bodies depicted in them are typically gothic. ⁵ The characters named in each of the titles act as a device to represent the fears and social concerns of the era. They are transformative and uncontrolled, representing a threat to the established codes of reason and morality. As Dorota Wisniewska explains, the nineteenth-century gothic bodies were made monstrous through excessive, amoral, and vicious behaviour as well as through the combination of race, class, and gender qualities perceived as undesirable.⁶ Within the socio-cultural context of both Victorian England and today, the *Invisible Man* is a body —painfully and violently out of control, a body ‘uncanny’ in Freud’s sense that should have remained repressed.¹⁷ His antisocial conduct that includes going naked into the streets, secretly observing others, terrorising, and causing anarchy, poses a moral and physical threat to both society and the individual. A product of the literary *Zeitgeist* of the 1880s, the *Invisible Man* is characterised in a way typical of the monstrous and the gothic, insofar as he represents a clustering of various deviant qualities. He is —a threat to



everything we hold dear!; 8 a disciplinary warning of what kind of corruption (and punishment) can occur when body and mind are not subject to self-control.

While the Invisible Man exhibits characteristics of a gothic body, he also represents Wells's concern with the themes of scientific romance. A trained scientist himself, Wells was passionate about the need for widespread scientific education. Steven McLean suggests that the novel represents Wells's desire for a society engaged in both the logic of scientific thinking and the potential of creative thinking, as opposed to the irrational reasoning demonstrated by the fictional villagers of Iping. 9 McLean also poses that the contrasting characterisation of the —good scientist Dr. Kemp, who maintains connections to the scientific community and strives for the betterment of society through his actions, and the Invisible Man (as a scientist gone —bad) expresses Wells's attitude toward the social responsibility of scientific practitioners. 10

The Invisible Man is perceived as a threat partly because he defies social values and expectations in order to ruthlessly pursue personal desires. He is an anonymous and unfriendly arrival in the country town of Iping. The residents are initially baffled by his rebuttal of friendly advances and view his continued presence with unease. He refuses to entertain the customs of village life and confirms his position as an outsider by engaging in behaviour that is unfathomable to the townspeople: The frantic gesticulations they surprised now and then, the headlong pace after nightfall that swept him upon them round quiet corners, the inhuman bludgeoning of all the tentative advances of curiosity, the taste for twilight that led to the closing of doors, the pulling down of blinds, the extinction of candles and lamps—who could agree with such goings on? They drew aside as he passed down the village, and when he was gone by, young humorists would up with coatcollars and down with hat-brims, and go pacing nervously after him in imitation of his occult bearing.11

This —inhuman disregard for social niceties confirms his status as an outsider. He unsettles and antagonises the local people and cuts himself off from them. He is secretive and fearful that the credit for his scientific discoveries may be stolen away from him, and thus seeks



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autonomy from the scientific community, an act which reflects his separation from society on the whole. Mary Douglas addresses the acts of social ostracism and mocking that the villagers exercise upon the Invisible Man by identifying social pollution as the risks and problems particular to a culture. Cultures may find expression for these threats by attributing power to body margins so that their —deepest fears and desires take expression.¶12 By endangering the villagers' way of life through his persistent belligerence and undisciplined body the Invisible Man is identified as separate to the social order and seen as a social threat. Through mirroring a situation that endangers social structures on the body's borders, a culture can enact rituals of cleansing on a human scale in order to remove a posed danger. The Invisible Man's body becomes an expression of social pollution that must be cleansed in order for the villagers to regain control and order. As a result he is made irredeemably —other.¶ In the Victorian era, the figure of the —other¶ arose in response to the projected values, desires and anxieties of the time. It could apply to anyone who failed to conform to the accepted figure of the English subject (white, middle class, male), or it could refer to qualities recognised as strange and undesirable within the individuated self.¶13 The Invisible Man is identifiable as a differentiated —other¶ in both senses of the Victorian understanding: he is a stranger in a new town and, moreover, has wholeheartedly embraced his morally ambiguous and recklessly impulsive qualities. As Douglas illustrates, the Invisible Man presents a risk to the established order and boundaries of village life. He is a marginal figure who engenders social pollution by rejecting the accepted mechanisms and rules of the society he has entered. These are part of the symbolic space that the self must operate within, which Jacques Lacan refers to as the —big Other.¶ The big Other is —fragile, insubstantial, properly virtual, in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition. It exists only insofar as subjects act as if it exists.¶14 Thus in violating subtle social codes the Invisible Man endangers the very fabric and cultural language of village life. He is produced and read as —other¶ by a society that is unable to understand or accept him, much as he is unable to accept it.



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The Invisible Man's —otherness is confirmed through his body itself. He longs to be extraordinary and has undergone a painful process in order to become an unseen entity. His physical manifestation is an expression of his pursuit of the extraordinary and his rejection of accepted social ideas and rules. Yet the Invisible Man's desire to become extraordinary does not preclude him from being located within the symbolic framework of the big Other. Despite his transformation he remains a corporeal man with corporeal needs and his body continues to be invested with personal and social meaning, whether in a visualised or unseen state. He becomes —other through alienation from himself, which occurs as the loss of his visualised body results in a blurring of self-perception. Simultaneously, his alienation from society manifests as a disaffection with social structure and order, and a bodily rebellion against the established codes of social communication and cultural engagement. To the villagers his figure comes to embody the threat of what is unknown, uncontrolled, and concealed— something —other than what is accepted and known.

The Invisible Man occupies a unique position in terms of the way he is characterised through wearable garments. He is known through the quality and cut of his clothes, and the act of wearing garments helps to visualise his body as a socially acceptable human form. Without clothes he must survive unseen, facing physiological and psychological hardships:

I had no shelter, no covering. To get clothing was to forgo all my advantage, to make of myself a strange and terrible thing. I was fasting, for to eat, to fill myself with unassimilated matter, would be to become grotesquely visible again. ... I could not go abroad in snow—it would settle on me and expose me. Rain, too, would make me a watery outline, a glistening surface of a man—a bubble. And fog—I should be like a fainter bubble in fog, a surface, a greasy glimmer of humanity. Moreover, as I went abroad—in the London air—I gathered dirt about my ankles, floating smuts and dusts upon my skin.³⁷

Conclusion



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Through the analysis of the interplay between revelation and the unseen in *The Invisible Man*, we are able to speculate on the ways that skin, body, and garments can be culturally communicative media that function at the forefront of social survival. Concealed from sight, the *Invisible Man* faces great difficulty operating within society. He remains unrecognised as a human being in need of shelter, food, and support. Without a visualised form, he is distanced from the subtle ways that bodies are encoded and interpreted within a social context. His invisible skin and body are inscrutable, inhibiting his ability to engage in exchanges of social dialogue. He is unable to convey visual information about his spatial location or presence, and cannot use emphatic gesture effectively: his expressions, state of health, and gaze cannot be observed or interpreted. He begins to lose his own sense of humanity and instead sees himself as a hollow glimmer of a man. His concealed, naked body comes to represent a threat to social values and order, and taps into the base fear of being observed or attacked by an unknown, unseen presence.

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