The Invisible Man

H.G. Wells

As he grew older, Wells wrote more and more social comment rather than science fiction. He drew on his own experiences as a young man growing up in poverty. ‘Who needs invented stories,’ as he wrote himself in 1933, ‘when day by day we can watch Mr Hitler in Germany?’

A classic film of The Invisible Man was made in 1933 in the United States starring Claude Rains in the title role.

Summary

This story was written by H.G. Wells, sometimes called the ‘father’ of science fiction, in 1897. The story takes place in an ordinary village among ordinary people in the south of England about a hundred years ago.

Chapter 1: One winter’s day, a strange figure arrives at the inn in the small village of Iping. Mrs Hall, the landlady, is pleased to have a winter guest and makes sure he has everything he needs. When the visitor takes off his hat and coat, however, she is shocked. His head is completely covered in bandages. As he never shows his face, she thinks that he must have been badly injured in some terrible accident, but despite her efforts to engage him in conversation he never offers any explanation for his strange appearance, and stays alone in his room most of the time. He simply tells the landlady that he is expecting some boxes to be delivered.

Chapter 2: Late in the afternoon, the landlady sends a man to the visitor’s room to mend a clock. The visitor agrees but tells them that once the clock is mended, he must be left to do his work. The clock-mender also tries to start a conversation with him, but the stranger becomes angry and tells him to finish the job quickly and leave.

Chapter 3: The next day, the visitor’s boxes arrive. He comes out to collect them and is bitten on the leg by the delivery-man’s dog. He goes back to his room and the landlord goes to see if he is all right. In the dim light of the room, Mr Hall sees a strange thing – it appears as if the stranger has no hands. He is then struck in the chest and thrown out of the room. The stranger unpacks the boxes, which are full of books and cases containing bottles, and sets to work. Later on, when Mrs Hall takes him his dinner, she sees his face for a second and it looks as if he has no eyes. The visitor tells her she must knock before entering and that he must not be disturbed in his work. He works all afternoon and becomes increasingly frustrated. The people in the inn can hear him shouting and throwing objects around.

About the author

Herbert George Wells was an important English writer in his own day and is remembered today as an innovative writer in the new genre of science fiction. Born in 1866, he came from a poor background, which was unusual for a writer at that time. He won a scholarship to study science at university. With a first-class degree in biology, he briefly became a teacher. His career in the classroom was ended by a sharp kick in the kidneys from an unhappy pupil, which left him too unwell to continue teaching. He then lived on a small income from journalism and short stories, until his literary career took off with his first science fiction novel, The Time Machine, in 1895.

Wells wrote with tremendous energy throughout his life, producing many science fiction stories, short stories, sociological and political books, autobiographical novels and histories. He became very successful as a writer, perhaps because his work was both popular and intellectual, and he lived in some style. He married twice and had a reputation as a womaniser. He moved in socialist circles and used fiction to explore his political ideas.

Contemporary political and social issues underlie the plots of Wells’s stories. The War of the Worlds (1898) and The Time Machine (1895) were attacks on the self-satisfaction of society rather than genuine attempts to predict the future. The Invisible Man (1897) marked a move towards more realistic subject matter. Although the idea of the invisible man is obviously a fantasy, the reader meets him through the eyes of the ordinary villagers rather than the aliens of his earlier books. Wells often reaches pessimistic conclusions in his work, as in this story, but he said that he was neither a pessimist nor an optimist, more an observer.
Chapter 4: The weeks and months go by and the visitor spends most of each day working in his room. He only goes out in the evenings, with his clothes wrapped around him up to the eyes. The people of the village begin to gossip about him and wonder why he refuses to show himself. Cuss, the local doctor tries to talk to him but he becomes very angry. He has lost an important piece of paper. The doctor cannot believe his eyes when the man lifts his arm and reveals that his sleeve is empty.

Chapters 5–6: A burglary takes place at the vicarage. The vicar and his wife hear noises in the house and go to investigate. They hear the sound of coins jangling and the sound of a man sneezing but when they search with a lamp they can’t find anybody. Back at the inn, Mr and Mrs Hall realise that the stranger has not slept in his bed and that he has disappeared, leaving his clothes behind. Then the furniture in the stranger’s room begins moving around as if it had a mind of its own. They begin to think the stranger has put spirits into the furniture, but when Mr Hall goes to speak with him, the stranger tells him to go to the devil.

Chapters 7–8: The local people are now very suspicious of the stranger. He remains in his room, but Mrs Hall does not bring him any food. He still has not paid his bill and she tells him that she and the whole village want to understand what is going on. The stranger becomes very angry and reveals that under his bandages he is in fact invisible. The people in the bar are terrified and run away. The people of the village meet up and together with the local policeman, they try to arrest the Invisible Man. But in the violence and confusion, he manages to escape. He meets a tramp called Marvel and forces him to help him. In order to remain invisible he has to wear no clothes and he needs Marvel to carry his money and his books.

Chapters 9–10: The Invisible Man returns with Marvel to the Coach and Horses for his clothes and papers. He loses his temper when finds Cuss and Bunting going through his things and he steals their clothes. After a struggle with the people of the village, he manages to escape again.

Chapters 11–14: The story of the Invisible Man begins to spread through the countryside by word-of-mouth and in the newspapers. Marvel tries to escape and takes refuge in an inn. The Invisible Man comes after him and is shot and injured by one of the men in the inn. Despite his injury, he manages to escape again.

Chapters 15–18: The Invisible Man takes refuge in the house of Dr Kemp. By strange coincidence, the two men realise that they used to study science together. The Invisible Man reveals his identity and tells Kemp how he discovered how to make himself invisible and how he intends to use his new power to scare and control people. He wrongly believes that Kemp will help him – but Kemp sends a note to the police. The police arrive but the Invisible Man manages to escape yet again.

Chapters 19–22: The hunt for the Invisible Man starts in earnest. Kemp, who now knows the Invisible Man’s secrets, tells the police they have to starve him out and prevent him from sleeping by locking up all the houses and all the food for twenty miles around. Glass is scattered on the roads. The Invisible Man is furious at Kemp’s betrayal and comes back to his house, intent on killing him. Colonel Adye tries to stop him from entering the house, but the Invisible Man shoots him dead. Two other policemen arrive and manage to injure him by striking at him with a poker. But the Invisible Man still manages to attack Kemp and is only prevented from killing him when he is struck on the head with a spade. As he dies, the Invisible Man becomes visible again.

Background and themes

Exploring the extremes of human behaviour: H.G. Wells called his science fiction stories ‘science romances’ or ‘grotesque romances’. They are a mixture of the comic and the serious, the strange and the familiar. Although he was a scientist himself, he did not pretend that he was predicting great scientific inventions or discoveries. Instead he was using science fiction as a basis for exploring extremes of human behaviour. By putting his characters in imaginary situations, he could examine how they behaved when pushed to the limits of experience. The invisible man finds himself with tremendous power to fight and flee, a power which he uses with great delight. As he is invisible, no one can catch him, so there is no moral restraint on his actions.

Forecasting the future: Wells himself paid tribute to the remarkable forecasts of Jules Verne, another father of science fiction, who accurately predicted submarines, hot-air balloons and space travel. Wells likened his own stories to Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, another grotesque story where man plays God.
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Science and scientific investigation: were very important and popular at this time. The world was still coming to terms with Darwin’s Origin of Species (published 1859), whose ideas are found throughout the literature of the second half of the nineteenth century. In his novels, Wells questioned the idea that evolution was a force that would make things better and better for mankind.

Good Science or Bad Science? At the beginning of The Invisible Man, we are not quite sure whether to feel sympathy and pity for Griffin or hate and contempt. Until we learn about Griffin’s past when he meets Dr Kemp, we may feel that Griffin is surrounded by fools. The more we learn about him, however, the more he fits the stereotype of the ‘Mad, Bad Scientist’ who will stop at nothing in his pursuit of his scientific goals. Dr Kemp comes into the story as the ‘Good, Sane Scientist’, whose personal morality is strongly against Griffin’s science without humanity.

The ending, however, is tragic; with Wells making the point that scientific discovery must not be allowed to develop without social and ethical control.

Discussion activities

Before reading
1 Discuss: Tell the students that The Invisible Man is about a scientist who has made himself invisible. Working individually at first, the students make a list of as many advantages and disadvantages to being invisible as they can. After five or ten minutes, put students into small groups and have them compare and discuss the lists they have made.

2 Role play: Write the words ‘Ethics Committee’ on the board. Tell the students to imagine that they are members of an ethics committee at a scientific institution. Their job is to decide whether or not to allow research into how to make people invisible should be allowed to go ahead. You may wish to distribute roles to the students such as – a priest, a physicist, a businessman/woman, a journalist … Give the students enough time to prepare and then put the students into groups of four and have them act out the meeting. Each member of the committee must state their case and the others must say whether they agree or disagree and why/why not. At the end of the meeting, the students elect a spokesperson to present their decision to the rest of the class.

Chapters 1–4

After reading
3 Pair work: On pages 4 and 5, Mrs Hall tries to find out why the stranger hides his face all the time. She starts a conversation and tells him about her nephew’s accident, hoping it will encourage him to reveal things about himself. But the stranger is very unfriendly and gives her no information at all. Working in pairs, tell the students to imagine how the conversation might have been different if he had been more willing to talk about himself. Give them ten or fifteen minutes to prepare and then have them act out their dialogues for the rest of the class. You may wish to hold a vote on who made up the best dialogue.

4 Discuss: How important is it to be able to see a person’s face? On page 8, after he has met the stranger, the clock-mender says, ‘I’d like to see a man’s face if I had him staying in my house.’ Working in small groups, the students discuss whether they agree or disagree with the clock-mender’s statement. Each group elects a spokesperson to present the group’s ideas to the rest of the class.

5 Role play: Working in pairs, the students write short speech for Teddy Henfrey, the clock-mender, in which he goes to the local pub and tells his friends about the strange man he just met at the inn. One member of each pair then comes to the front of the class to perform the speech.

6 Write: After reading Chapter 2, ask the students to imagine how Mr Hall feels after he finds out that his wife has taken in such a strange lodger. Put the students into pairs and tell them to write a diary entry for Mr Hall in which he recounts how he feels. Working in pairs, tell the students to imagine how the conversation might have been different if he had been more willing to talk about himself. Give them ten or fifteen minutes to prepare and then have them act out their dialogues for the rest of the class. You may wish to hold a vote on who made up the best dialogue.

7 Pair work: Put the students in pairs and tell them to imagine the conversation that takes place between Mr and Mrs Hall when Mr Hall returns home after meeting Teddy Henfrey in the street. Remind them that Mr Hall didn’t know what was happening until he met the clock-mender and so their dialogue should reflect this. Go around the class while they are preparing and give help on vocabulary if necessary. Once they have written the dialogue, the students practise it out loud in pairs. Finally, ask some of the pairs to play out their dialogue in front of the whole class.

8 Role play: Divide the class into three equally-sized groups. Allocate one of the following characters to each of the groups: Mr Hall, Mr Fearenside, and the stranger. Ask each of the groups to re-tell the events of Chapter 3 from the point of view of their character. Ask one student per group to present the account orally in front of the whole class.
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9 Discuss: On page 14, Mrs Hall says of the stranger: ‘He gave his name but I didn’t hear it properly.’ We also learn that she thought it was silly to admit she didn’t know his name. Ask the students if they have ever been in a similar position to Mrs Hall – not knowing somebody’s name and not daring to ask them. Put the students in small groups and have them exchange and discuss their experiences. Depending on the enthusiasm of the students, you may like to conduct a whole-class feedback session at the end of the activity.

10 Role play: Put the students into pairs. Ask each pair to prepare to play the role of either Dr Cuss or the stranger. Tell them they are to role play the conversation between the two men which is recounted by Dr Cuss on pages 15 and 16. The students write out the dialogue and then practice it until they can perform it without having to read the script.

11 Discuss: We know right from the beginning that the main character in this story is invisible because of the title of the story. Put the students in small groups and ask them to discuss whether they think the opening chapters would be more exciting if they didn’t already know the stranger was invisible? At what point in the story do students think they would guess and why? Each group elects a spokesperson to report the group’s discussion to the rest of the class.

Chapters 5–6

12 Role play: At the end of Chapter 6, after the furniture has seemingly moved by itself and when the stranger has shut himself in the parlour, Mr Wadgers advises Mr Hall to go in and ask him to explain his behaviour. We learn that ‘it took some time to persuade Mr Hall to do it.’ Put students into groups of three and tell them to imagine the conversation between Mr Hall and Mr Wadgers and Mr Huxton as they try to persuade the landlord to go and talk to the stranger. Give them ten or fifteen minutes to prepare and then have some of the groups act out the scene for the rest of the class.

13 Write: After the stranger has told Mr Hall to go the devil at the end of Chapter 6, he sits down to write his thoughts in his diary. Working in pairs, the students write a short entry in his diary in which he recounts the events of Chapters 5 and 6. When they have finished writing, ask the pairs to exchange papers and discuss their work for factual and grammatical errors.

14 Guess: Working in the same pairs as in exercise 13, the students try to imagine what the stranger will do next. Tell them to write down one or two sentences. Call upon one of the pairs to read out their sentence or sentences and then ask another pair to react to their opinion and to read out their own sentence. Keep the activity going around the class for as long as the students remain interested.

Chapters 7–8

15 Pair work: Put the students in pairs. Tell them to write out the conversation on pages 22 and 23 between Mrs Hall and the stranger as if it were a stage play. Begin with ‘Why wasn’t my breakfast laid?’ on page 22 and end with ‘I mean where did you find it?’ on page 23. You may need to pre-teach some (mild) swear words for the stranger to utter. Once the students have written out the dialogue, ask them to practice it out loud, working on pronunciation and intonation. Call on some of the pairs to perform the dialogue in front of the whole class.

16 Role play: Put the students in pairs. Tell them to imagine they are television journalists. They are going to interview one of the men involved in the struggle to arrest the Invisible Man in Chapter 7. They can ask a maximum of eight questions. Tell the students to prepare a list of questions they would like to ask. After a few minutes, get the students to act out the interview – with one member of each pair playing the journalist and the other playing the character from the story. Tell them to practise it a few times and then to switch roles. Finally, ask different pairs to perform their interview in front of the whole class.

17 Discuss: On page 30, the Invisible Man tells Mr Marvel – An Invisible Man is a man of great power. Write this sentence on the board. Ask a student to read the sentence out loud and then say if they agree or disagree with it. Tell them to give one reason for their answer. Then move on to another student and ask them if they agree with the first student and why. Continue around the class in the same way until everybody has given their opinion. Write up any new vocabulary items on the board.

18 Discuss: Working individually, give the students a few minutes to make a list of the positive and negative qualities of the Invisible Man mentioned in the story so far. Then write the following questions on the board: Do you feel any sympathy for the Invisible Man? Why/why not? Working individually for another five minutes or so, the students note down their answers. Then put the students into groups of four or five and ask them to exchange their views on the following question: Does the Invisible Man deserve our sympathy? Encourage the students always to give reasons for their answers. Finally, call on the groups to present their views to the rest of the class.

Chapters 9–13

19 Discuss: Put students into small groups. Ask them to think of a plan for catching the Invisible Man. Tell them to prepare a presentation for the rest of the class. After ten or fifteen minutes call on one or two member of each group to come to the front of the class and present their plan. When all the plans have been presented the class votes for the best one.
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20 Write: Working in groups of three or four, students imagine they have to write a short newspaper article about the Invisible Man – the one that the sailor tells Mr Marvel about in Chapter 12. Their article should cover the following questions – When did the Invisible Man first appear? Where has he been living? How many people have seen him? What has he been doing? How did he escape? The article should also contain advice to people to tell them how to protect themselves from the Invisible Man. When they have written their articles, ask for volunteers to read their work out loud to the rest of the class.

21 Role play: Put the students in groups of four. Tell them that they are going to play characters in a pub in the area where the Invisible Man has been seen. They have all read about him in the newspaper and now each of the characters claims they have seen the Invisible Man themselves. Give them a few minutes to prepare to recount the story of how they met him and what happened. Then the students act out the scene. You may like to ask some of the groups to perform the scene in front of the whole class.

Chapter 14

22 Read carefully: Tell the students to read Chapter 14 again carefully. Working individually, they must decide whether they think the men in the Happy Cricketers were justified in trying to shoot the Invisible Man. Had he committed any bad crimes up to this point? Should they try talking to him first? Are they simply over-reacting to the newspaper reports, the gossip and Mr Marvel’s fear? After a few minutes, put the students in groups of four to compare their ideas. Each group should now try to come up with a list of five good uses for invisibility. They should find things that would help the world and not harm it. When they have finished (after five minutes or so), put them in small groups to compare their ideas. Each group elects a spokesperson to report the group’s finding to the rest of the class.

Chapters 15–17

23 Role play: Put the students in pairs. Tell them to write out the conversation on pages 45–46 between Dr Kemp and the Invisible Man as if it were a stage play. They should begin with ‘Kemp!’ on page 45, and end with ‘How on earth?’ on page 46. Ask the students to practise reading the dialogue out loud, working on pronunciation and intonation. Call on some of the pairs to perform the dialogue in front of the whole class.

24 Guess: Put the students in small groups. Ask them to re-read page 48 where the Invisible Man tells Dr Kemp that ‘We can do such great things together’ and to come up with suggestions about what the Invisible Man means by this. Each group elects a spokesperson to report the group’s finding to the rest of the class.

25 Write: Have students work in pairs to write the note that Dr Kemp writes to Colonel Adye (see page 48). When they have finished, each pair exchanges letters with another pair. They then write a short reply from Adye to Dr Kemp.

Chapters 18–22

26 Discuss: Write the following question on the board: Was the Invisible Man responsible for his father’s death? Each student must write down their answer to the question and provide one or two reasons. After a few minutes, initiate a discussion by asking individual students to read out their answers and then inviting the others to react.

27 Pair work: Working individually, give the students five minutes to make a list of all the things that Kemp suggests the police should do in order to catch the Invisible Man. Then write the following question on the board: Which of these things will work? Why/why not? Working individually for another five minutes or so, the students note down their answers. Then put the students into pairs and ask them to exchange their views. Encourage the students always to give reasons for their answers. Finally, call on the pairs to present their views to the rest of the class.

28 Role play: Ask students to imagine that after the Invisible Man dies, Dr Kemp has a dream about him in which he talks to him and wants to know why he betrayed him to the authorities. Before playing out the scene, student A writes down all the reasons that made the Invisible Man think that Dr Kemp would help him. Student B writes down all the reasons why Dr Kemp thought he had to tell the authorities about the Invisible Man. Then have the students play out the scene.

Extra activities

29 Discuss: Put students into groups. Ask them to discuss what they think of Griffin. Do they think he is totally bad or do they feel some sympathy for him? Did they feel any sympathy for him at the beginning of the story? What makes Griffin behave in the way he does?

30 Pair work: Put students into pairs. Ask them to write down five questions they would want to ask H.G. Wells if he was in the classroom that day. Tell them to be prepared to justify their choices. Ask the pairs to read out their questions to the rest of the class, and discuss any interesting points raised.

31 Discuss: Working individually at first, ask the students to make a list of as many good uses for invisibility as they can. They should find things that would help the world and not harm it. When they have finished (after five minutes or so), put them in small groups to compare their ideas. Each group should now try to come up with a list of five good uses of invisibility. After a further ten or fifteen minutes, conduct a feedback session with the whole class during which you write up each group’s suggestions on the board.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.