

15. *The Open Conspiracy; Blue Prints for a World Revolution*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1928; revised edition with additional subtitle *A Second Version of this faith of a modern man made more explicit and plain*, London: Hogarth Press, 1930. U.S. ed. of rev. ed, as *What Are We To Do With Our Lives?*, Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1931.
16. *The Shape of Things to Come*, New York: Macmillan, 1933. Page references to 1945 edition. Another version was published as *Things to Come; A Film Story based on the Material in His History of the Future "The Shape of Things to Come"*, London: Cresset Press, 1935. See the attack on this book by Owen Francis Dudley, *Human Happiness and H.G. Wells; An Antidote to "The Shape of Things to Come"*, London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1936.
17. *The Holy Terror*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1939.
18. *Mind at the End of Its Tether*, San Francisco: Millet Books, 1973.
19. C.E.M. Joad, "An Open Letter to H.G. Wells", *New Statesman and Nation* (August 17, 1940), p.155. Wells replied in the issue of August 24, 1940, p.180 and Joad responded August 31, 1940, p.208.
20. This is certainly not the first time that Wells has been presented as a pessimist. For other such presentations, see, for example, Hillegas, *The Future As Nightmare* and his earlier article, "Cosmic Pessimism in H.G. Wells's Scientific Romances", *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters*, 46 (1961), pp.655-663; W. Warren Wagar, "H.G. Wells and the Radicalism of Despair"; Anthony West, "The Dark World of H.G. Wells", *Harper's Magazine*, 214 (May 1957), pp.68-73; and George Woodcock, "The Darkness Violated by Light".

Science and Society: A Brief Look at *THE INVISIBLE MAN*

Kirpal Singh

Relatively little has been written about *THE INVISIBLE MAN* (1897), the novel Wells published after the phenomenal success of *THE TIME MACHINE* (1895) and *THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR MOREAU* (1896). In this short and exciting story — no less a person than Joseph Conrad considered the book a splendid achievement¹ — Wells examines the impact of science on society from an essentially societal point of view. We are made to see the Invisible Man through the eyes of the various individuals who come across him. The story offered Wells a greater scope to explore issues already raised in the earlier scientific romances because of its contemporary setting. The emphasis on society marks a significant development in Wells' art for it prepares the reader for the larger viewpoint of *THE WAR OF THE WORLDS* (1898). While a good deal of the novel's success is due, no doubt, to what Patrick Parrinder terms "ironic reversals"², its relevance for the present reader lies primarily in the response it offers to the pursuit of scientific knowledge for selfish ends.

Griffin, the Invisible Man, after years of patient research invents the means to make himself invisible. The narration of the ordeal that he underwent in the course of his invention is humanly moving and shows Wells' fine ability to render forcefully the more private sensations of pain and suffering. Once invisibility becomes a possibility Griffin dreams of all the things he could do with a new found sense of liberation:

I was invisible, and I was only just beginning to realise the extraordinary advantage my invisibility gave me. My head was already teeming with plans of all the wild and wonderful things I had now impunity to do. (*The Invisible Man in Seven Science-Fiction Novels of H.G. Wells*, Dover Pub. New York, 1934, p.266.)

Invisibility had been a motif in the discussion of right conduct since ancient times.³ What makes Wells' treatment of it unique is the attempt to detach it from magic or fantasy and provide it with a scientific base.⁴ Hence Griffin is presented as a scientist. The question the novel poses and answers is: can a scientific objective be tenable if it alienates its pursuer from the society around him? Wells' answer is an emphatic 'no'. Far from being an aid to progress, science can often undermine the peace and goodwill existing in society. Griffin intrudes into Iping village and brings chaos and confusion to it. He is hardly the benign scientist who experiments in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of life or the material conditions that govern it. On the contrary he envisages unlimited power and liberty for himself. Like Moreau of the earlier novel he aims at self-edification. And the end of both these malevolent scientists is tragic.

The very first experience of invisibility in society proves Griffin to be at the mercy of the crowds and the vehicles that clash and knock against him in busy Oxford Street. Instead of making fools of others (as he had planned to do) he is himself made a fool (p.267). Our sympathy for him, as he is reduced to a figure of ridicule, is balanced by

our dread. We learn early of Griffin's basic inhumanity. It is significant that both he and Moreau should be characters devoid of feelings.⁵ His theft of his father's stolen money to do his research leads to his father's suicide. But, "I did not feel a bit sorry for my father. He seemed to me to be the victim of his own foolish sentimentality. The current cant required my attendance at his funeral, but it was really not my affair" (p.259). His motives for his invention are also suspect. While his explanations for secret research reveal the more unpleasant side of science and technology (and of human nature), we sense the growing feeling of self-importance and perverted intentions:

I had to do my work under frightful disadvantages. Oliver, my professor, was a scientific bounder, a journalist by instinct, a thief of ideas — he was always prying! And you know the knavish system of the scientific world. I simply would not publish, and let him share my credit. I went on working, I got nearer and nearer making my formula into an experiment, a reality. I told no living soul, because I meant to flash my work upon the world with crushing effect — to become famous at a blow. (p.257)

William Bellamy has written of the "dissociated existence, a prototype for existential man"⁶ that Griffin embraces through his social invisibility. Part of Griffin's problem lies in his rejection by society. He is frustrated by the interference of petty individuals and misunderstood by those with whom he comes into contact. Realising that his goals would be reduced to nought without the help and co-operation of another, Griffin confesses his story to his old college-mate, Kemp, and pleads for the latter's assistance. Griffin's confession is pathetic; his awareness of the uselessness of his discovery humiliating:

The more I thought it over, Kemp, the more I realised what a helpless absurdity an Invisible Man was — in a cold and dirty climate and a crowded civilised city. Before I made this mad experiment I had dreamt of a thousand advantages... I went over the heads of the things a man reckons desirable. No doubt invisibility made it possible to get them, but it made it impossible to enjoy them when they are got. (p.282)

Griffin learns that ultimately man is dependent upon his fellow-man for survival. But his outrage at the theft of his books containing the secrets of invisibility and his dismay at his material helplessness makes him desperate. He proposes to establish a tyranny to avenge himself:

The point is, they know that there is an Invisible Man — as well as we know here is an Invisible Man. And that Invisible Man, Kemp, must now establish a Reign of Terror. Yes, — no doubt it's startling. But I mean it. A Reign of Terror. He must take some town like your Burdock and terrify and dominate it. He must issue his orders. He can do that in a thousand ways — scraps of paper thrust under doors would suffice. And all who disobey his orders he must kill, and kill all who would defend the disobedient. (p.285)

Griffin's plan is thwarted by Dr. Kemp who cannot accede to his request for

co-operation. Dr. Kemp's betrayal, even if understandable in the light of social obligation, invites our censure on grounds of guilt. At the end of the novel we read of Dr. Kemp's trying to get the secret of invisibility himself! Wells's portrayal of the ordinary, socially-conscious scientist does not allow him to compromise on moral grounds. Surely, human nature cannot resist the temptation of acquiring power by means that include duplicity. If the indictment against Griffin is a severe one, that against Dr. Kemp is no less harsh: his portrait as a cold, almost unfeeling, opportunistic character hardly leaves room for complacency.

At the end of the novel Griffin goes insane and, far from realising the glorious dreams he had envisioned with his invention, he is hunted by society for social nuisance and for murder. His death, his ironic return to the world of visibility, is frightfully vivid and demonstrates Wells' talent for stark description:

And so slowly, beginning at his hands and feet creeping along his limbs to the vital centres of his body, that strange change continued. It was like the slow spreading of a poison. First came the little white nerves, a hazy grey stretch of a limb, then the glassy bones and intricate arteries, then the flesh and skin, first a faint fogginess and then growing rapidly dense and opaque. Presently they could see his crushed chest and shoulders, and the dim out-line of his drawn and battered features. When at last the crowd made way for Kemp to stand erect, there lay, naked and pitiful on the ground, the bruised and broken body of a young man about thirty. His hair and beard were white — not grey with age but white with the whiteness of albinism, and his eyes were like garnets. His hands were clenched, his eyes wide open, and his expression was one of anger and dismay.

'Cover his face!' said a man. 'For Gawd's sake cover that face.' (pp.304-5)

'Anger and dismay' are the key words concluding the tragedy of the Invisible Man,⁷ a man who attempted to go beyond his human limitations with the aid of science but failed. Griffin's hubris is self-burst in his not-too-late realisation that though he is invisible he is not free from the hazards of nature: 'It was a bright day in January and I was stark naked and the thin slime of mud that covered the road was freezing. Foolish as it seems to me now, I had not reckoned that, transparent or not, I was still amenable to the weather and all its consequences' (p.168). Our response to the Invisible Man must remain ambiguous, compounded of pity and fear. But this ambiguity, far from relieving the tension of the novel, heightens it to an unforgettable degree.

Wells took considerable liberties in writing *THE INVISIBLE MAN*.⁸ The narration is often marred by clumsiness and awkward expression. In saying this, however, we should not overlook the exceptionally brilliant idea and its superb execution in terms of suspense, excitement and logical consistency.⁹ Griffin does attain a kind of tragic nobility through his insistent pursuit of his goal but his departure from accepted behaviour does not warrant positive heroism. Society's intolerance for the pioneering, idiosyncratic inventor, however, is paralleled by the anger of the exasperated scientific temper. The result is damaging to both society and the individual. Wells's uncanny insight into the mind of the disgruntled but

talented scientist sounds a warning to both the scientist and his fellowmen. Any tendency to isolate a significant discovery ought to be rejected. Wells affirms that the scientist has a moral and social commitment which he cannot abdicate under any circumstance. Griffin — young, intelligent, courageous — remains for posterity the pathetic representative of the self-doomed scientist.¹⁰ In an age which encourages experimentation without always considering the moral and ethical issues, the lesson of the Invisible Man is especially pertinent.

Notes

1. After reading *THE INVISIBLE MAN*, Conrad wrote to Wells: "I am always powerfully impressed by your work. Impressed is the word, O Realist of the Fantastic! whether you like it or not. And if you want to know what impresses me, is to see how you contrive to give over humanity into the clutches of the Impossible, and yet manage to keep it down (or up) to its humanity, to its flesh, blood, sorrow, folly. That is the achievement! In this little book you do it with an appalling completeness. Frankly — it is uncommonly fine." *Life and Letters*, ed. Jean-Aubry, Heinemann, London, 1927, Volume 1, p.259.
2. Patrick Parrinder, *H.G. Wells*, Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1969, p.24.
3. Robert M. Philmus, *Into the Unknown: The Evolution of Science Fiction from Francis Godwin to H.G. Wells*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1970, pp.100-101.
4. "Wells's great problem was to attain invisibility. His great feat was that he managed to do so 'scientifically' and gave a plausible explanation of how Griffin became invisible." Ingvald Raknem, *H.G. Wells and His Critics*, Scandinavian University Books, Oslo, 1962, p.319.
5. Wells himself alluded to this when he spoke of the novel as embodying "the dangers of power without control, the development of the intelligence at the expense of human sympathy." Quoted in Norman & Jeanne MacKenzie, *The Time Traveller: The Life of H.G. Wells*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1973, p.126.
6. William Bellamy, *The Novels of Wells, Bennett & Galsworthy: 1890-1910*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1971, p.24.
7. A contemporary review of the novel states: "The tragedy is always on the brink of farce until we reach the last page and a piece of wholly pathetic tragedy. The hunted terror of society is caught at last, and most pitiful is the re-entry he makes into the visible world he left so boldly." *The Saturday Review*, 18 September, 1897.
8. Jack Williamson, *H.G. Wells: Critic of Progress*, The Mirage Press, Baltimore, 1973, pp.85-86.
9. "Assessing the values of the critics' estimates of *THE INVISIBLE MAN* one might say this: the critics whose attention was held by the more bizarre aspects of the story failed to discern the great merits of the work. Only few saw that its author was an innovator, who, by substituting science for the

supernatural, gave an entirely new treatment to an old theme. But they all failed to grasp the underlying idea of the moral and the fable, and to discover how logically, consistently, and inevitably Griffin's discovery led to his destruction." Raknem, p. 29.

10. "Griffin's undoing, like Moreau's, stems from a megalomania that has convinced him that his discovery will endow him with unlimited power." Richard H. Costa, *H.G. Wells*, Twayne Publishers, New York, 1967, p.41.

Residential Conference 1984

The topic of this year's weekend conference is to be "Education or Catastrophe". It will be held at P.N.L.'s Tufnell Park Hall of Residence, on 22nd and 23rd September. The speakers will include Roger Stearn and Christopher Rolfe (who has promised to lead a conducted tour of Wellsian sites in Camden). To reserve a place, please send a £3 deposit per person to the Hon. General Secretary.

International Wells Symposium

The Symposium is planned to take place in London at the end of July 1986. Proposals for papers will be welcomed, and a number have already been received. A formal notice of the Symposium, giving details of the topics to be covered, of the location and date, and of associated activities (such as an exhibition and a guided tour of Wellsian sites) will be issued shortly. The 1986 Symposium will be the first of its kind and we hope that all those concerned with the study of Wells and with his contemporary relevance will resolve not to miss it.