Revelation and the Unseen in H. G. Wells’s *The Invisible Man*

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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, re-defined." 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 visualised 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 characterisation and indi-
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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.

**Allegorical Bodies: Invisibility, the Gothic body, and Otherness**

Originally serialised in 1897 and published as a book in the same year, Wells’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 epitomises 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.”³ Invisibility is rendered plausible through the known phenomena of light refraction and absorption, using ex-
planations 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.”\(^7\)

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.\textsuperscript{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 coat-collars and down with hat-brims, and go pacing nervously after him in imitation of his occult bearing.\textsuperscript{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 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.”\textsuperscript{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. 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.” 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.

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 threat of the Invisible Man is intimated in the first pages of the novel. Glimpses of the emptiness beneath his layers of cloth are suggested soon after he arrives in Iping as an improbably dressed and bandaged blow-in. The hotelier Mrs. Hall sees “an enormous mouth wide open,—a vast and incredible mouth that swallowed the whole lower portion of his face. It was sensation of the moment: the white-bound head, the monstrous goggle eyes, and this huge yawn below it.” The sinister pall gathering about him after a series of such incidents, and the increased incidence of
crime in the villages since his arrival, culminates in a horrifying public revelation of his invisibility and a violently enacted social ritual of cleansing. In the face of the threat embodied by the Invisible Man, the villagers band together to pursue and capture him, whereupon he is beaten to death. By beating him to death as a mob, the villagers perpetuate the understanding of the body as a moralised site of discipline and punishment on both a personal and social level. The Invisible Man’s failure to exercise self-control ultimately results in social ostracism, his becoming a hunted outlaw and the ensuing trail of destruction, his physical and psychological demise, and finally death.

As a moralised body, the Invisible Man is constituted in very specific ways. Wisniewska states that characters such as “[Dr.] Jekyll and Dorian [Gray] are monstrous because an exterior hides a corrupt self. The monstrous body in this respect encourages readers to read themselves and their own bodies and scan themselves for signs of devolution.” As epitomised by Dorian Gray, the body is a surface that identifies and reveals qualities of ourselves to the foreign gaze, and as such is capable of being redefined, emphasised, effaced, and given false histories. Nina Jablonski explains this:

Our skin talks even when we don’t; it is not a neutral canvas. Through the expressive functions of skin and body decoration, we have expanded the communicative potential of our bodies and reinforced the primacy of the visual sense in our sensory repertoire. Especially in industrialised societies, this may well be a response to the increasing importance of the sense of self and the identification of self at the level of the skin.

The Invisible Man’s visualised form may be revealed, but the character of his surface is destined to remain concealed until his death. His living skin cannot be read as a text—it neither confesses personal qualities nor acts as a surface that communicates false information like Dorian Gray’s. His invisible skin is not neutral, but is a statement of rebellion against the reason and morals of society. At the point in the novel at which he dies, his skin is revealed to be an almost albino colour, and is taken as a further sign of Otherness. Albinism is used as a device to help explain how invisibility may be scientifically achievable. Bonnie TuSmith observes that in contemporary literature human albinos are generally considered un-aesthetic, and writers who utilise albino imagery seem “to play off this anticipated response to defamiliarize the reading experience” of the body and skin, rendering them colourless, ambiguous texts.
Socially Encoded Skin

The absence of the protagonist’s visible skin and body is noticeable especially when revealed upon his death. This is so partly because bodies and skins function as important visual signifiers of age, ancestry, health, mood, cultural identity, experience, and aspirations. They are cultural texts encoded through marking, adornment, expressive gestural movements, and social readings of surface. In Volatile Bodies, Elizabeth Grosz states that these messages or texts construct bodies as networks of meaning and social significance, producing them as meaningful and functional subjects within social ensembles. Unable to communicate through the medium of his own body, the Invisible Man is removed from the social milieu. He cannot be observed or read; he cannot be known from afar; and he cannot act as a mirror for others in the world, returning a projected image of the body to an audience who may perceive with empathy a flush upon his cheek or emotion in his eyes. His body does not remain untouched by depravity like Dorian Gray’s, and it does not contain conflicting sinful and moral selves like Jekyll and Hyde. The concealed monstrosity that Wisniewska highlights is the combined horror of his undisciplined conduct and unvisualised state. He has no visible skin at all, and as such, is unable to engage in a fundamental form of social communication.

Late nineteenth-century bourgeois attitudes towards the body were dramatically different from those prevalent a mere century earlier. Evolving medical practices had stepped away from bloodletting and instead advocated that ideal bodies were whole and unwounded. Subsequently, the skin was far less made up with cosmetics to conceal craters and pocks. The skin, made visible, was recognised as a surface upon which personality could be revealed. Nineteenth-century literature reflected this individuation through a preoccupation with detailed descriptions of the fleeting blushes and wan complexions that revealed one’s state of being. Wells’s novel emerged in this era when the contemporary understanding of skin as a social canvas became prevalent. It is significant that skin is accepted as a socially communicative medium within the novel. The tramp, Mr. Thomas Marvel, variously assumes “a greyish tint between the ruddier patches,” and “a sporadically rosy face beneath a furry silk hat,” as a sign of his ongoing drinking habits. Wells has called upon the ability of readers to interpret skin descriptions as visual clues that develop Marvel’s character. In supposing a visual absence of the skin when portraying the Invisible Man, Wells has taken a position that plays upon bourgeois fears of Otherness, developing a character who is threatening because he is anti-social, unknown, and inscrutable.
The Invisible Man actively rejects communicating through the visual codes that facilitate relationships and maintain continuity and stability between self and society. Even in his socialised bandaged form he is inscrutable, as observed by hotelier Mrs. Hall and Henfrey the clock-jobber, who “saw descending the stairs the muffled figure of the stranger staring more blackly and blankly than ever with those unreasonably large glass blue eyes of his. He came down stiffly and slowly, staring all the time; he walked across the passage staring, then stopped.” Driven to conceal and mask himself from others, the Invisible Man is a transgressive figure, an object of distrust capable of covert observation while giving nothing of himself away. His decision to forgo clothing in order to go unseen becomes a symbol of his detachment from society and his own fears of being truly revealed. His body can no longer be observed as a true reflection of the life he leads: after the protagonist turns invisible, the visual history of his misdeeds cannot be seen, so his corruption and true monstrosity are made internal.

Even when finally visualised upon his death, the Invisible Man retains a level of inscrutability, described as having a white beard and hair, “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 his face!’” He remains an evasive subject, his body still vaguely insubstantial with features visible in “dim outline.” While it is ascertained that he is a young man, about thirty years old, severely beaten and lying pitifully naked upon the ground, it is not clear whether his hands are clenched in defence or attack, his expression one of rage or fright. The disquieting effect of his white hair and red eyes upon the crowd reinforces his position as Other, and the immediate call for his body to be covered reflects the desire for his Otherness to be concealed, or disappear, once more.

In the opening pages of Wells’s novel, the attire of the Invisible Man is described in detail. Emerging from the biting wind and driving snow as he makes his way into town, he is “wrapped from head to foot, and the brim of his soft felt hat hid every inch of his face but the shiny tip of his nose; the snow had piled itself against his shoulders and chest, and added a white crest to the burden he carried.” As a stranger arriving in Iping, he is presented through the eyes of the villagers, and it is through the act of their attentive spectatorship that he is initially characterised. There are slouching felts, crisp linen collars, silk mufflers, earthy velvets, and the sound of hobnail boots. But despite these costly materials, his ghastly white bandages, glinting blue lenses, layered clothes, and forbidding bearing mark him as an outcast to the villagers.
By refusing to observe religious days “even in costume,” and wearing full coat, hat and gloves while inside near a roaring fire, the Invisible Man casually violates subtle codes of acceptability. His improbable appearance and unsuitable attire have the effect of making him more visible, rather than being an inconspicuous presence. From the outset he appears a sinister figure:

All his forehead above his blue glasses was covered by a white bandage ... another covered his ears, leaving not a scrap of his face exposed excepting only his pink, peaked nose. It was bright pink, and shiny just as it had been at first. He wore a dark-brown velvet jacket with a high black linen lined collar turned up about his neck. The thick black hair, escaping as it could below and between the cross bandages, projecting in curious tails and horns, giving him the strangest appearance conceivable.

Despite this alarming first encounter, his unusual appearance is greeted by curiosity and initial surprise rather than outright fear. His covered face becomes the subject of great conjecture as the townsfolk draw on their limited experience to explain his bandages. It is supposed that he had an accident or operation, that he is a disguised criminal or anarchist, a harmless lunatic, or perhaps a piebald. As it becomes obvious that an explanation is not forthcoming, curiosity turns to unease. Children who see him after dark have nightmares and home-bound labourers are alarmed by his skull-like head emerging from the gloom on quiet country lanes. He is seen to be concealing his identity, occupation, and origins, and as a result his presence steadily becomes more threatening.

Unlike Thomas Marvel, whom he takes on as an unwilling aide, the Invisible Man is seen as someone to be feared. While Marvel is also an outsider and stranger to Iping, he is immediately recognised and accepted as a tramp:

A person of copious, flexible visage, a nose of cylindrical protrusion, a liquorish, ample, fluctuating mouth, and a beard of bristling eccentricity. His figure inclined to embonpoint; his short limbs accentuated this inclination. He wore a furry silk hat, and the frequent substitution of twine and shoelaces for buttons, apparent at critical points of his costume, marked a man essentially bachelor.

Marvel is clearly poor, being first introduced while trying on pairs of “owdatically ugly” charity boots over his hole-ridden socks in a ditch by a roadside. He is an “unhappy-looking figure in the obsolete silk hat,” “unshaven, dirty, and travel-stained, ... looking very weary, nervous, and un-
comfortable, and inflating his cheeks at frequent intervals.” Upon being approached by the Invisible Man, he asks himself if he is plagued by visions brought on by alcohol. He is unable to trust his own drink-addled judgement, and thus is open to the possibility of an improbably invisible human. With very little concept of himself beyond what is expected in the role of “tramp” and a worldview that is confined to his immediate circumstances, Marvel fits the Jungian archetype of the Persona. Archetypes are the recurring images, characters, or motifs within myths, dreams, fantasies and religions that represent typical human experiences and concerns. Analytical psychologist Carl Jung poses that the Persona is “a mask that feigns individuality, making others and oneself believe that one is individual, whereas one is simply acting a role through which the collective psyche speaks.” Marvel projects a particular archetypal image, that of the tramp, which is rendered as an immediately recognisable symbolic identity. As a foil and aide to the Invisible Man, Marvel provides comic relief and also represents the outcast capable of social redemption. His transparency as a character—with emotion ingrained in his shifting skin tone and notably shabby attire—serves to develop a humanistic character for whom we feel sympathy. Likewise, the descriptive passages that conjure up the texture and appearance of the Invisible Man’s attire develop visual imagery that is used to convey important information that fleshes out the character. These detailed descriptions of empathetic skin and expressive clothing exemplify how literature is capable of both developing and reinforcing the ways that bodies act as culturally communicative media. Both characters illustrate the importance of the visualised body as a symbolically encoded site of social exchange.

Revelation and the Invisible Body

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.\textsuperscript{37}

This passage, in which the Invisible Man explains his circumstances to his confidante Dr. Kemp, is particularly telling on a number of counts. Firstly, it highlights the difficulties of surviving unseen; secondly, it illustrates that he has no intention of assimilating into society, since he sees invisibility as having advantages over the natural state of man, despite certain discomfort; and thirdly, it shows that he identifies himself as monstrous, especially in a half-visible form. Unclothed, he may move freely and without being observed, but he is also vulnerable to the harsh English weather. He cannot eat without the unassimilated food being observed, and any passage through rain, dust, dirt, fog, snow and mud will render him in ghostly outline. Roaming the public realm \textit{sans} clothes, he flies in the face of Victorian-era values, at a time when nakedness was associated with primitive culture. Unclothed and uncivilised, he is characterised as primal and animalistic, and when hunted, is driven to acts of survival in line with a fight or flight response.

Clothing provides much needed physiological protection—warmth and safety from the elements—as well as offering psychological protection from the dehumanising effects of invisibility. Claudia Benthien writes about how human beings have a base desire to "protect himself or herself against the penetrating gaze of others. That requires covering oneself—even if, as in many cultures, this is done merely through symbolic ornaments or a specific inner attitude that regulates the act of looking."\textsuperscript{38} She goes on to explain that this is in response to an archaic fear of the possession-taking gaze of others. Clothing is usually seen as offering up a way to shield ourselves, but for the Invisible Man, it is also a symbol of human qualities. By donning clothes his body takes a visible form that is otherwise not afforded. It offers up a way to exist within society and be recognised as a human being, albeit an outcast.

Yet the Invisible Man has no intention of assimilating into society. He sees invisibility as having certain advantages and relates how he "beheld, unclouded by doubt, a magnificent vision of all that invisibility might mean to a man,—the mystery, the power, the freedom. Drawbacks I saw none. You have only to think! And I, a shabby, poverty-struck, hemmed-in demonstrator, teaching fools in a provincial college, might suddenly become—this."\textsuperscript{39} Invisibility offers him an out of his menial existence, a chance to take what he wants and do as he wills. His intentions are far from noble—to rob a little, to hurt a little, and ultimately to begin a Reign of Terror. He does not wish to be a part of society so much as he wishes to dominate it,
gaining power over a town by terrorising citizens and killing anyone that does not obey his orders. To achieve this, he needs an accomplice: he reaches out to both Marvel and Dr. Kemp in an effort to realise his plans, though neither are willing to play a part.

In confiding to Kemp, the Invisible Man wants to be known and understood and through this, we learn more of his identity—Griffin, formerly of University College. For the first time in the novel, he is transparent, speaking candidly about how he came to be transformed into a state of invisibility and his motives in doing so. It transpires that he has thrown himself into the act with no thought of repercussions, realities, or the ethical and social impacts of becoming invisible, or creating other invisible beings. His first experiments are carried out on a scrap of white fabric that vanishes and on an elderly neighbour’s white cat, which fades away except for the dark pigments in its claws and the reflective tissue in its eyes. Fuelled by stimulant drugs, anger at his prying landlord, and his relative success in lowering the refractive index of a creature, Griffin impulsively transforms himself into the Invisible Man. He relates to Kemp the horrible process which includes using drugs to bleach his blood and the help of a cheap gas engine that works two dynamos radiating a vibrational frequency:

A night of racking anguish, sickness and fainting. I set my teeth, though my skin was presently afire, all my body afire; but I lay there like grim death. … I thought I was killing myself and I did not care. I shall never forget that dawn, and the strange horror of seeing that my hands had become as clouded glass, and watching them grow clearer and thinner as the day went by, until at last I could see the sickly disorder of my room through them, though I closed my transparent eyelids. My limbs became glassy, the bones and arteries faded, vanished, and the little white nerves went last.40

Becoming invisible marks the loss of Griffin’s fundamental connection to humanity and his transition into monstrosity. It is a sign of his rash haste and rejection of social values that, despite having mastered the skill, he does not make invisible clothes. Instead, he chooses to cover his traces by burning his scientific equipment and the Portland Street home, and then flees naked from the scene. Griffin’s rebirth as the Invisible Man marks his definitive transformation into Otherness in the form of a gothic body. He has lost the ability to see a face looking back at him in the mirror: he has become anonymous, unseen and unaccountable for the actions he takes, which he uses to exploit people around him.

Interestingly, it is not in an invisible state that he sees himself as monstrous, but when he is made half-visible. As demonstrated in the passage
cited above, it is when the Invisible Man finds himself alone in London without shelter, covering, clothes and food that he is confronted by his distance from being a socialised body and is forced to consider himself as a subject. He must address the difficulty of fulfilling basic human needs without the support of society—even Marvel, the tramp, has the ability to beg for shoes and alms. Socially unacknowledged, the Invisible Man must learn to survive without shelter or clothing, depriving himself of food so that the unassimilated matter does not make him half-visible. When he does procure clothing, he must find ways to use garments and props to conceal his invisibility in order to rejoin society. He comes to recognise that invisibility may allow him to gain objects of desire, but he personally cannot enjoy these spoils without being acknowledged within a social milieu. The Invisible Man no longer envisages himself as a socialised individual but as a subhuman, an inhabited space within clothing, a space around undigested food, and a hollow amongst the elements. He sees himself as insubstantial: “a greasy glimmer of humanity,” “a glistening surface of a man,” an outline, a bubble, a surface, and a grimy skin.

As an invisible entity the protagonist is no longer able to experience what Lacan describes as the “mirror stage.” The mirror stage occurs when a pre-linguistic child recognises their reflection in a mirror and mistakes it for a “coherent and unified self.” This image of the self can become the basis for the construction of a united, fictional subjectivity. As Sean Purchase states, mirror images conceal “what is, for Lacan, a fundamental absence or lack of self-unity, a divided, unconscious self, only upheld as ‘whole’ in maturity by socially and culturally determined forces such as language.” While the Invisible Man has matured beyond childhood, he is not necessarily capable of holistic linguistic communication. Having lost a vital form of human language—the visualised body as an expressive text—he does not have the ability to see his body and its mirrored image. In the scenario that plays out in the novel, the collapse of the fiction of the unified self most notably occurs when an incensed dog tears the Invisible Man’s trouser leg. It is as if his own skin has been violated, and the dark emptiness revealed within is a sudden, visual reminder of his Otherness.

Science, Revelation, and the Possibility of Redemption

Part of the horror of the Invisible Man is that he is a product of his own creation. He embodies both the potentials and ethical pitfalls of scientific discovery. Through his confession to Kemp, he is revealed as a brilliant young scientist who has made a remarkable discovery but has been corrupted by his own power and selfish motivations.
Refusing to explain or share his research with the wider academic community and effectively alienating his peers, he is unable to secure funding. In order to continue his work, he resorts to stealing from his father, who commits suicide as a result. Steven McLean posits that Griffin’s behaviour should in part be understood in the context of Wells’s insistence that scientists must endeavour to facilitate effective communication with the rest of society, or else risk alienating the ever-proliferating public sources of funding for scientific research. In support of this is the antithetical characterisation of Griffin and Kemp. Both are scientists and alumni of the same university, yet they stand in stark opposition to one another. Kemp is the ideal, socially responsible scientist, engaged with the broader scientific community through his work and practising out of a pleasant and orderly study. In contrast, Griffin is seen cloistered in his chaotic room, miserable, isolated and uncomfortable while the town’s Whit Sunday celebrations are underway outside. Urged to redeem himself by Kemp, who encourages him to publish his results and take the world into his confidence, Griffin instead chooses to continue on his path of moral corruption in search of power. Griffin tells Kemp that he is “just an ordinary man—a man you have known—made invisible.” But he does not truly believe this. The casual violence and angry outbursts of the first half of the novel are contextualised within a wider series of events and selfish motivations. He feels no remorse for his father’s death and is indifferent to the suffering of others; he believes that the sundry beatings, burglary, arson, and amoral behaviour that have brought him to this point are acts of necessity that he has been driven to perform. He is outraged by what he perceives to be a great injustice: being denounced for the deeds he had to perform in order to survive. He has not simply retreated from society to withhold his work but has imposed his power upon others, expressing an inner attitude that belies his claims of ordinariness and instead shows that he regards himself as above common social values. This is highlighted in the dramatic public unveiling of his true form to the Iping people when the Invisible Man exclaims:

“You don’t understand … who I am or what I am. I’ll show you. By Heaven! I’ll show you.’ ... It was worse than anything. Mrs. Hall, standing openmouthed and horror-struck, shrieked at what she saw, and made for the door of the house. Everyone began to move. They were prepared for scars, disfigurements, tangible horrors, but nothing! ... The man who stood there shouting some incoherent explanation, was a solid gesticulating figure up to the coat-collar of him, and then—nothingness, no visible thing at all!”

The Invisible Man is aware of the horror that revealing his formless-
ness may induce. In this passage, he aims to reveal not his ordinariness but his extraordinary nature to the villagers. The villagers are understandably horrified by the invisible body in their midst. They have been provided with various sensory clues as to the Invisible Man’s form but in the early stages of the novel are unable to piece together the evidence at their disposal due to limited experience, imagination, and scientific understanding. This inability to move beyond the visual and make connections with other sensory evidence allows the Invisible Man to remain undetected for an extended period, but in placing such a primacy upon sight Griffin suffers his downfall. He does not account for the fact that the unseen can still be inferred through a combination of the other senses; his scent, sounds, actions, touch, and traces of his passage are discernible to a keen observer. The villagers place a greater value upon these forms of detection once alerted to the Invisible Man’s true state of being. In Chapter 15 they collectively identify the Invisible Man through the disembodied sound of the panting of breath and feet running along the road. This causes widespread panic, but marks the point at which the villagers as a group begin to draw upon the ability of their broader senses to reveal the unseen and enable them to track his passage.

Conclusion

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. The Invisible Man illustrates how the visualised body is important as a symbolically encoded site of social exchange. Through acts of revelation, by donning clothes to be visible, and then by revealing his unseen form, the character renders the body a personally and
socially invested text. However, the novel also establishes that while sensory primacy may favour the visual, the corporeal body cannot be considered solely as a visual text. The Invisible Man’s unseen body is extraordinary, but it does not preclude him from being revealed through keen perceptive awareness. He is most often detected through being felt or heard, or through observation of the interactions he has with the world around him. The novel highlights the ways in which the body may be loaded with meaning, and how literature, as a creative and critical forum, allows us to examine the body as a metaphorical site to address personal and social concerns.

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NOTES

5 Kelly Hurley addresses the abhuman in gothic literature by saying that “the Gothic represents human bodies as between species: always-already in a state of indifferention, or undergoing metamorphoses into a bizarre assortment of human/not human configurations.” Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 10. Jekyll and Hyde take on qualities of the *doppelgänger* as multiple selves manifest, Dorian Gray’s deeds are unnaturally split between man and portrait, Dracula supernaturally shifts between states of fog and beast.
7 Wisniewska, “My Humanity is Only Skin Deep,” 191.
8 Priest, introduction, xvii.
10 Ibid., 66–69, 87.


16 Wisniewska, “My Humanity is Only Skin Deep,” 193.


19 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 117.


21 Ibid., 62, 53, 63, 64, respectively.


23 Ibid., 148.

24 Ibid., 148.

25 Ibid., 5.

26 Ibid., 21.

27 Ibid., 5–6.

28 Ibid., 7.

29 Ibid., 23.

30 Ibid., 22.

31 Ibid., 43.

32 Ibid., 43.

33 Ibid., 62, 53, 63, 64, respectively.

34 Ibid., 45.


40 Ibid., 100.

41 Ibid., 116.

43 Ibid., 243.


45 Wells, *The Invisible Man*, 70.

46 Ibid., 25, 35.

47 Ibid., 79.

48 Ibid., 37.
