

A Grotesque Romance

BY NICHOLAS RUDDICK

In a writing career that spanned more than fifty years, during which he became one of the most influential thinkers of his age, H.G. Wells (1866-1946) published over a hundred books. The vast majority of these have fallen into varying degrees of obscurity, but four short novels that the young Wells published between 1895 and 1898 seem today as fresh as ever. We think of them as science-fiction classics, though the term "science fiction" didn't enter common usage until the 1930s, and Wells avoided the label even then – he preferred "scientific romance". In three of these classics, Wells explored grand Darwinian themes that had fascinated him since his scientific education in the mid-1880s under the crusading evolutionist Thomas Henry Huxley: the destiny of mankind as a biological species (*The Time Machine*, 1895), the uncertain boundary between the human and animal realms (*The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 1896), and the vulnerability of all organisms, be they men or Martians, to extinction via natural selection (*The War of the Worlds*, 1898).



Wells' other great scientific romance, *The Invisible Man* (1897), has a narrower focus and a more traditional theme. Invisibility has long been associated with magic rather than with science; the motif seems more at home in



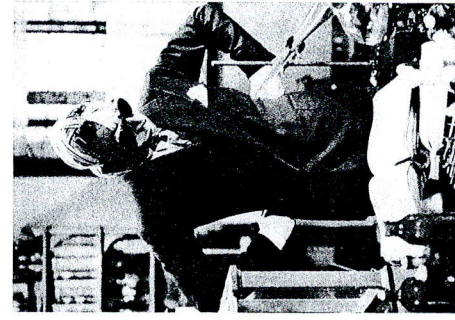
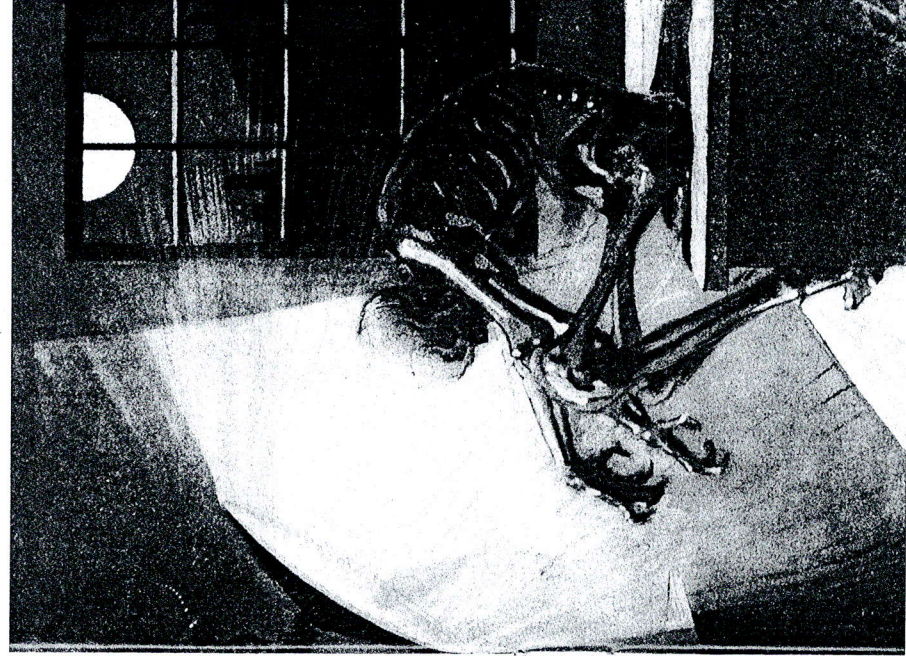
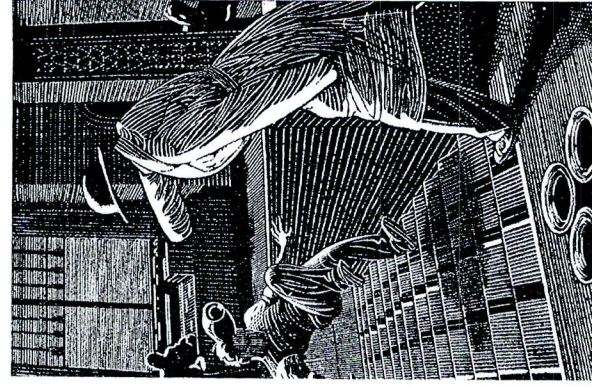
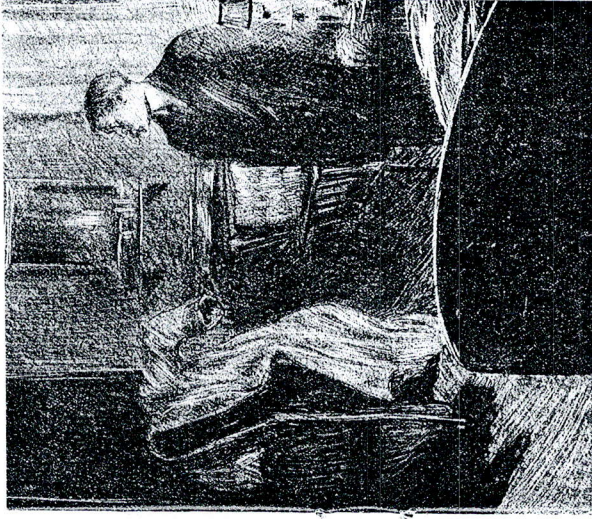
myth, folk-tale, or Tolkien-style fantasy than in science fiction. Set in a Sussex village with the mundane name of Iping, *The Invisible Man* ultimately derives, not from Darwin or Huxley, but from the story of Gyges as retold by Plato in *The Republic*: a shepherd, finding a ring that confers invisibility, uses his new power to seduce a queen, murder a king, and seize the throne. Plato cites the tale as evidence that men will never behave justly if their powers are unlimited. By detailing the increasingly irrational and violent actions of Griffin, the title character of *The Invisible Man*, Wells supports the ancient philosopher's argument. Because Griffin achieves invisibility scientifically rather than magically, the novel can be read as an updated version of those old cautionary tales that warn mortals not to claim the supernatural powers that the gods jealously reserve for themselves.

But while *The Invisible Man* does expose the timeless human tendency to abuse extraordinary powers, it is chiefly concerned with one quite modern type of potential abuser: the scientist. Wells explores not only how a flawed genius mishandles the god-like power conferred by the mastery of one scientific field, but also what motivated him to devote himself to that field in the first place. The characters in science fiction are often crudely sketched because readers are supposed to be interested mainly in the play of speculative ideas or futuristic weaponry: for psychological subtlety or insight into social mores one goes to Jane Austen not to Jules Verne. In *The Invisible Man*, however, Wells showed that it was possible to write effective science fiction in which the central character has considerable psychological complexity and the social milieu is densely depicted. Griffin certainly is one of the maddest of science fiction's innumerable mad scientists, but Wells wants us to understand how and why he got that way.

The subtitle of *The Invisible Man* is *A Grotesque Romance*. Something that is "grotesque" is an unnatural hybrid evoking in the observer an uncertain mixture of fascination, horror, and mirth. A good example of such a hybrid is the griffin, a fabulous beast containing elements of lion and eagle. In the novel, Griffin is a grotesquely heterogeneous creature even before he achieves invisibility: he is a physical freak (a near-albino), an intellectual freak ("the most gifted physicist the world has ever seen"), and an emotional freak (a monster of egotism). The novel itself is a weird but fascinating blend of genres, as typified by an early scene at the inn in Iping when the mysterious stranger starts to unwrap his facial bandages. His hosts, who assume that he has suffered a disfiguring accident, watch appalled as his nose falls off and rolls on the floor. Then they notice that it is made of cardboard, but just as they are about to laugh in relief, the stranger rips off the rest of his bandages to reveal, not the hideous scars that they were expecting, but...*nothing*! Then there are scenes of pure farce in which handfuls of money remove themselves from a bank and trousers embarrassingly elude their owners. Later there is horrific violence, such as when Griffin smashes an inoffensive man's head "to a jelly" with an iron rod, merely for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. And at the end, there is even a note of high tragedy, for though Griffin forfeits most of our sympathy as he descends into violent madness, his fate can still fill us with pity and terror because of the vast gulf between his extraordinary potential and his actual achievement.

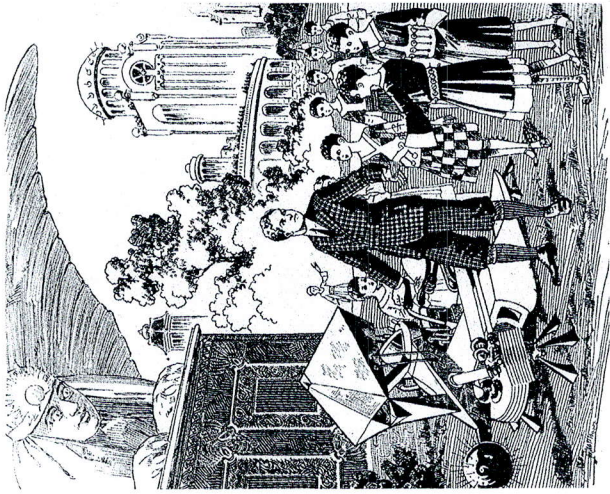
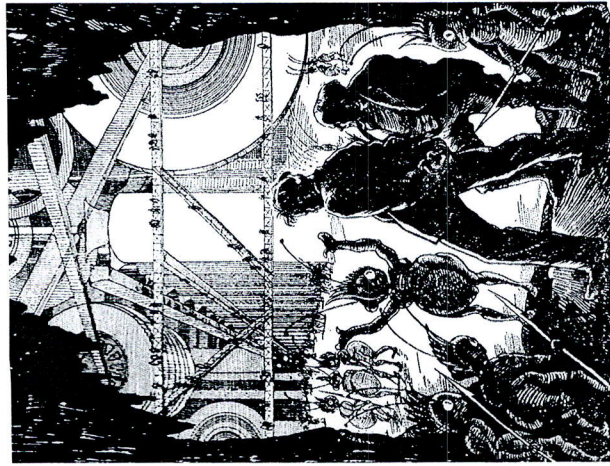
Griffin's complex character, gradually warped by his dealings with society, endows Wells' grotesque scenario with unity and plausibility. His genius, his titanic aspirations, and his extremely impatient nature would combine to alienate his college classmates. He would be likely to abandon the lucrative path of medicine, in which he would have to deal with patients face to face. His choice of specialization, the long-sheer frustration from thwarted ambition. He describes to Dr Kemp – a former fellow-student whose mediocrity has been rewarded with wealth and distinction – how he had planned "to flash my work upon the world with crushing effect and become famous at a blow," but had found himself "a shabby, poverty-struck, hemmed-in demonstrator, teaching fools in a provincial college." In spite of his genius he had become a nonentity, someone metaphorically invisible. In managing to make himself literally invisible, he prepares to take revenge on the rest of humanity for their failure to "see" him for what he really is.

Griffin's case history may be especially relevant today because it describes the making of a terrorist. In the late nineteenth century, "propaganda of the deed" (as terrorism was sometimes

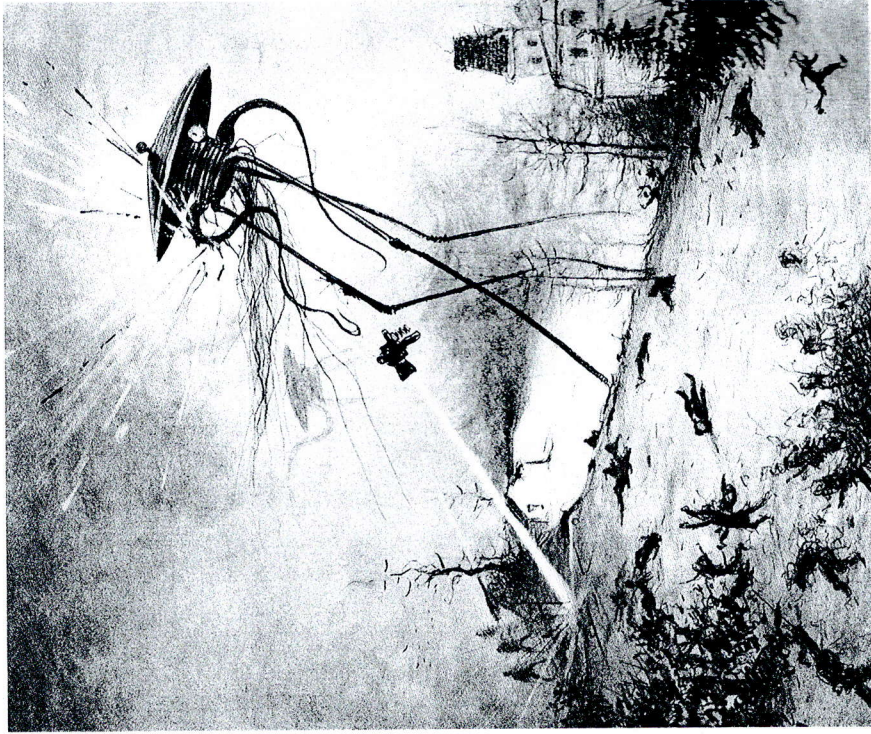


THE INVISIBLE MAN, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ILLUSTRATION BY LOUIS STRIMPL FROM A 1912 FRENCH EDITION (MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY); ILLUSTRATION BY EARNEST WALLCOUSINS FROM A 1935 EDITION; CLAUDE RAINS IN THE 1933 FILM VERSION; COVER ILLUSTRATION BY LOUIS STRIMPL, 1912 (MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY).

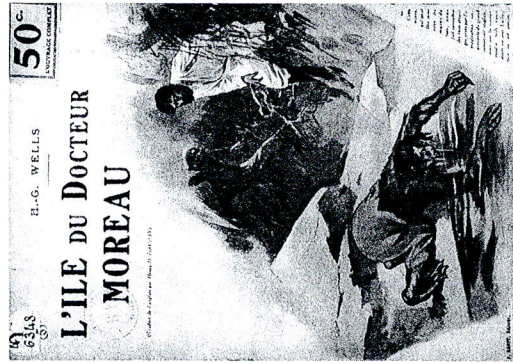
OPPOSITE: ALICE WITH THE MOCK TURTLE AND THE GRIFFIN, ILLUSTRATION BY ARTHUR RACKHAM FROM A 1907 EDITION OF ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND (BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY).



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ILLUSTRATIONS BY FRANK PAUL FOR *THE FIRST MAN IN THE MOON* AND *THE TIME MACHINE*, PUBLISHED IN 1927 IN *AMAZING STORIES*; ILLUSTRATION BY ALVIM-CORREA FROM A 1906 EDITION OF *THE WAR OF THE WORLDS* (MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY).



THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR MOREAU, OPPOSITE: ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN LAWRENCE; COVER ILLUSTRATION FROM A 1910 FRENCH TRANSLATION (BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY).



called) was strongly associated in the public mind with so-called "anarchists" who sought to further various radical political agendas by bomb-throwing, assassination, and otherwise violently destabilizing bourgeois democracy. From his first appearance in *Iping*, Griffin, by both word and action, seems to confirm the fears of those who, like the local schoolmaster, believe that he is an anarchist lying low. Later, Griffin tells Kemp that he plans "a judicious slaying" to establish a "Reign of Terror" inaugurating "the Epoch of the Invisible Man." But Griffin has no real political agenda, unless it is his own aggrandizement at the expense of anyone who, however inadvertently, stands in his path. As he rushes out of Kemp's house, Griffin hurls aside a little child, breaking its ankle: this is the action, not of a courageous radical, but of someone in a blind fury because he can't get his own way. Of course, Griffin does try to justify his violent outbursts by giving them a political gloss, and in this way Wells hints that the terrorist mentality – at least as Griffin exhibits it – is the product, not of twisted idealism, but of burning resentment at one's lowly status fuelled by an overweening pride in one's superiority to the rest of humanity.

The Invisible Man is particularly suited for dramatic adaptation because of its fascinatingly complex central character, the striking contrast between parochial *Iping* and its grotesque visitor, and the theatrically irresistible idea of an invisible protagonist. Probably still the best film adaptation of any H.G. Wells work is James Whale's *The Invisible Man* (1933), which made a star of Claude Rains in the title role, and which Wells himself pronounced "excellent". The screenplay by R.C. Sherriff (whose most famous work, *Journey's End*, was produced at The Shaw last year) is reasonably faithful to the novel, but there are two significant deviations worthy of mention here. In Whale's film, the mental decline of "Jack Griffin" is attributed to the effects of the invisibility drug, thereby largely absolving society for making him what he is. And the film omits one of Wells' most remarkable comic creations, the tramp Thomas Marvel, an almost Shakespearean mixture of clown and fool. I like to think that one future playwright was so struck by the scene in the novel describing the tramp's absurd dialogue with an invisible interlocutor in a desolate setting that he developed it into one of the most famous plays of the twentieth century. (Clue: *We're still waiting for an answer*.) Read Chapter 9 of *The Invisible Man* and see if you agree with me.

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