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UNPACKING THE INVISIBLE MAN: READING THROUGH THE ANALYTIC OF INVISIBILITY, MONEY AND ROMANTICISM

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the enduring imaginative appeal of The Invisible Man by Herbert George Wells, hereinafter referred to as H.G. Wells, through the trope of invisibility and money. In doing so, the paper also analyses the novel's thematic concerns that reflects England's transition amidst economic, social, and scientific changes. Further, it shall also elaborate on the intertwined conflict between Romantic ideals and urbanization in showcasing, the scientific hubris and the parochial attitudes of society, in exploring themes of literal, social, and psychological invisibility. Conclusively, it reads Wells' novella as a cautionary tale signalling the dangers of unchecked ambition and underscores the need for ethical responsibility through the contrasting characters of Griffin and Dr. Kemp who highlight the potential for both harm and good in scientific endeavours.

Keywords: Capitalism, Invisibility, Romantic, Science Fiction, Technology

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1. INTRODUCTION

Even though it's been over a century since it was first published, the charm of The Invisible Man has not waned a bit. In fact, its imaginative appeal is evident in the ceaseless churning of the story for new meanings and interpretative possibilities. It is palpable in a surge of retellings in different genres and media; comics, animations, film, television, stage and even radio adaptations as well as variants of the story that work with the invisibility motif. The variety of book covers, illustrations and performance too attest to its abiding appeal across generations, as the images given below amply demonstrates.

Figure 1

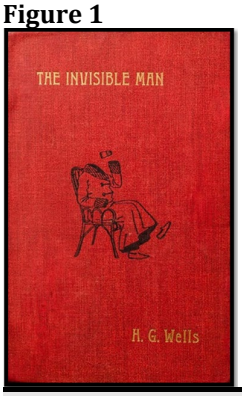

Figure 1 First Edition Cover of the Invisible Man by H. G. Wells (London: Pearson, 1897)

Figure 2

Figure 2 Theatrical Release Style A "Teaser" Poster for the 1933 Film the Invisible Man. Illustrated by Karoly Grosz. Universal Pictures

Figure 3

Figure 3 The Invisible Man by Kiarasa. Mar 12, 2011

Figure 4

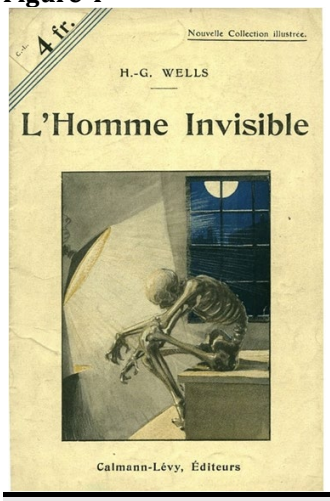

Figure 4 The Invisible Man by H. G. Wells, Cover Illustrated by Ludvík Strimpl for Calmann-Lévy in 1912.

Figure 5

Figure 5 A Street Performer in Scotland. 2016.

Taking cue from the popular appeal of Wells' classic novel The Invisible Man, this paper attempts to understand the phenomenal success of The Invisible Man. In doing so, this paper shall delve into the crucial thematic concerns of the novel in focus. However, before going into a textual analysis of the novel, it is imperative to locate the author in the historical context as well as cast a glance at his literary oeuvre so as to better understand the prescient nature of his works.

2. WELLS' LITERARY OUTPUT: AN OVERVIEW

Defying the challenges posed by his humble origins, Wells established himself as a renowned figure in the literary world. The Time Machine (1895) marks an important historical moment in his writing career whose success catapulted him into fame turning him into a literary celebrity. He was credited with having conceived a new genre called 'scientific romance' that grew steadily over the years

and has now developed into what is known as 'science fiction'. From his early years he was interested in the idea of time travel and possibilities made real with the aid of scientific intervention. The Chronic Argonauts (1888), published during his college years in Science Schools Journal, was his first attempt at writing a story that involved travelling in time. The Time Machine (1895), an extended and a well-developed version of the short story, was soon followed by other scientific romances; The Island of Doctor Moreau (1896), The Invisible Man (1897), The War of the Worlds (1898), When the Sleeper Awakes (1899), and The First Men in the Moon (1901). He also tried his hand at other literary genres such as Realist novels or 'Condition of England' novels such as Kipps (1905), Tono- Bungay (1909), and The New Machiavelli (1911)), non-fictions dealing with the future- Anticipations (1901), The Great State: Essays in Construction (1912) and bestselling historical works like The Outline of History (1920) and A Short History of the World (1922).

For Wells, his works were not only an expression of his imaginative mind but also a medium to comment on society and the scientific explorations and inventions of the day, and to explore the hidden potential of science combined with the ethical and moral concerns arising out of the God like power that technology would place in the hands of man. Given his social and political commitment, he also wrote novels dealing with women's rights, social reform, class and economic inequalities. His astute representation of the socially marginalized and a tender insight into their lives add a characteristic Dickensian tone to his novels. Kipps (1905) is one such example dealing with class distinctions where the protagonist's fortune witnesses a dramatic shift following an unexpected inheritance from his grandfather. The complications arise at the intersection of the social mores and his class origins that had hardly prepared him to deal with the manners and expectations of the upper-class society in which he has been suddenly thrown into. Continuing with the 'social problem' in Ann Veronica (1909), the author raises the New Woman question with Women's Suffrage movement informing the novel. Its feminist impulse was too shocking for the readers, who feared that it would have corrupting influence on the young ladies. In keeping with his felt need to reform society, Wells wrote utopian novels that reimagined societies, as in A Modern Utopia (1905) written during his association with the socialist Fabian Society. It presented Samurai as capable of running the best form of government. In his 'A note to the Reader' that prefaces the novel, he announces his intention 'to give the general picture of a Utopia that has grown up in my mind during the course of these speculations as a state of affairs at once possible and more desirable than the world in which I live.' Men Like Gods (1923) is another example of his Utopian novels that reveal Wells' early optimism for a better future.

Wells' political concern with the future of human race led him to also write prophetic historical fiction that reimagines the conventional plotting of history and goes a step ahead by seeking to foreshadow a history as it would unfold in the future. They combine within themselves prophetic warnings with possible lessons to be learnt from the First World War if man were to forestall history from repeating itself. In his The Outline of History, he wrote, 'Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe'. Though he increasingly became pessimistic, he still sought to mobilize an international support to avoid the Second World War and voiced his opinions in the international press. The Shape of Things to Come (1933) and The Holy Terror (1939) tackle urgent issues regarding the fate of humanity and the global world amidst the rise of fascism and the second coming of the world war, and this strain informed his last work far more forcefully; The Mind at the End of its Tether (1945), as the name vividly suggests, reinforces a dark world corrupted to the extent of annihilation.

Having taken an overview of his literary output, it needs be said that even while he was engaged in advancing his socialist ideals through his involvement in active politics, he was at the same time also driven by the commercial success which he sought to maximize further. He collaborated with filmmakers and reworked on his books such as The Shape of Things to Come, that was adapted for the screen into The Things to Come (1936), and The Man Who Could Work Miracles (1898), a short story that was turned into a film bearing the same name in 1937.

With humungous literary output and many of his works being bestsellers, he stood out from the many other contemporary writers, and the literary tradition of the age that seem to have changed at the turn of the century. Wells, though friend with Henry James, an American avant-garde of high modernism was himself no modernist and he had no qualms about it. While Wells was an established figure, Virginia Woolf, whose position as a modernist writer is unshakeable censures him in her essay "Modern Fiction", published in 1919. For Woolf who famously said '… in or around December 1910, human character changed', saw the year 1910 as marking a beginning of a new literary age, Modernism. Not content with the old literary formulas, she urged the writers to create a "new" kind of art, language and images to express the human realities. Even while she admits to Wells' talent, she expresses her disappointment with the kind of creative faculty that she feels has been wasted: Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy have excited so many hopes and disappointed them so persistently that our gratitude largely takes the form of thanking them for having shown us what they might have done but have not done; what we certainly, perhaps, do not wish to do. … In the case of Mr Wells … it indicates to our thinking the fatal alloy of genius, the great clod of clay that has got itself mixed up with the purity of his inspiration (Woolf, 1919, p. 244).

What irked Woolf about Wells was what she felt was his lack of interest in the emotional lives of his characters. Though Wells might not have appealed to the modernist writers of the early twentieth century it would be fallacious to say that he did not experiment. His wide-ranging literary oeuvre is a testimony to his playing with the form though not in line with the modernist lineaments.

It is interesting to note that even though today H. G. Wells is known as "The Father of Science Fiction", his works were called 'scientific romances' in his days. Here it imperative to underscore two things. One, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is arguably one of the earliest literary predecessors of this tradition. Of all his works, Wells' The Invisible Man comes closest to it. Both of them have a scientist secretly engaged in scientific pursuits that will earn them distinctions but has life threatening dimensions to it. Their personal quest for power and glory is ruptured because of its disconnectedness from humanity and an abandonment of ethical responsibility. Moreover, both of them also work with the trope of alienated beings placed in the matrix of a social and cultural life that seems to antagonize them to the extent of them turning into the Other. Thus, what we have in Wells is the application of scientific principles to fiction to investigate social and moral concerns arising out of misuse of technology. In short, these novels act as cautionary tales against fetishization of science and technology that privileges inventions at the cost of humanity.

Two, even though Wells is credited with initiating science fiction, it is also Jules Verne, a French author, who with his keen interest in science helped give shape to the fledgling genre. The confusion stems, in part, from the ambiguity in the definition of the genre. Scholars working in the field of science-fiction point to the difficulty of defining the term. While some scientific imagination or technological innovation is seen as the starting point, it is not sufficient in itself. For instance, in the context of

The Invisible Man, the situation is made complex when one seeks to answer how science-fiction negotiates its boundaries with realism that is deployed in the characterization of landscape and characters. One of the ways in which Wells seeks to resolve this dilemma is by etching a more familiar and realistic landscape so that the shock of de-familiarization which is inbuilt in a science-fiction text is not too much. Such a tentative move also stems, as Christopher Priest points out, from the fact that "at the time when Wells was writing his scientific romances, the idiom of the fantastic was not at all well established in popular fiction" (Priest, 2007, p. xvi). Further, commenting on the function of real locations in science fiction, he explains that: Using a real or thinly disguised real place can be thought of as a minor form of authorial stage fright: to persuade the reader of the extraordinary events that are to follow, the author establishes a familiar location (Priest, 2007, p. xvi).

So, some of the real places that form the Wellsian landscape are Midhurst (Bramblehurst), Portsmouth (Port Stowe) Sandgate (Fishbourne), and Southsea (Port Burdock). However, this did not in any way constrain his literary possibilities. Rather, it is becoming an intelligent means of negotiating readerly anxieties and authorial aspirations, and a broadening of the scope of what is now known as science-fiction. Read in such a context Norman Nicholson's assessment of him sums up the author: No one could call Wells a "regional" novelist. His restless mind could never be tied down to one place and he never learned, as T.S. Eliot would have us learn, to sit still. Yet, his imagination always made its strongest flight when it had a small patch of solid earth from which to take off. His greater novels all have the look and feel of actuality. (Nicholson).

3. INVISIBILITY, MONEY AND ROMANTICISM: THEMATIC MOTIFS AND CONCERNS

Again, I seek the reader to note the warnings I gave in that year, twenty years ago. Is there anything to add to that preface now? Nothing except my epitaph hat, when the time comes, will manifestly have to be: "I told you so. You damned fools." (The talics are mine.) -Herbert George Wells, In the War in the Air.

One of the ways in which the phenomenal success of The Invisible Man can be explained is by taking the line of argument that sees the trope of invisibility, quite novel for its own time, as central to the fascination with the novel. However, the continued appeal is also a testimony to the richness of the text and a range of thematic concerns that animate the novel. Located at the cusp of economic, social and scientific changes, Wells explores the transition of England in terms of changing physical landscape, social arrangements and economic patterns of proliferation as well as through fears and exhilarations associated with the recent developments in science.

Though not very obvious, one of the less commented themes in The Invisible Man is the Romantic spirit that dwells in conflict with the increasing urbanization of the rural spaces. The deliberate choice of countryside as the setting for a large part of the novel has a certain purpose. It becomes the site to articulate the emergent anxieties associated with the changing times. In one of the most visually evocative passages in the novel, the Invisible Man expresses his disdain for the commercial spirit that has taken over the countryside, the ill effects of which are visible in the changing topographical landscape of the place. On a visit back to Chesil Stowe, he mourns the loss of the village where he once lived and had found his ladylove too: I remember walking back to the empty house, through the place that had once been a village and was now patched and tinkered by the jerry builders into the ugly likeness

of a town. Every way the roads ran out at last into the desecrated fields and ended in rubble heaps and rank wet weeds. I remember myself as a gaunt black figure, going along the slippery, shiny pavement and the strange sense of detachment I felt from the squalid respectability, the sordid commercialism of the place (p. 99).

In rejecting the new modernizing impulses that is too quickly embraced by the bourgeoisie as a mark of 'having arrived', he marks himself as the isolated Romantics who too embraced rural virtues over a morally corrupt and degenerate city life. He closes this by saying: It was all like a dream that visit to the old places. I did not feel then that I was lonely, that I had come out from the world into a desolate place. I appreciated my loss of sympathy, but I put it down to the general inanity of things (p. 99).

The commercial ethics that repel him are also explored through the figures of landlords and inn owners as well as through an image of an emporium in London, Omniums, 'the big establishment where everything is to be bought … meat, grocery, linen, furniture, clothing, oil paintings, even- a huge meandering collection of shops rather than a shop (p. 115).

It is through an analytic consideration of money, then, that this strand of meaning becomes clear as attitudes to money are also a significant indicator of class and privilege. Mrs. Hall, the owner of the Coach and Horses has quickly adapted herself to the demands of the business. While she cares for her guests, she is also a no-nonsense woman in so far financial matters are concerned. In asserting her rights to the place, she brooks no hesitation. Apart from insisting on her payments to be made on time, the only thing that can silence her objections to the stranger's undesirable deeds in her house is the promise of a monetary settlement. The novel is clear about the ways in which it is the money that has now taken over the control so much so that the recurring image of "the flying money" becomes an apt metaphor for the circulation and ruling power of money. One might, perhaps, argue that money is what also drives the stranger who is later revealed to be the Invisible Man, Griffin. While that is partly true, it is also to be noticed that his need for money does not stem from a capitalist desire to accumulate wealth. In fact, his acts of robbing people of their money is to secure for himself a safe place to conduct his unfinished project on invisibility and to purchase the wherewithal to conduct his experiments.

In connecting the preceding arguments about the Invisible Man's disdain for people who embody the mercenary spirit and his consequent distancing of himself from them, two things need to be said. One, the reason why he shuts himself off from any human contact is because he cannot tolerate people who act chiefly as hindrances to his research. Two, even when he holds them in contempt for attempting to rise above their station in life, he is himself not exempt from such aspirational thoughts. Frustrated with his life as a teacher with prying colleagues and disinterested students, he entertains thoughts of escaping the drudgery of such a life through hard work. He tells Dr. Kemp: 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. 97).

Thus, hoping to excel in the scientific community and take the world by surprise, he immerses himself in a secretive mission though constantly thwarted by people around him. Nonetheless, despite the trying circumstances he discovers the formula for invisibility. Thrilled by his discovery, he imagines "a magnificent vision of all that invisibility might mean to a man, -the mystery, the power, the freedom. Drawbacks I saw none" (p. 97). Yet very soon he realizes the inordinate amount of difficulties that it involved right from conducting his first successful experiment to

the corporeal suffering involved in the process of transition: "But it was horrible. I had not expected the suffering. A night of racking anguish, sickness and fainting… all my body afire; but I lay there like grim death" (p. 106). With a prophetic irony that anticipates the finality in the concluding chapter, this initiates the trajectory of his life that will become one of being perpetually hounded.

Far from achieving the many advantages that he had hoped for, he finds himself at the receiving end. In a strange way, his bodily invisibility does not make him immune to the human needs for food, clothes and shelter and yet it is this that he must avoid in order to escape detection. When he first goes out as an invisible man he entertains 'plans of all the wild and wonderful things that I had now impunity to do' (p. 109). However, much to his shock and disappointment he finds himself rudely jolted back to his senses when hit violently by the crowd through which he meant to go about fooling a bit. Despite his invisibility he is still vulnerable to the elements of nature, and dogs who rely on their sense of smell pose a threat to his survival as well.

Gradually, the Invisible Man develops more megalomaniacal tendencies. From wanting to establish a splendid identity for himself in the world and have some wild and extraordinary fun while remaining invisible, he transforms himself into an agent of terror. Once the news of the invisible man runs wild, he anticipates terrible prospects for himself, if caught, and thus declares his plans to establish a reign of terror. And in this he seeks the support of Dr. Kemp who advises him against it.

Griffin ends up embodying everything that is antithetical and which marks him as an outcaste. He is the Other that needs to be either domesticated or exterminated because it poses a monstrous threat to the survival of any social order. Wells briskly takes the readers through the manhunt scenes in which the Invisible Man gets trapped and ultimately killed because of the combined efforts of Dr. Kemp and the elaborate machinery deployed by the police to restrict his movement.

From the beginning Wells had conceived a novel that brought together his interest in science as well as socialist politics. Griffin's working in isolation evokes the image of Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's eponymous novel. In Shelley's novel, Victor Frankenstein is a scientist engaged in a lonely pursuit of creating life form out of dead and decaying matter. While both entertain extraordinary thoughts with their scientific ambitions, both are equally exasperated at the horrors that it unfolds for them. In the case of Victor, he is repelled by his own creation whom he sees as a monster owing to its physical deformity whereas Griffin himself becomes an embodiment of horror by unleashing terror on a wide scale. Both are instances of geniuses gone horribly wrong. The subtext in both of the novels is one of anxieties and boundless possibilities that science and technology evoked, particularly in the times in which they were written; an age marked by a growing fascination with science. Charles Darwin's The Origin of Species (1859) is considered to be one of the seminal influences on Wells' The Invisible Man.

Further, if one of his aims of the novel is to expand on the scientific investigations, the other is to shift the gaze on the community life of countryside that has traditionally been seen as repository of moral values and togetherness of a communal living. Despite the burglary and a wave of panic from the Invisible Man, the village folks continue with their festivities on Whit-Monday. In some sense, it marks a celebration of the triumph and a spirit of closeness that characterizes the relations in the countryside. However, in a remarkable balancing of the city-country divide Wells' does not idealize or demonize either. His portrait of the close-knit community life also shows signs of fracturing in the individualist and mercenary ethics that seems to be quickly gripping the villages too.

In relaying his past to Dr. Kemp, Griffin tells him that he robbed his father of the money so that he could pursue his experiments. His death is given a summary dismissal in a single sentence: "The Money was not his, and he shot himself" (p. 98). In a brilliant stroke of mastery, Wells represents 'Griffin's symbolic murder of his father' as precipitated by selfish tendencies in the wake of modernization where money seems to be the only means out. It also signifies the collision of the traditional values with the modernizing forces (Cantor, 2006).

In addition, Griffin's refusal to integrate with the Iping folks is challenged by the community's collective desire to know him. In the chapter "The Unveiling of the Stranger" the inhabitants collect in Mrs Hall's house to figure out who the stranger is. Through act of conjectures, an incident of burglary at the Vicarage and the enigmatic presence of the stranger in Iping are connected together inspired in no less measure by the mysterious flying of Mrs. Hall's furniture and rumors that made a fugitive and half breed out of him because of his grotesque appearance and aloofness. Furthermore, the reason why they cannot leave him alone to carry out his work in privacy that he so desperately seeks is because what they know about him through the landlady is that he is an "experimental investigator. "This not only arouses their curiosity but also provokes their fear of the unknown as its meaning is unfathomable to them. Lastly, what adds to it is the stranger's avoiding the church. To the superstitious townspeople, it is an ultimate marker of devil that fears God and thus keeps away from the church and the God.

Within the intertwined politics of knowledge and identity is also embedded a critique of Othering. In the town's imaginary where his scientific pursuits hardly make sense to anyone, the stranger's identity as an alien presence gets further reinforced. In doing so, Wells is commenting not only on the social attitudes of the townspeople but also on their various limitations that cannot accommodate difference. It is because of such a parochial worldview that they project their own ignorance and fears on to the stranger and create an Other out of him who is both racially and physically distinct from them thus complicating questions of visibility.

The trope of invisibility, a multilayered and encoded motif in the text, has been variously commented upon by a number of critics. In his introduction to The Invisible Man, Christopher Priest deals at some length with various kinds of invisibility that is being suggested in the novel; a literal invisibility that implies the disappearance of the corporeal body; scientific invisibility that explains the physical process of how invisibility is attained through altering natural properties; social invisibility marginalizes a person or a community on the basis of caste, class, gender, sexual orientation et al thus treating them as invisible beings despite their very real presence. In an extension of social invisibility, psychological invisibility could be personal or social alienation characterized by mental block leading to a refusal to acknowledge people. In The Invisible Man, the term invisibility is invoked in all its ramifications.

In another abiding concern with the narrative method that needs to be addressed is the role of the comic scenes in the novel. In what purports to be a serious and a sinister tale, the narrative abounds with hilarious moments. It is also in understanding Wells' use of comic elements that his curious labeling of his work as a 'grotesque romance' can be understood. The grotesque is highlighted in the Invisible Man's unusual dressing; when he arrives in the town, regardless of the weather, he conceals himself under unusual layers of clothing, hat and black glasses. What further add to the comical moments is the exaggerated external add-ons or appendages like nose that the Invisible Man is obsessed with. Further, a lot of scenes involving his encounter with townspeople until he takes on menacing proportions

are brilliant examples of slapstick comedy. It is in this kind of exploration of the fanciful but distorted notions of power and actions of what one could do with the powers achieved through certain technical devices that Wells is able to distinguish himself from more modern science-fiction writers. He is not interested so much in the power derived from scientific means itself as he is in understanding how it can corrupt human beings if divorced from issues of morality and ethical implications of it. Among other things, one of the functions of humour is to also remind us about the ordinariness of human life that needs to be nourished instead of being ruined by delusions of power and authority.

In the end, in matters pertaining to scientific inventions and technological interventions that seek to alter natural processes, questions of ethics and responsibility is a perennial concern that needs careful consideration. A lot of science fiction including Frankenstein explores the price that our civilization might have to pay if moral and ethical restraints are not brought to bear upon human being's soaring scientific ambitions. Sounding a note of caution against probable dangers of misplaced notions of progress, their stories remind us that scientific hubris may just be the tipping point in leading a catastrophic future. Such an interpretation is validated by Dr. Kemp in one of the most dramatic moments in the novel. In an attempt to explain Adye, the Chief of Burdock, the degree of violence and irreparable damage that the Invisible Man is going to inflict, he utters, "The man's become inhuman, I tell you… He has cut himself off from his kind" (p. 138).

If Griffin is an embodiment of evil scientist with disastrous appropriation of knowledge, then Kemp is the opposite of him, the voice of conscience. As Griffin reveals his intentions to terrorize and kill people if they resist, Kemp is horrified and pleads reason with him. Hoping to make him see the incredible amount of good he can do to the society through his research, and to ultimately help him integrate in the society he says: Understand me, I don't agree to this. Why dream of playing a game against the race? How can you hope to gain happiness? Don't be a lone wolf. Publish your results; take the world- take the nation at least- into your confidence. Think what you might do with a million helpers (p. 134).

It is then befitting that it is him who has the wits and the confidence to take on Griffin, and that it is because of him that the Invisible Man's plan to spread reign of terror and make everyone subservient to his command is curbed.

In the ending of the novel that concludes with an epilogue, the author leaves us with the image of Thomas Marvel, the tramp, successfully running his business from the 'capital' gained through deceit. With the vantage point of having 'known' the Invisible Man and now in possession of the money and the experiment notes of the Invisible Man, he invests that capital- money and narratives- in a business and is successfully making money out of it. He embodies the business acumen indispensable to a capitalist order. His careful choice of signage for his inn that has "an empty board save for a hat and boots" (p. 160) is a careful exploitation of visualizing modes in advertisements that is much sought after for the growth of business.

In what seems to be a lasting example of Wells' critique of industrialism and science, the tramp and the level headed scientist respectively become Wells' signboard for the new market economy that has ushered in, and the knowledge that marries social concern that is needed for the greater good of humankind. It is not accidental, then, that Wells chooses to end the novel not only with the death of Griffin but with Dr. Kemp, a benevolent scientist, and Marvel, a successful entrepreneur.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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