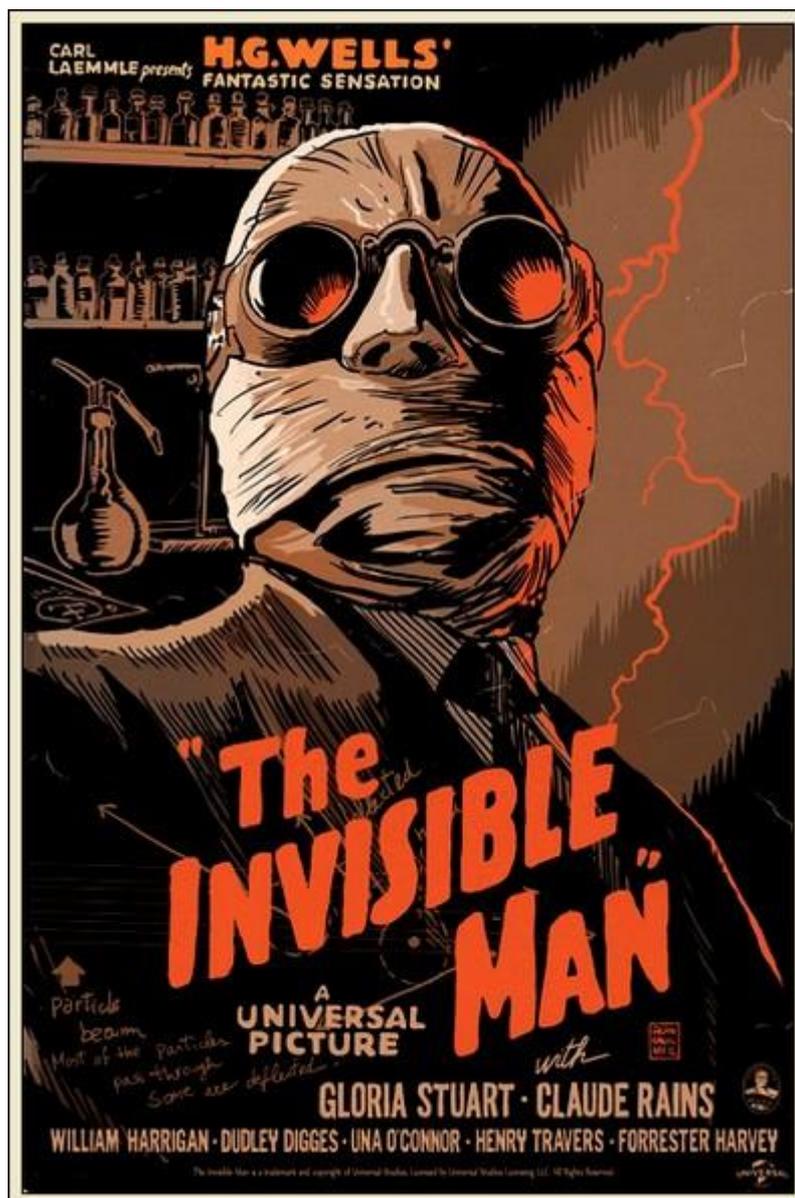


The Invisible Man



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by James Whale. Produced by Carl Laemmle. Screenplay by R. C. Sherriff. Loosely based on *The Invisible Man* by H.G. Wells. Cinematography by Arthur Edson. Art Direction by Charles D. Hall. Original Music by Heinz Roemheld. Edited by Ted J. Kent. Special Effects team Leader: John B. Fulton.

Cinematic length: 71 minutes. Companies: Universal Pictures. Cinematic release: November 1933: DVD release 2004. Rated M15+. Rating 85%.

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Written Without Prejudice

Cast

- *Claude Rains* as Dr. Jack Griffin / The Invisible Man
- *Gloria Stuart* as Flora Cranley
- *William Harrigan* as Dr. Arthur Kemp
- *Henry Travers* as Dr. Cranley
- *Una O'Connor* as Jenny Hall
- *Forrester Harvey* as Herbert Hall
- *Dudley Digges* as the chief detective
- *E. E. Clive* as Constable Jaffers
- *Merle Tottenham* as Millie, the barmaid
- *Harry Stubbs* as Inspector Bird
- *Donald Stuart* as Inspector Lane
- *Robert Brower* as the old farmer
- *Monte Montague* as a constable
- *John Carradine* as the informer
- *Walter Brennan* as the bicycle owner

Review

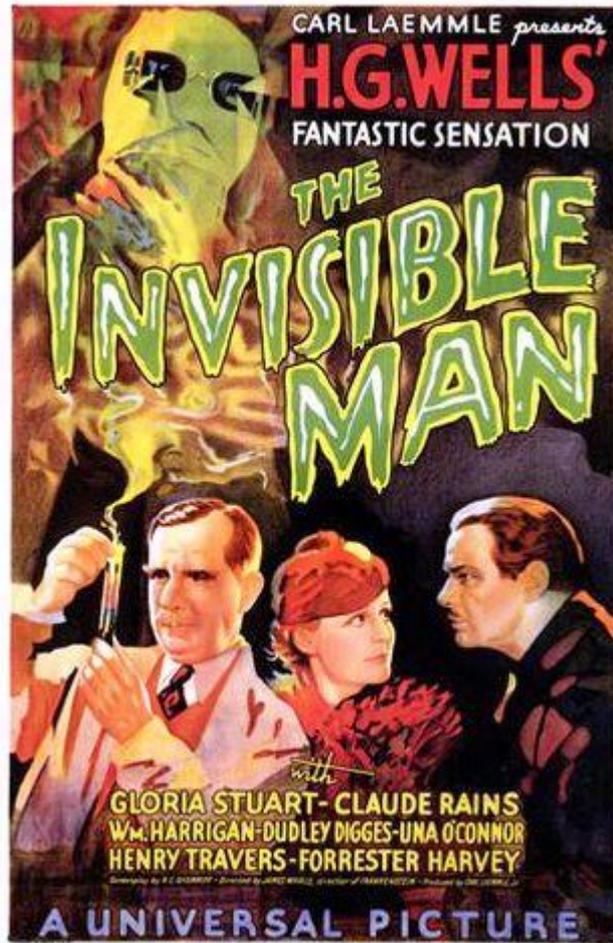
In the film version the story begins very differently to how it begins in Well's novel. Here the action has already advanced as Dr. Jack Griffin trudges through the snow to a small town inn, which he virtually takes over as he rents out a room. If his appearance, wrapped up in bandages and dark glasses, with a heavy coat and gloves were not enough to cause suspicion and dismay, his pre-emptive, egocentric bossiness would. Holed up in a rented room, he desperately tries to make an antidote for his invisibility using chemicals. Clearly a desperately unhappy man. He tries to reverse a hell of his own making. The inn's owners Jenny and Herbert Hall (Una O'Connor and Forrester Harvey) however want him out and when they become forceful he snaps, rejoicing in revealing his invisibility and the havoc he can and does frenetically cause as the Halls, the villagers and the police try to entrap him. This chase scene does have some funny moments, which are in the style of Buster Keaton, but that changes when in the next scene we are in the offices of his former co-workers in chemicals who worry about him, Flora Cranley (Gloria Stuart) his love, her father and professional supervisor, Dr. Cranley (Henry Travers) and their partner, Doctor Kemp. From their conversations we learn that he

was secretive about his last experiment to the extent that he left to complete it and that it involved a rare chemical, that those who ingest it are left insane and with blanched skin.



Griffin and Flora recall their romance

When Griffin meets Flora we see that they did not communicate well in past days. She remembers a carefree time for her when he was anything but carefree, being worried about how his lack of money and lowly position would affect their chances of marriage. Going by her facial expression she feels surprised that these things matter. He briefly emerges again as a man pathetically desperate for “a way back” out of invisibility but then he talks of how he could make money by getting and selling state secrets and forming invisible armies that could conquer the world. He then starts a Hitleristic bully boy rant about taking over the earth.



H.G Wells 1866-1946



This shot gives an idea of the effectiveness of the special effects. The pyjamas walk and sit



Filming: James Whale (standing left) Claude Rains and crew members in the Lion's Head Inn sitting room.

Released eleven months after Hitler came to power, *The Invisible Man* was extraordinarily prescient with its depiction of a powerful megalomaniac with a damaged psyche, a compulsion to command and a need for a sense of triumph through destruction. What was funny in his first rampage in the town of Iping becomes horrific as he murders people, pushes search party members over cliffs, and derails a speeding train. His laughter at his Iping rampage, which we could share, becomes repulsive in the later scenes and suggests not only sadism and madness, but arrested development or reverting to a childhood state as he cannot cope.

The film was a commercial and critical success, due in part to the extraordinarily difficult but effective special effects put together by John B. Fulton and his team. Hollywood's special effects were usually risibly obvious from the first days of film well until into the 1960s, but not here. With wires, matte shots, tinkering with negatives and a cover-all black suit filmed against black backgrounds (which Rains hated) Whale's team produced much. He was fortunate to have R.C. Sherriff a stage writer, for his screenplay. In drama even short delays in the narrative can be fatal; points must be made quickly. With cinema screenplays many meander and team efforts often result in muddled or conflicting purposes. That does not happen here. In 71 minutes James Whale packs a good deal in without becoming frenetic or putting the audience on a roller coaster ride through a horror gallery. Narrative, characterisation, settings, theme and subtext all segue together nicely with skilful pacing and points sometimes made deftly, at other times forcefully, yet without force being overdone. Fine performances by everybody was also another massive positive. Claude Rains, until then primarily a stage actor, was superb in a difficult role. His portrayal of Griffin made his mark in Hollywood and so began a distinguished film career. Whale could balance humour with suspense as in the first scenes at the White Horse Inn where he delineates English village life and the comradery at The Lion's Head with gentle humour – which vanishes when Griffin appears. The police are also shown to be a joke, with near parodies of their usual depictions and behaviour. Whale's use of humour adds a needed contrast to the ultimately pathetic end to Griffin's life.

Ironically one of the few people who disliked the film was H.G. Wells, the story's original creator. He liked Una O'Connor's portrayal, but apparently not much else. Some differences, such as adapting the story's

original late Victorian setting into the 1930s were acceptable. However the way science combined with ambition and insecurity about love, led a good man into tragedy was not. Originally Griffin was ruthless and ambitious and this led him into the experiment to become invisible, but who amongst us, good or bad has not dreamed of that at some point? When Wells decided to write on that idea he was tapping into a primal dream – hence despite the virtues and the success in the 1897 book and the 1933 film, the idea continues to be reworked in mass culture.



James Whale 1889-1957

