

## THE MYTH OF GYGES AND *THE INVISIBLE MAN* BY H.G. WELLS

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There is an ancient Greek myth about a man named Gyges. According to myth, Gyges was a shepherd in the service of the King of Lydia. One day there was an earthquake in the mountainous region where Gyges and his fellow shepherds tended the king's flocks. Shifting stones revealed a cave in the mountainside, and Gyges curiously investigated it. Entering the cave, Gyges discovered that it was in fact a tomb. He found a bronze horse-statue that contained a corpse larger than that of a man wearing a golden ring. Gyges pocketed the ring and fled from the cave.

Then the shepherds met together, according to custom, so they might send their monthly report about the flocks to the king. Gyges arrived for the meeting, having the ring on his finger, and as he was sitting among them he chanced to turn the jewel of the ring inside his hand. Instantly he became invisible to the rest of the company, and they began to speak of him as if he were no longer present. He was astonished at this, and again touching the ring he turned the collet outwards and reappeared. He made several trials of the ring, and always with the same result-when he turned the collet inwards he became invisible, when outwards he reappeared. Gyges then volunteered to be chosen as one of the messengers who reported to the king as to the status of the flocks. Arriving at the palace, Gyges used his new power of invisibility to seduce the queen. Then with her help he murdered the king and became king of Lydia himself.

Greek philosophers used this story to talk about morality and ethics. Some believed that if a person did have the power to become invisible, the rules of morality and society would be out the window, and the person would act however he or she wished. One philosopher argued it this way: "[If given this power] no man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and sleep with anyone at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a god among men."

Now fast-forward to Victorian England. H.G. Wells was one of the time's greatest authors, penning such classics as *War of the Worlds*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and *The Time Machine*. Harkening back to the myth of Gyges, one of Wells' novels, *The Invisible Man*, experimented with the limits to which a person might go if he or she were released from the bonds of social restriction.

*The Invisible Man* is a tale of suspense that focuses on an insane medical student, Griffin, who has discovered how to make people invisible. Because he is mad and invisible, Griffin poses a special threat to the community. He can steal from people and assault them as if he were a ghost. As the police close in on him, he becomes more desperate and more dangerous.



Probably Wells' third most well-known novel, *The Invisible Man* is famous more for its protagonist than its story – the bandage-clad figure of Dr. Griffin, complete with trench coat, hat and sunglasses, has stuck far better in the public consciousness than Wells' actual story has. Nevertheless, it advances an important question: Can men become monsters when released from the rules of morality and society?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. In the myth of Gyges, we do not know if Gyges was a good man before he finds the magical ring. Do you think he was already corrupt, and the ring just amplified his evil nature? Or did the idea of the magical ring corrupt him completely? Explain.
2. If you found a magical ring like Gyges did, would it change your behavior? Explain.
3. Do you agree with the philosopher who said that we all would become thieves, murderers, and rapists if we were given the Ring of Gyges? Explain.
4. If the rules were removed from society, how would people act?
5. What kind of people considers themselves "above the law"? How do they act? What happens to them?
6. How are society and morality connected?
7. **Connect:** Watch *The Dark Knight* directed by Christopher Nolan. In this Batman film, the antagonist, a criminal called the Joker, claims that deep down all people are evil. During his reign of terror in Gotham City, the Joker seeks to prove that people's true nature is an animalistic selfishness. How does this tie into the myth of Gyges and *The Invisible Man*? Would H.G. Wells agree with the Joker? Do you? Explain.