

Constructing the Unknown: Village Gossip and Cultural Identity Formation in H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*

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Abstract. *This study examines the role of gossip and rumor in the construction of social identity in H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*. While previous scholarship has predominantly focused on invisibility, scientific modernity, alienation, and technological anxiety, limited attention has been given to the communal processes through which Griffin's identity is discursively produced. Employing a qualitative interpretive design grounded in philosophical hermeneutics, the study analyzes narrative passages, dialogues, and communal conversations that contribute to the formation of social meanings within the village of Iping. The analysis draws upon Hall's theory of representation, Foucault's concept of discourse, and Goffman's theory of stigma to investigate how gossip functions as a cultural technology of identity formation. The findings reveal four interconnected processes. First, gossip operates as an epistemic response to social uncertainty, enabling villagers to transform ambiguity into shared knowledge. Second, repeated narratives generate stable identity categories that progressively redefine Griffin as a stranger, victim, criminal, anarchist, lunatic, and supernatural threat. Third, these discursive constructions facilitate processes of othering through which difference is converted into social exclusion. Finally, the accumulation of gossip and rumor culminates in mythification and moral panic, transforming Griffin into a symbolic embodiment of communal anxiety. The study argues that Griffin's identity is not discovered through factual knowledge but produced through collective interpretation and representation. By foregrounding gossip as a mechanism of cultural meaning-making, this research offers a new perspective on *The Invisible Man* and contributes to contemporary discussions of discourse, identity, representation, and social knowledge in literary and cultural studies.*

Keywords: *gossip; identity formation; othering; moral panic; hermeneutics; cultural studies; H. G. Wells; *The Invisible Man*; discourse; representation*



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1. Introduction

Recent developments in literary and cultural studies have increasingly challenged essentialist understandings of identity by emphasizing its discursive, relational, and socially constructed nature. Rather than functioning as a stable attribute inherent to the individual, identity is now widely understood as a product of representation, language, and cultural negotiation operating within specific social contexts (Hall, 1997; Barker, 2012; Woodward, 2016). This shift has generated renewed

scholarly interest in the ways communities produce social meanings through everyday communicative practices, particularly through informal modes of discourse such as gossip, rumor, and collective storytelling. Far from being trivial forms of communication, gossip has been recognized as a powerful cultural mechanism through which communities circulate knowledge, regulate social norms, establish group boundaries, and construct collective perceptions of individuals and events (Gluckman, 1963; Bergmann, 1993; Foster, 2004). Recent scholarship further demonstrates that gossip functions as a discursive instrument capable of shaping social status, public reputation, and identity formation through repeated acts of representation within communal networks. Contemporary studies show that gossip contributes to the circulation of social information, the regulation of reputational judgments, and the maintenance of group norms, thereby shaping how individuals are collectively perceived and socially categorized (Cruz et al., 2021; Robbins & Karan, 2020; Yucel, 2024). Consequently, gossip may be understood not merely as informal conversation but as a cultural practice that actively participates in the production of social reality and collective meaning.

The cultural significance of gossip becomes particularly evident in relation to representations of the stranger. Classical sociological theory identifies the stranger as a liminal figure who exists simultaneously within and outside the social group, generating uncertainty, curiosity, and suspicion among community members (Simmel, 1950). Such ambiguity often stimulates the production of narratives designed to explain, categorize, and ultimately domesticate social difference (Bauman, 1991; Jenkins, 2014). Contemporary studies of identity and othering similarly argue that communities frequently establish social cohesion through symbolic distinctions between “insiders” and “outsiders,” producing cultural boundaries that define who belongs and who does not (Brons, 2015; Pickering, 2001; Said, 1978). These processes are sustained through discourse, particularly through recurring narratives that transform speculation into socially accepted knowledge. Recent scholarship has highlighted how collective narratives function as epistemic frameworks through which communities interpret unfamiliar individuals and convert uncertainty into culturally intelligible identities. Such interpretive processes are closely related to broader dynamics of belonging, social categorization, and collective meaning-making that enable communities to stabilize uncertainty through shared narratives (Ahmed, 2021; Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2021; Jenkins, 2014). In this regard, gossip and rumor operate as mechanisms of social interpretation, allowing communities to assign meanings to individuals whose identities remain unstable or unknown.

These dynamics are strikingly represented in *The Invisible Man* by H. G. Wells, first published in 1897. Existing scholarship has predominantly interpreted the novel through the lenses of scientific modernity, invisibility, alienation, technological anxiety, ethical transgression, and the fragmented self (Suvin, 1979; Parrinder, 2000; Seed, 2010; Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 2008; Roberts, 2016). More recent studies continue to situate Griffin within broader discussions of scientific power, posthuman identity, and the crisis of modern subjectivity (Luckhurst, 2021; Canavan, 2022; Mousoutzanis, 2020). While these approaches have significantly enriched understanding of Wells’s fiction, they tend to privilege Griffin as an isolated individual while overlooking the

collective social processes through which his identity is produced. Yet throughout the narrative, Griffin is rarely understood through direct knowledge or objective evidence. Instead, his identity emerges through an accumulation of rumors, suspicions, and speculative interpretations circulated among the residents of Iping. Villagers successively identify him as an accident victim, a fugitive criminal, an anarchist, a madman, and eventually a supernatural threat. Before Griffin becomes visible as a character, he is already constructed as a social narrative. The community therefore functions not merely as an observing audience but as an active producer of meaning whose discourse generates the identity attributed to the stranger.

Despite extensive scholarship on invisibility and alienation in *The Invisible Man*, relatively little attention has been devoted to the role of gossip as a mechanism of cultural identity formation. This absence is notable because the novel repeatedly demonstrates how communal discourse transforms uncertainty into knowledge, difference into stigma, and strangeness into social threat. Drawing upon Hall's (1997) theory of representation, Foucault's (1972) conception of discourse and power, and Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma, this study argues that gossip and rumor function as cultural technologies through which the community of Iping constructs Griffin's social identity. More specifically, the article examines how everyday conversations generate collective knowledge, how repeated narratives become accepted as social truth, and how these processes reflect broader Victorian anxieties concerning otherness, uncertainty, and social disorder. By shifting critical attention from invisibility as an individual condition to the communal production of identity through discourse, this study contributes a new perspective to Wells scholarship while extending contemporary discussions of language, culture, representation, and identity formation in literary studies.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative interpretive design grounded in philosophical hermeneutics to examine the role of gossip and rumor in the construction of social identity in H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*. Hermeneutics is particularly appropriate for this research because the study does not merely seek to identify narrative events within the text but to interpret the cultural meanings, social assumptions, and discursive structures embedded in the interactions among the residents of Iping. As a method of interpretation, hermeneutics emphasizes the process through which meaning is produced, negotiated, and understood within historical and cultural contexts (Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1981). Rather than treating literary texts as closed systems of representation, hermeneutic inquiry approaches texts as dynamic sites of meaning in which language, culture, and interpretation continuously interact. Contemporary literary scholarship has increasingly reaffirmed the relevance of hermeneutics for investigating identity, representation, and social meaning because it enables researchers to uncover layers of cultural significance that extend beyond surface narration and to situate textual interpretation within broader cultural and historical horizons (Schmidt, 2021; Malpas, 2018; Davey, 2023).

The primary data source of this research is *The Invisible Man* by H. G. Wells, first published in 1897. The analysis focuses specifically on narrative passages,

dialogues, descriptions, and communal conversations that contribute to the social construction of Griffin's identity throughout the novel. Data were selected through purposive textual sampling, emphasizing sections in which villagers discuss, interpret, speculate about, label, or respond collectively to Griffin's presence. Particular attention was given to episodes involving Mrs. Hall, Teddy Henfrey, Fearenside, Mr. Cuss, Reverend Bunting, and other members of the Iping community because these characters function as primary agents in the circulation of gossip and rumor within the narrative. These textual units were treated not simply as narrative elements but as cultural utterances that reveal how communal discourse produces social knowledge and identity. Such an approach aligns with contemporary hermeneutic literary studies that regard dialogue and narrative interaction as sites where cultural values and collective perceptions are articulated and reproduced (Warnke, 2016; Malpas, 2018).

The analytical process follows the hermeneutic circle, a central principle of philosophical hermeneutics in which interpretation moves recursively between individual textual elements and the larger cultural framework of the text (Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1981). In practice, the analysis was conducted through three interconnected stages. The first stage involved close reading to identify recurring instances of gossip, speculation, labeling, and collective interpretation within the narrative. The second stage focused on thematic hermeneutic interpretation, examining how these discursive patterns contribute to the formation of social meanings regarding Griffin. The third stage contextualized these meanings within broader Victorian cultural anxieties concerning otherness, social uncertainty, scientific disruption, and communal order. Through this interpretive movement between textual details and socio-cultural contexts, the study seeks to understand not only what the villagers say about Griffin but also how their discourse functions in producing a socially recognized identity for him. This interpretive framework reflects recent developments in literary hermeneutics that emphasize the relationship between textual meaning, historical consciousness, and cultural interpretation (Felski, 2020; Moi, 2020; Eagleton, 2023).

To strengthen interpretive validity, the study integrates hermeneutic analysis with theories of representation, discourse, and stigma. Stuart Hall's theory of representation (1997) is used to explain how social meanings are produced through repeated acts of representation; Michel Foucault's concept of discourse (1972) provides a framework for understanding how communal narratives generate forms of social knowledge that become accepted as truth; and Erving Goffman's theory of stigma (1963) illuminates the process through which difference is transformed into social exclusion. These theoretical perspectives were not applied as rigid analytical categories but as interpretive lenses guiding the reading of the text. The analysis therefore prioritizes the ways language, rumor, and collective narration operate as cultural mechanisms that construct Griffin as a stranger, a deviant figure, and ultimately a social threat. By combining philosophical hermeneutics with cultural and discourse-oriented theories, the study seeks to produce a contextual and theoretically grounded interpretation of identity formation in *The Invisible Man*, while contributing

to broader discussions concerning language, social meaning, and cultural representation in literary studies.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Gossip as an Epistemic Response to Social Uncertainty

The emergence of gossip in *The Invisible Man* is rooted in the villagers' inability to interpret Griffin through familiar social categories. His concealed appearance, social withdrawal, and persistent refusal to disclose personal information disrupt the community's expectations of transparency and social participation. As shown in Table 1, the villagers repeatedly transform observable irregularities into interpretive narratives that assign social meaning to Griffin's presence. Rather than remaining passive observers, the residents of Iping actively construct explanations that convert ambiguity into socially intelligible knowledge. Gossip therefore functions not merely as informal communication but as an epistemic mechanism through which the community restores interpretive order in the face of uncertainty.

Table 1. Hermeneutic Coding of Gossip as an Epistemic Response to Social Uncertainty

Page	Textual Evidence	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Hermeneutic Interpretation	Emergent Social Meaning
5	"He was wrapped up from head to foot"	Concealed body	Physical opacity	The body becomes unreadable within ordinary perception.	Unknown social identity
5	"I prefer to keep them on"	Refusal disclosure	of Deliberate secrecy	Transparency is replaced by concealment, inviting interpretation.	Suspicion
6	"All his forehead above his blue glasses was covered by a white bandage"	Hidden markers	facial Identity concealment	The absence of recognizable features prevents social identification.	Curiosity
10	"I like to be alone and undisturbed"	Social withdrawal	Isolation	Refusal of interaction is interpreted as abnormal behavior.	Outsider status
10	"My reason for coming to Iping was ... a desire for solitude"	Self-separation	Social distancing	Griffin symbolically places himself outside communal life.	Non-belonging
14	"I wish you wouldn't come in without knocking"	Defensive behavior	Boundary maintenance	Restricted access increases the need for communal explanation.	Narrative speculation
16	"He rarely went abroad by daylight"	Avoidance behavior	Behavioral abnormality	Everyday routines become signs of hidden motives.	Social suspicion

Page	Textual Evidence	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Hermeneutic Interpretation	Emergent Social Meaning
16	"His temper continued very uncertain"	Emotional unpredictability	Instability	Unpredictable conduct challenges expectations.	social Anxiety

As presented in Table 1, the dominant pattern emerging from the data is the transformation of observable difference into socially meaningful interpretation. Griffin's concealed body, restricted visibility, and refusal to participate in ordinary social interaction are consistently decoded as signs of secrecy, abnormality, and potential threat. Notably, none of these interpretations originate from verified information. Instead, the villagers construct explanatory narratives based on limited observations, demonstrating that communal understanding is shaped less by evidence than by interpretive necessity. The progression from "concealed appearance" to "suspicion" and from "social withdrawal" to "outsider status" illustrates how uncertainty generates discursive activity aimed at restoring cognitive stability.

The findings further indicate that gossip operates as a collective mechanism of knowledge production. Individual observations become socially authoritative only after they are circulated and repeated within the community. Through this process, physical opacity gradually acquires moral significance, while behavioral difference becomes associated with deviance. From a hermeneutic perspective, the villagers are not simply describing Griffin but actively producing meanings that allow him to be understood within existing cultural frameworks. Consequently, gossip serves as the epistemic foundation upon which subsequent processes of labeling, stigmatization, and othering are constructed throughout the narrative.

3.2. Naming the Unknown: Gossip and the Production of Social Identity

While gossip initially functions as a mechanism for interpreting uncertainty, its repeated circulation gradually produces more stable forms of social knowledge. As villagers continuously discuss Griffin, speculative interpretations evolve into recognizable identity categories. The process demonstrates that identity in *The Invisible Man* is not established through self-representation but through communal acts of naming. As shown in Table 2, the residents of Iping progressively reconstruct Griffin through a series of labels that transform him from an unfamiliar stranger into a symbolic social threat.

Table 2. Hermeneutic Coding of Identity Formation Through Gossip

Page	Narrative Label	Textual Evidence	Interpretive Logic	Discursive Function	Social Identity Produced
5-6	Stranger	Griffin arrives concealed and avoids disclosure	Lack of familiarity requires categorization	Initial recognition	social Unknown outsider

Page	Narrative Label	Textual Evidence	Interpretive Logic	Discursive Function	Social Identity Produced
7	Accident Victim	"The poor soul's had an accident"	Physical difference seeks rational explanation	Humanization	Victim
15	Piebald Individual	"This chap ... is a piebald"	Bodily ambiguity generates speculation	Biological classification	Physical anomaly
16-17	Criminal	"A criminal trying to escape justice"	Concealment interpreted as evidence of guilt	Moral judgment	Criminal
17	Anarchist	"An Anarchist in disguise"	Uncertainty linked to political anxiety	Political labeling	Social threat
17	Lunatic	"Harmless lunatic"	Behavioral difference becomes pathology	Medicalization	Madman
17	Bogey Man	"Bogey Man!"	Fear enters folkloric imagination	Mythification	Supernatural threat

As presented in Table 2, the villagers' interpretations follow a clear trajectory from uncertainty to threat construction. The earliest labels, such as *stranger* and *accident victim*, attempt to assimilate Griffin into familiar social frameworks. At this stage, the community still seeks explanations that preserve social coherence. However, as Griffin continues to resist communal expectations of visibility and participation, increasingly negative labels emerge. Interpretations shift from sympathy-based explanations toward categories associated with deviance, criminality, and danger. This progression demonstrates that identity formation within the novel is cumulative; each new label builds upon previous interpretations while simultaneously increasing the symbolic distance between Griffin and the community.

From a hermeneutic perspective, the findings indicate that naming functions as a process of meaning stabilization. The villagers repeatedly transform uncertainty into recognizable categories that allow them to interpret and manage social difference. Yet these categories reveal more about the community's cultural anxieties than about Griffin himself. The labels "criminal," "anarchist," and "Bogey Man" are not derived from verified knowledge but from collective efforts to render ambiguity intelligible. In Hall's terms, identity emerges through representation rather than essence. Griffin becomes socially knowable not because his true identity is revealed but because the community continuously produces narratives that define who he is presumed to be.

3.3. Producing the Other: Discursive Boundaries and Social Exclusion

While the preceding section demonstrates how gossip generates increasingly stable identity categories, the social consequences of these labels extend beyond identification. As particular interpretations become dominant within the community, they begin to establish symbolic boundaries separating Griffin from the residents of Iping. Identity formation therefore evolves into a process of *othering*, whereby difference is transformed into exclusion. Rather than merely describing Griffin as unusual, villagers progressively construct him as someone who exists outside the moral, social, and cultural norms governing communal life. As shown in Table 3, this

process operates through recurring discursive markers that redefine unfamiliarity as deviance and ultimately as threat.

Table 3. Hermeneutic Coding of Othering Through Everyday Discourse

Page	Discursive Marker	Textual Evidence	Interpretive Process	Boundary Construction	Cultural Consequence
10	Isolation	"I like to be alone and undisturbed"	Withdrawal interpreted as abnormality	Social as participation vs. isolation	vs. Outsider status
14	Restricted access	"I wish you wouldn't come in without knocking"	Privacy interpreted as secrecy	Openness vs. concealment	vs. Distrust
16	Concealment	Persistent use of bandages and dark glasses	Hidden appearance interpreted as deception	Transparency vs. opacity	vs. Suspicion
16-17	Collective dislike	"People in Iping ... agreed in disliking him"	Individual difference becomes collective judgment	Community stranger	vs. Social exclusion
17	Physical distancing	"They drew aside as he passed"	Symbolic rejection becomes embodied practice	Inclusion avoidance	vs. Spatial separation
17	Pathologization	"Harmless lunatic"	Difference becomes psychological abnormality	Normality vs. deviance	vs. Stigmatization
17	Mythic labeling	"Bogey Man!"	Human identity replaced by symbolic figure	Human vs. monstrous	vs. Dehumanization

As presented in Table 3, the process of othering develops through a gradual shift from social observation to symbolic exclusion. Initially, Griffin's difference is interpreted through relatively neutral markers such as isolation and privacy. However, these characteristics are repeatedly reinterpreted within communal discourse until they acquire negative social meanings. Isolation becomes abnormality, privacy becomes secrecy, and concealment becomes deception. The findings demonstrate that the villagers do not simply observe difference; they actively assign cultural significance to it. Through repeated acts of interpretation, behavioral and physical distinctions are transformed into indicators of moral and social deviation.

More significantly, the coding reveals that othering is sustained through binary oppositions that structure communal understanding. Griffin is consistently positioned against the values that define village life: openness, familiarity, sociability, and predictability. As a result, he becomes a symbolic embodiment of everything the community perceives itself not to be. This finding aligns with Hall's conception of identity as a relational process constructed through difference, while also reflecting Said's argument that communities frequently define themselves through the production of an "other." In *The Invisible Man*, Griffin's exclusion is therefore not the inevitable consequence of his invisibility but the outcome of a discursive process through which unfamiliarity is transformed into deviance and deviance into threat.

The community's response reveals less about Griffin's actual character than about the cultural anxieties embedded within the social order of Iping.

3.4. From Gossip to Myth: The Cultural Production of Moral Panic

The final finding demonstrates that the circulation of gossip and the consolidation of othering do not merely produce social exclusion; they ultimately transform Griffin into a symbolic object within the collective imagination of Iping. At this stage, the community no longer responds primarily to Griffin as an individual but to the meanings attached to him through repeated acts of interpretation. As rumors accumulate and circulate, speculation acquires the status of common knowledge, while common knowledge gradually evolves into collective belief. The stranger thus becomes detached from empirical reality and reconstructed as a cultural symbol embodying fear, uncertainty, and social disorder. As shown in Table 4, the process culminates in the emergence of moral panic, whereby communal reactions are driven less by Griffin's actual behavior than by the narratives constructed around him.

Table 4. The Transformation from Gossip to Moral Panic

Page	Narrative Event	Discursive Process	Hermeneutic Interpretation	Cultural Outcome
16-17	Villagers repeatedly discuss Griffin's unusual behavior	Gossip circulation	Difference becomes a shared object of interpretation	Collective curiosity
16-17	Griffin is described as a criminal	Rumor amplification	Suspicion gains narrative legitimacy	Social distrust
17	Griffin is identified as an anarchist	Political projection	Uncertainty ideological threat	Collective anxiety
17	Griffin is labeled a lunatic	Pathologization	Difference deviance	Stigmatization
17	Children call him "Bogey Man"	Mythification	Human identity is replaced by symbolic fear	Folkloric construction
22-23	Invisible movements and unexplained events create public alarm	Collective reinterpretation	Rumor is validated through extraordinary events	Moral panic
24-25	Community mobilization against Griffin	Social reaction	Symbolic threat becomes practical danger	Collective action

The coding results presented in Table 4 reveal that the transformation of Griffin from an unfamiliar outsider into a perceived social threat occurs through a cumulative series of discursive processes. Rather than operating as isolated events, gossip, rumor, labeling, stigmatization, and mythification function as interconnected stages that progressively intensify communal perceptions of danger. To synthesize these relationships and illustrate the overall trajectory emerging from the hermeneutic analysis, Figure 1 presents a conceptual model showing how observable difference is gradually transformed into collective mobilization through successive processes of interpretation and symbolic amplification.

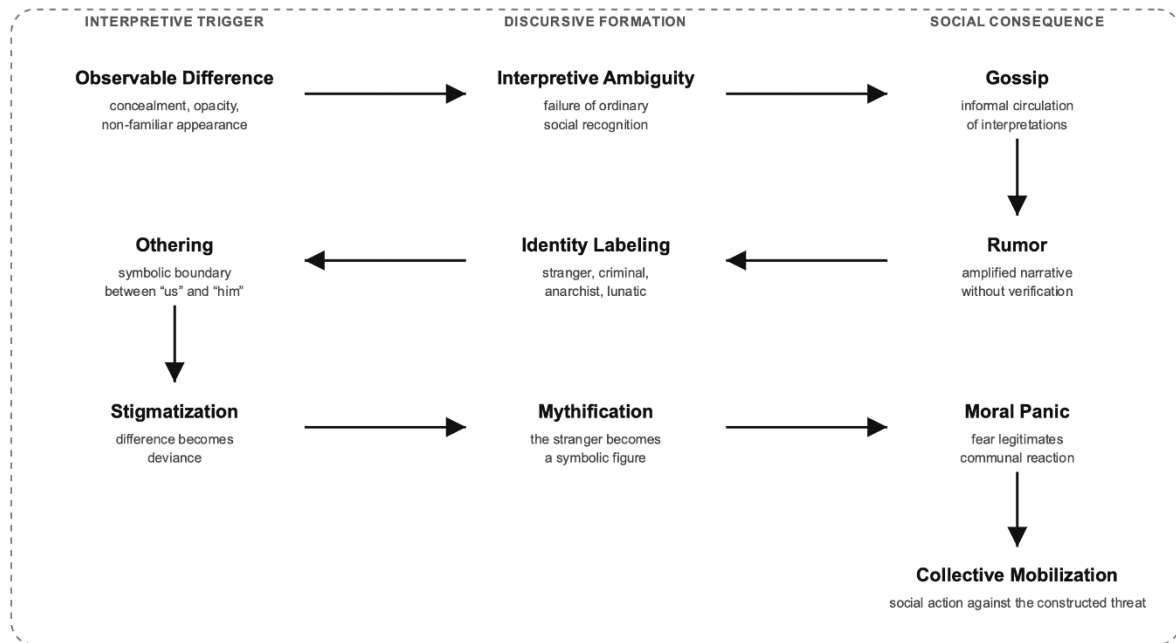


Figure 1. Model of Identity Transformation in *The Invisible Man*

As presented in Table 4, the transformation from gossip to moral panic follows a cumulative rather than spontaneous process. The villagers initially attempt to explain Griffin through ordinary social categories; however, as uncertainty persists, increasingly dramatic narratives emerge. Gossip evolves into rumor, rumor acquires legitimacy through repetition, and repeated interpretations become accepted as social truth. The progression from “criminal” and “anarchist” to “Bogey Man” demonstrates a significant shift from rational explanation to symbolic imagination. At this stage, Griffin ceases to function as a social actor and becomes a cultural sign through which the community expresses fears that extend beyond the individual himself.

The findings further indicate that mythification serves as the final stage of identity reconstruction. Once Griffin is interpreted as a folkloric figure rather than a human subject, ordinary standards of evidence lose their significance. The community no longer evaluates Griffin on the basis of direct observation but through narratives already circulating within collective memory. In this sense, mythification operates as a mechanism that converts uncertainty into certainty and speculation into reality. Consistent with Foucault’s conception of discourse, repeated narratives generate forms of knowledge that become socially authoritative regardless of their empirical validity. Similarly, Goffman’s notion of stigma helps explain how difference is progressively amplified until it produces a socially recognized threat.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that gossip in *The Invisible Man* functions as an epistemic response to uncertainty rather than as a form of trivial social interaction. This supports the central argument of the study that Griffin’s social identity is not discovered by the residents of Iping but progressively produced through interpretation, naming, and communal circulation. The trajectory identified across Tables 1–4 reveals a coherent movement from uncertainty to social knowledge, from

social knowledge to identity labeling, and from labeling to processes of exclusion and moral panic. These findings reinforce Hall's conception of representation as a constitutive process through which meanings are generated and circulated, while simultaneously supporting Foucault's argument that discourse produces forms of socially authorized knowledge (Hall, 1997; Foucault, 1972; Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1981). Moreover, contemporary research on gossip indicates that gossip plays a significant role in regulating reputational judgments, facilitating social categorization, and maintaining collective norms, rather than merely transmitting information (Foster, 2004; Michelson & Mouly, 2000; Cruz et al., 2021; Robbins & Karan, 2020; Yucel, 2024).

This study also extends previous scholarship on Wells by shifting the analytical focus from Griffin's invisibility as an individual condition to the community's discursive production of Griffin as a social object. Earlier readings of *The Invisible Man* commonly emphasize scientific transgression, modernity, alienation, posthuman embodiment, and technological anxiety (Suvin, 1979; Parrinder, 2000; Seed, 2010; Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 2008; Roberts, 2016; Canavan, 2022; Mousoutzakis, 2020). While these interpretations remain valuable, the present findings reveal that Griffin's invisibility becomes culturally meaningful only after it is interpreted, circulated, and socially amplified by the villagers. In other words, the novel's central problem is not simply that Griffin cannot be seen, but that he cannot be socially stabilized within the village's interpretive order. This finding connects Wells's fiction to broader questions in cultural studies concerning how communities transform ambiguity into intelligible identity categories (Simmel, 1950; Bauman, 1991; Jenkins, 2014; Woodward, 2016).

The process of othering identified in Table 3 further demonstrates that Griffin's exclusion is not an inevitable consequence of physical difference but the outcome of discursive boundary-making. Throughout the narrative, the villagers position themselves as familiar, visible, sociable, and morally legible, while Griffin is repeatedly constructed as strange, concealed, isolated, and potentially dangerous. This binary structure resonates with Said's theory of othering and broader cultural studies perspectives that view identity as relationally constituted through difference and exclusion (Said, 1978; Hall, 1997; Pickering, 2001; Brons, 2015). In this respect, the community of Iping does not merely respond to Griffin's abnormality but actively produces abnormality through culturally available interpretive frameworks. The findings therefore support the argument that social identities emerge not solely from individual characteristics but from collective representational practices that define who belongs and who remains outside the boundaries of social legitimacy (Jenkins, 2014; Woodward, 2016).

The final movement from gossip to myth and moral panic is particularly significant. As demonstrated in Table 4 and Figure 1, the community gradually shifts from rational interpretation to symbolic amplification. Griffin is initially understood as a stranger and subsequently redefined as a victim, criminal, anarchist, lunatic, and ultimately a supernatural threat. This progression suggests that moral panic is not a spontaneous social reaction but the culmination of repeated interpretive processes through which uncertainty is transformed into collective certainty. Contemporary scholarship on gossip and social cognition similarly indicates that repeated narratives

can shape collective perceptions, reinforce shared beliefs, and intensify communal responses to perceived threats (Cruz et al., 2021; Robbins & Karan, 2020; Yucel, 2024). Wells's depiction of Iping therefore anticipates a broader cultural mechanism whereby discourse converts ambiguity into fear and fear into socially sanctioned action.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that *The Invisible Man* is not only a story about scientific ambition or bodily invisibility, but also a sophisticated narrative about the cultural production of identity through language. Griffin's transformation into a social threat depends on a sequence of communal interpretations: uncertainty produces gossip, gossip produces labels, labels produce stigma, stigma produces othering, and othering produces moral panic. This finding contributes to literary and cultural studies by positioning gossip as a cultural technology of identity formation. It also opens a broader interpretive path for reading Victorian fiction as a site where ordinary speech, rumor, and communal narration reveal the mechanisms by which society constructs the unknown, disciplines difference, and legitimizes exclusion.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that gossip in H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* functions not merely as informal communication but as a cultural mechanism through which social knowledge, identity, and collective meanings are produced. Through a hermeneutic analysis of the interactions among the residents of Iping, the findings reveal a progressive discursive trajectory beginning with uncertainty and culminating in moral panic. The villagers initially respond to Griffin's concealed appearance and social withdrawal by generating interpretive narratives that transform ambiguity into intelligible knowledge. These narratives subsequently evolve into stable identity labels, including stranger, accident victim, criminal, anarchist, lunatic, and Bogey Man. The study shows that Griffin's social identity is not derived from empirical knowledge of his character but from repeated acts of representation, interpretation, and communal circulation. Gossip therefore serves as an epistemic instrument that converts uncertainty into socially authorized truth.

The findings further indicate that identity formation in the novel is inseparable from processes of othering, stigmatization, and mythification. As narratives about Griffin circulate throughout the village, difference is progressively transformed into deviance and eventually into a perceived threat to social order. The community's response reveals how discourse operates as a cultural technology capable of producing exclusion and legitimizing collective fear. By shifting attention from invisibility as an individual condition to the communal production of identity through language, this study contributes a new perspective to Wells scholarship and to broader debates in literary and cultural studies concerning representation, social knowledge, and identity formation. Ultimately, *The Invisible Man* emerges not only as a narrative about scientific experimentation but also as a powerful exploration of how communities construct the unknown through gossip, rumor, and collective imagination.

Author Contributions

Thabo M. Ndlovu conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, conducted the textual analysis, interpreted the findings, and drafted the manuscript. **Amina O. Adeyemi** contributed to the theoretical development, data interpretation, critical revision of the manuscript, and overall supervision of the research process. Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

All data analyzed in this study are derived from publicly available literary texts. The primary source analyzed was H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*. All data supporting the findings of this study are contained within the article.

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Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted tools were used solely to support language refinement, grammar checking, and manuscript editing. All conceptualization, interpretation, analysis, argument development, and scholarly conclusions were undertaken independently by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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