

The Engagement of Year 9 Boys in lessons on *The Invisible Man*

1 What is the issue?

- There appears to be a widespread perception among teachers that (Pinkett 2019; Myhill and Jones 2004) boys are disruptive and disengaged in their learning where girls are obedient and diligent.
- Statistically, boys have lower attainment than girls across primary and secondary education, are more likely to be excluded from school and less likely to attend university (Pinkett 2020).
- This attainment gap is especially apparent in literacy (Younger et. al. 2005)
 - Specifically in my middle-set year 9 class, these effects have appeared as we have transitioned to a more challenging scheme of work on H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*.
- When compared to the previous scheme on debate skills, boys have become more disruptive and less engaged.

2 What does the research suggest?

There appears to be 3 main issues driving boys' under-attainment:

One: Clinging to outdated models of masculinity

- Much research suggests that these issues are not tied to ability. Rather, they are tied to outdated cultural constructions of masculinity (Pinkett 2020; Cleveland 2011; Francis 2000; Jackson 2002b)
- In particular, boys seem to equate academic work with femininity (Jackson 2002a)
- They are thus more likely to underachieve in order to protect their social image and status (Younger et. al. 2005)

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Two: Self-esteem issues

- Boys appear to be very status-conscious, so more likely to deliberately fail in order to avoid the humiliation of trying and failing (Pinkett 2020; Cleveland 2011).
- Boys not only equate accomplishment with self-worth but also appear to value that accomplishment more if it was achieved without effort or struggle (Covington 1998; Jackson 2002a)
- This has been worsened by the tendency in neoliberal thought to blame failure entirely on the individual and thus underplay the influence of contextual factors (Francis 2006).

Three: Pervasive Myths about teaching Boys

- The myth that boys love competition: Pinkett (2020) argues, this strategy is detrimental for boys who lack confidence. It simply worsens the above issues with self-esteem and encourages the use of failure as a self-defence strategy (Pinkett 2020).
- The myth that you should make the learning "relevant" to what boys enjoy: Pinkett again discredits this, pointing out that this restricts the opportunity for boys to develop their cultural capital and is itself a form of stereotyping. This relevancy myth appears in James (2015), although he does acknowledge that boys often make poor choices when deciding on which tasks make them learn best.

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- Willingham (2010) also points out that, due to limitations on our working memories, boys will simply remember the parts of the learning that are supposedly "relevant" to them and forget the crucial skill they were intended to remember.

Recommendations from the research include:

- Developing boys' cultural capital by showing your enjoyment of wider reading about the teaching topics (Pinkett 2020).
- Create a classroom atmosphere of mutual encouragement and positive reinforcement, given boys' vulnerability to self-esteem issues (Pinkett 2020; Younger et. al. 2005; Jackson 2002a). This can be done through low-stakes tasks which are less connected to boys' perception of their ability and self-worth (Covington 1998; Jackson 2002a).
- Ensure that you have equally high expectations of boys as well as girls. This to take advantage of the Pygmalion Effect, in which higher teacher expectations lead to higher results, and to ignore the inverse: the Golem Effect (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968; Babad et. al 1982).

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Classroom Practice 1: Building Cultural Capital

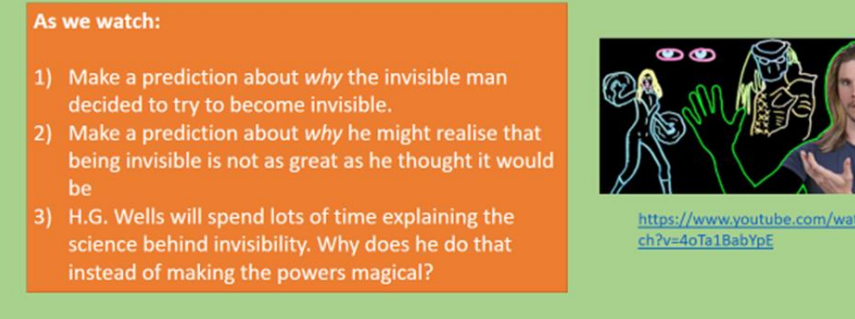
Largely inspired by Pinkett's ideas (2020) I included tasks to build the students' cultural capital.

- I included links to other fiction and media largely as part of thematic discussion tasks, or as part of starters to encourage students to think more broadly about the themes of the novel.
- Given that H.G. Wells was a pioneer of science fiction, I also included a popular science video on the real-world physics, and biological consequences, of invisibility powers:

The Power of Invisibility: 1897 vs. 2018

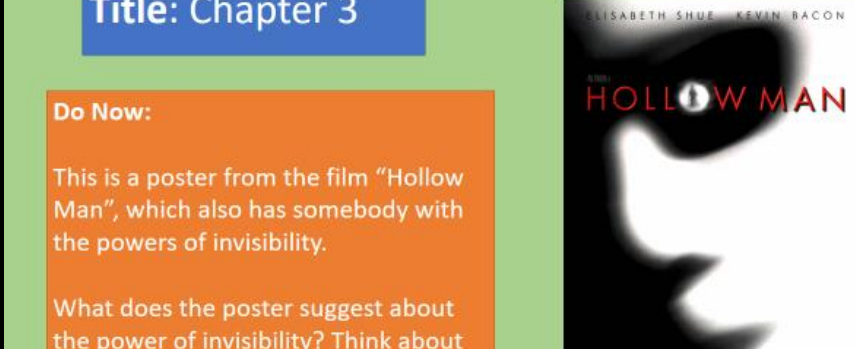
As we watch:

- 1) Make a prediction about why the invisible man decided to try to become invisible.
- 2) Make a prediction about why he might realise that being invisible is not as great as he thought it would be.
- 3) H.G. Wells will spend lots of time explaining the science behind invisibility. Why does he do that, instead of making the powers magical?



Title: Chapter 3


Do Now: This is a poster from the film "Hollow Man", which also has somebody with the powers of invisibility. What does the poster suggest about the powers of invisibility? Think about the colours, the lettering, and the design.



Forbidden Knowledge

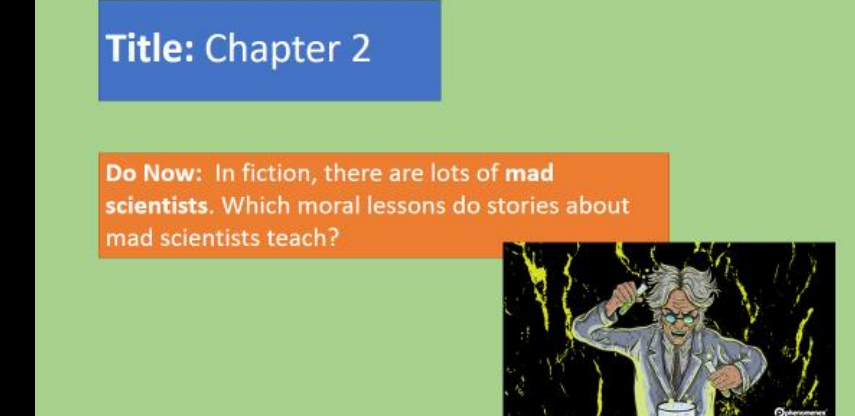
Call of Cthulhu

Faustus



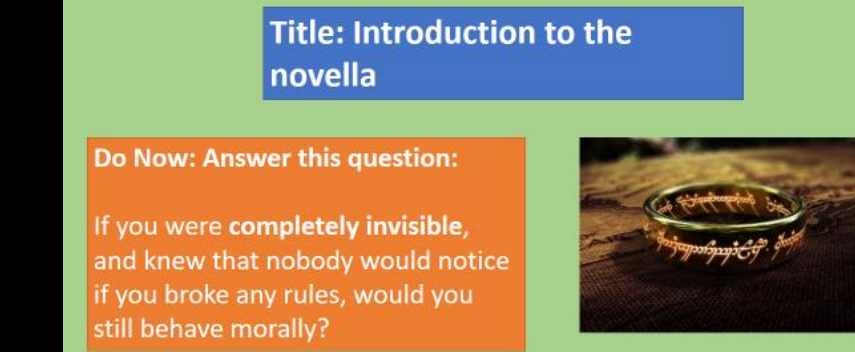
Title: Chapter 2

Do Now: In fiction, there are lots of mad scientists. Which mad scientists do stories about mad scientists teach?



Title: Introduction to the novella

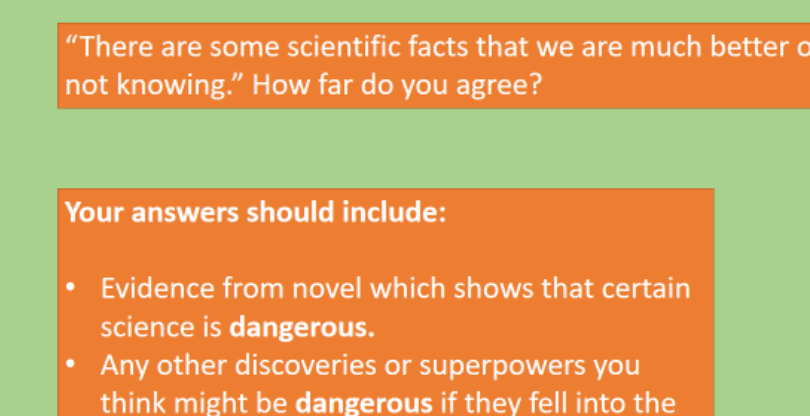
Do Now: Answer this question: If you were completely invisible, and knew that nobody would notice if you broke any rules, would you still behave morally?



"There are some scientific facts that we are much better off not knowing." How far do you agree?

Your answers should include:

- Evidence from novel which shows that certain science is dangerous.
- Any other discoveries or superpowers you think might be dangerous if they fell into the wrong hands.



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Classroom Practice 2: Use of Low-Stakes Tasks

- Largely informed by my greater awareness of the self-esteem and social status problems which boys face, I decided to include lower-stakes question and answer tasks, often as starters or as a way to provide a scaffolded introductions to more difficult tasks (Pinkett 2020; Younger et. al. 2005; Jackson 2002a; Covington 1998; Babad et. al. 1982).
- I also noticed that these status problems became especially pronounced when I asked students to read directly from the novel or to answer detailed reading comprehension questions.
- This was because *the Invisible Man* features lots of complex C19th vocabulary, and boys who got words wrong often faced derogatory remarks from their peers.
- To remedy this issue, I also included grid vocabulary tasks in which students had to work out the definitions of Victorian words based on clues prior to encountering them in the full text.

Key words in Chapter 10

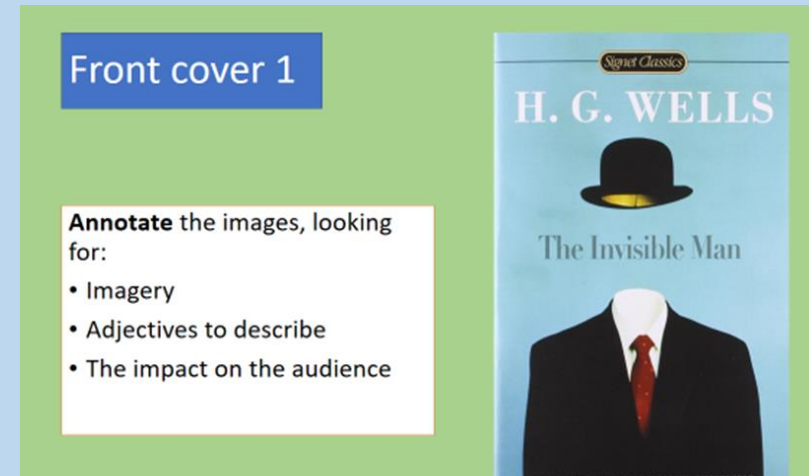
1) Write each of these words in your books.
2) Try and work out what they mean based on the clues next to them.

Unpleasant	If you are opposed of something, you dislike it.
Resolute	The opposite of this would be to believe reluctantly .
Angry	Describe a sort of of evil .
Awfully	The opposite of this would be to be entirely and awfully .
Subsequent	In sequence is in order of things. " Subsequent " can mean "next" or "afterwards".

Front cover 1

Annotate the images, looking for:

- Imagery
- Adjectives to describe
- The impact on the audience



Key words in Chapter 11

1) Write each of these words out in your books.
2) Try and work out what they mean based on the clues next to them.

Cypher	Messages in spy movies are written in cypher .
Sporadically	The opposite of this would be carefully and organised .
Nautical	Links to boats and the navy.

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Reflections on Classroom Practice and Next Steps:

These reflections are structured according to Brookfield's "Lenses" (2017).

- **Autobiographical:** My own experiences of this was that there was a significant rise in disruptive and off-task behaviour, especially among the boys in the class, when we moved to the more challenging *The Invisible Man* scheme of work. However, when I implemented these cultural capital exercises, focused vocabulary building and low-stakes tasks, such disruption decreased. I also felt much more confident teaching the class, and was prevented from lapsing into lecture-style lessons.
- **Students Eyes:** From the students' perspective, these interventions appear to have increased their confidence and engagement with the novel. There was particular embarrassment, often among boys, surrounding reading extended passages out loud. This was because any reading mistakes tended to be subtly mocked by their peers. Since the implementation of vocabulary exercises however, their appears to be less reluctance to read out loud and a greater willingness to engage in discussions surrounding the novel's more abstract themes.
- **Colleagues' Experiences:** Many of these strategies come recommended by colleagues experienced in teaching C19th texts. Specifically, they recommend this type of rigorous assessment for reading comprehension, and the use of strategically-selected extracts instead of extended periods of reading. The teacher observing me has noticed higher student engagement, and has noticed that the more granular tasks have allowed me to increase the pace of my lessons.
- **Theoretical Literature:** These strategies were largely informed by Pinkett's (2019) research; specifically his guidance on avoiding certain stereotypical tasks that are falsely viewed effective for teaching boys. It may therefore be prudent to examine a wider range of sources going forward. There is however a slight issue surrounding cognitive load during the cultural-capital building exercises. As Willingham (2010) advises, students experience a high level of cognitive stress during tasks which require lots of abstract thinking; thus meaning that it is good practice to introduce new content gradually. By their very nature however, many of the cultural-capital building tasks I employed required lots of this abstract thinking and the introduction of new content far too rapidly. In future, it may be more effecting to try and build cultural capital more slowly, and limit the number of links to other literature in any given lesson to ensure that students do not feel overwhelmed.

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