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### Sample MonkeyNotes

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# *Passing*

by

**Nella Larsen**

**1929**



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Laurie Lahey

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

Chicago and New York City, the mid-late 1920s

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

#### Major Characters

**Irene Redfield** - Irene is the protagonist of this novel. She is a light-skinned African-American woman, who sometimes “passes,” when it is convenient for her. She is married to.....

#### Minor Characters

**Clare Kendry/ Bellew** - Clare is a light-skinned, blonde, African-American woman, who passes as white. Clare grew up with Irene in South Side Chicago. After Clare’s nasty father.....

**Bob Kendry** - Bob is Clare’s mean father. He is the son of a white father and an African-American mother. It is his white aunts that care for Clare once he dies.

**Gertrude Martin** - Gertrude is Irene and Clare’s childhood friend. She is also.....

**Fred Martin** - Fred is Gertrude’s white husband.

**John “Jack” Bellew** - Jack is Clare’s white husband, who does not know that she is African American. He is a bitter racist. He refers to Clare as “Nig” because her skin has gotten darker during the course of their marriage. He makes only three appearances in the novel, although he is frequently.....

Additional major and minor characters are identified in the complete study guide.

### CONFLICT

The conflict of a plot is the major problem the protagonist experiences. Because *Passing* is such an ambiguous novel, the conflict depends on one’s reading of what it is “about.” If this is a novel about sexuality and, thus, Irene’s latent lesbianism, the conflict takes place within Irene, who is “passing” as.....

**Protagonist** - The protagonist of a story is the main character who traditionally undergoes some sort of change. He or she must usually overcome some opposing force. In this story, Irene is the main character. Regardless of how one reads this novel, the change in.....

**Antagonist** - The antagonist of a story is the force that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. In *Passing*, Clare is the antagonist because her presence in Irene’s life forces.....

**Climax** - The climax of a plot is the major turning point that allows the protagonist to resolve the conflict. The climax of *Passing* is when Clare falls out the window, or is .....

**Outcome** - The outcome, resolution, or denouement is, like the rest of the plot, ambiguous. What we can clearly discern is that once Irene knows Clare is dead and that the crowd generally agrees she fell out of the window, Irene faints. Because we know Irene is not.....

### SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

This section opens at Christmastime, although neither the weather nor Irene’s spirits are cooperating with the

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spirit of the season. Irene is disturbed by Brian's behavior and wishes she could be sure that he only wants to go to Brazil. To her, he seems like a "man marking time," but she isn't sure what he could be waiting for. Brian wakes Irene, just before the party she is hosting is about to start. When Brian tells Irene that Clare is waiting for her downstairs, Irene gets annoyed because she did not invite Clare. As it turns out, Brian invited Clare to the party. Irene did not want her there because the party is for Hugh and Irene says that Hugh does not like Clare. As the discussion progresses, it becomes clear that Brian does not really care for Hugh. As Brian defends Clare, it dawns on Irene that something might be going on between Brian and Clare. Irene is shocked, but manages to maintain her composure until Brian leaves the room. When she is alone, she.....

## THEMES

### Major Theme

**Passing** - Passing is the novel's title and most obviously refers to someone who is African American pretending to be white; this is the most obvious reference because the characters in the novel use this term frequently when describing this act. However, passing is the main theme of the novel because.....

Additional themes are discussed in the complete study guide.

## MOOD

Somber. The mood of this novel is generally somber because it treats a series of serious issues including racial discrimination, sexuality, class, and death. While the reader may sometimes find.....

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Nella Larsen was born on April 13, 1891 in Chicago. She was mixed race, like the characters in her books: her mother was Danish and her father was West Indian. Larsen spent some time in Denmark when she was younger. In the United States, she briefly attended Fisk University, although she.....

## LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

This story takes place in 1925 and 1927 in Chicago and New York City (specifically Harlem). At this time, there was a great influx of African Americans into the North from the South beginning around 1910 or so. This diaspora is referred to as the "Great Migration" and was propelled by job opportunities in northern cities as well as a desire to escape the perils of the Jim Crow South. For many African Americans, a fresh start in the North also meant an opportunity to "pass," that is, to pretend they.....

## GENRE

Fiction. Sub-genre: Novel of Passing.

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

### PART I: Encounter

#### Summary

In the beginning of this section, Irene, the main character and protagonist of the novel, has received a letter from Clare Kendry, a woman Irene grew up with. It is apparent that Irene is not pleased and remembers receiving a similar letter two years prior. She immediately recalls what Clare was like as a child. Clare lived with her nasty father and they had little money; even then, Irene recalls, Clare was "selfish, and cold, and hard." However, Clare, who had an allegiance to no one, was able to transform into a warm, charming person when necessary. Clare's father, Bob Kendry, was killed in a saloon fight when she was a young girl. In the letter, Clare writes that she needs to see Irene again and references the last time they saw each other: two years earlier in Chicago.

In Chapter Two, Irene thinks about the events of this encounter. It is a hot August day and Irene, who is visiting Chicago, goes to the Drayton, a fancy hotel, to have some tea and escape the heat. While having her tea, Irene notices a beautiful woman with dark eyes and ivory skin. After the woman's companion leaves, she notices Irene—staring at her for so long that Irene wonders if the woman has realized she is African American. Eventually the woman comes to Irene and asks if people still call her “Rene.” Irene searches her mind and eventually places the woman: she is Clare Kendry. Initially, Irene tells Clare about her own marriage and children, but is hesitant to ask Clare about what has happened with her in the twelve years since they have last seen each other, in the years since Clare's father died and she moved away. Clare asks Irene what people said about her, but Irene is too embarrassed to tell her. Clare tells Irene the story of what happened after her father died. Clare went to live with her austere, white great-aunts, who held racist beliefs and wanted to instill a work ethic in their niece, whose father (their nephew) was the product of a white father (their brother) and a black mother. Clare, who could pass for white, eventually met Jack, a wealthy white man. The two eloped and moved away. Irene is fascinated, if a little disturbed, by how Clare has managed to pass as white for all these years. Clare explains that Jack met her white aunts, so it has not been that difficult to account for her background. As the women part ways, Clare tells Irene that she will call her about coming over for tea the following Tuesday. As Irene walks home, she angrily realizes that Clare never told her Jack's last name and that she has no way of reaching her if she wants to. Irene feels like Clare did this on purpose because she does not trust Irene to be discreet. Irene is very angry and decides she is through with Clare.

The following Tuesday, Clare phones Irene all day until Irene agrees to speak with her. Clare convinces Irene to come over for tea, finally giving Irene her last name, which is Bellew. At Clare's house, Irene sees another old friend, Gertrude Martin. Gertrude, a light-skinned African-American woman, has also married a white man; although, her husband, Fred, is aware of her background and does not seem to mind. Clare tells them she has been living in various European cities and insisted she come along on this latest trip with her husband, a international banking agent of some sort, because she wanted to see some familiar faces in Chicago. Gertrude tells the other women about her twin sons. Gertrude and Clare, who has a daughter, talk about how they will not have any more children out of fear they could be dark skinned. Irene, who grows increasingly annoyed during this discussion, tells the group one of her sons is dark, as is her husband. The conversation shifts away from uncomfortable topics, but eventually bores Irene. As Irene is about to leave, Jack Bellew returns and comes in to meet Clare's friends. Jack, believing the other women are white, explains why he calls his wife “Nig”: because when they first married she was very white, but has grown darker since. Jack goes on to make a slew of racist remarks about how there will never be any black people in his family. As Jack continues to insert bigoted comments into the conversation, Irene grows tenser, until she decides to leave. Gertrude leaves with her and they discuss how risky it is for Irene to associate with them. Irene is angry for the rest of the night, realizing she should have never gone to visit Clare in the first place.

The final chapter of this section contains a letter Clare sends to Irene the day after their visit, acknowledging that she should not have insisted Irene come to visit but was very happy to have seen her. Clare remarks in the post script that Irene's way (that is, marrying an African-American man and not passing as white) is wiser and happier than her lifestyle. Irene is not pleased with the letter and tears it up. She begins to think about her husband, Brian, who will be picking her up at the train station that day when she arrives home in New York. She worries that while he she has been away, he might have started thinking about moving away again. Apparently at the beginning of their marriage, and periodically throughout, Brian has wanted to move the family to another country, which worries Irene.

## Notes

The most important thing to be aware of in this section is the subtlety of Larsen's writing. For example, we do

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not even learn that Irene is black until she becomes nervous when Clare is watching her at the Drayton. This writing style is significant, and clever, because it is also not obvious to anyone else that Irene or Clare are African American. Larsen rarely tells the reader anything directly. Another example of this is how we learn about Clare's past: through Irene's recollection of a conversation she and Clare had two years prior.

The other significant aspect of Larsen's subtle writing is the conflicted nature of Irene's feelings toward Clare. Because Irene is this story's narrator, all descriptions of Clare are filtered through her perception. Thus the reader has access to Irene's preoccupation with Clare's physical features: her eyes (especially), but also her golden hair, her white skin, and her alluring lips. Scholars such as Ann duCille and Deborah McDowell have suggested that Irene's fascination with Clare's physical features, as well as the love/hate relationship she develops with Clare, implies latent lesbianism. Larsen never makes this explicit, but it's important to be aware of the potential of Irene's sexual attraction to Clare as you continue to read.

Finally, it is essential to keep the time period in mind when reading this novel. Irene and Clare's meeting at the Drayton takes place in 1925, which means the last time they saw each other prior to this was 1913. The events in New York take place two years after the Chicago meeting. There was a great influx of African Americans into the North from the South beginning around 1910 or so. This diaspora is referred to as the "Great Migration" and was propelled by job opportunities in northern cities as well as a desire to escape the perils of the Jim Crow South. For many African Americans, a fresh start in the North also meant an opportunity to "pass," that is, to pretend they were white. While Clare does not move from the South, her life as a white woman only really begins after she leaves home and is, thus, similar to what many blacks might have experienced at this time. However, Larsen also demonstrates how life in the North was not free of racism. Clearly, Irene and Clare benefit in ways that characters like Brian (Irene's husband) do not, due to their light skin color.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Irene** - Irene is the protagonist of this novel. She is a light-skinned African-American woman, who sometimes "passes," when it is convenient for her. She is married to physician, Brian Redfield and the mother of Junior and Ted.

Irene is a prominent member of the Harlem social scene. She is a middle-class woman, married to a successful doctor, and is actively involved in hosting parties and organizing dances. It seems that her life has been going very smoothly until she encounters Clare on the rooftop of the Drayton. That.....

### PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

**Exposition** - The exposition is the section of a novel in which the main characters and main conflict are introduced. Any relevant background information is also given in this section. The exposition of this novel occurs in the first chapter of the first section when Irene and Clare meet at.....

**Rising Action** - Rising action is the action that will lead to the climax (or the major turning point in the plot). In this novel the rising action is everything that happens before Irene "realizes" something.....

**Climax** - The climax of a plot is the major turning point that allows the protagonist to resolve the conflict. The climax of *Passing* is when Clare falls out of the window. Now that Clare is .....

**Outcome** - The outcome, resolution, or denouement is, like the rest of the plot, ambiguous. What we can clearly discern is that once Irene knows Clare.....

## THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS

### Major Theme

**Passing** - Passing is the novel's title and most obviously refers to an African American pretending to be white; this is the most obvious reference because the characters in the novel use this term frequently when describing this act. However, passing is the main theme of the novel because when we consider it to mean pretending to be someone you are not, it can also refer to sexuality or class. Numerous characters in this novel "pass" in various ways. "Passing," becomes the main conflict for the novel's main character, Irene.

Clare is the ultimate "passer" in this novel. She is a "black" .....

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

### POINT OF VIEW

Third person, omniscient. However, the anonymous narrator only has access.....

### QUOTATIONS - QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

1. "...For I am lonely, so lonely...cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before..." (11).

Clare writes this in a letter to Irene, two years after their meeting in Chicago. This statement is significant because it demonstrates the kind of language Clare uses with Irene, which could be interpreted as sexual.....

Additional quotes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

### SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / METAPHORS / SYMBOLS

**Clare's Red Gown** - Clare wears a red gown to the Freeland's party, on her final night alive. This is symbolic of the identity Clare has created for herself. When Irene first thinks back to what Clare was like as.....

### IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

**Title:** *Passing*

**Author:** Nella Larsen

**Date Published:** 1929

**Setting:** Chicago and New York, 1927 and 1929

**Genre:** Adult Fiction, sub-genre: Novel of Passing

**Tense:** Present

**Meaning of the Title:** "Passing" refers to the act of light-skinned African Americans pretending to be white. Many African Americans of mixed heritage appear white-skinned and, in.....

### VOCABULARY

Impetuous - Impulsive; acting with emotion.....

## STUDY QUESTIONS – MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. In what city do Clare and Irene meet at the Drayton?

- a.) New York
- b.) Chicago
- c.) Philadelphia

2. How did Clare's father die?

- a.) From a fight in a saloon
- b.) Cancer
- c.) A heart attack.....

## ESSAY QUESTIONS - TOPICS / BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. What is the significance of the title of each section: "Encounter," "Re-Encounter," "Finale"?
2. Pick a passage in which the narrator is describing Irene's impression of Clare's appearance? What is .....

## ANSWER KEY

1.) b 2.) a 3.) c 4.) a 5.) a 6.) c 7.) b 8.) b 9.) b 10.) c 11.) a 12.) b 13.) a 14.) c 15.) b

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