

MDC Literature Humanities

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Passing
by Nella Larsen



Welcome

Welcome to our Columbia University mini-course! I am looking forward to getting to know you. Over the next three weeks, we will be studying the book, *Passing*. A few words about the author, Nella Larsen: She grew up in Chicago, Illinois and spent much of her adult life in New York, writing some of her best work, like *Passing*, during the period known as the Harlem Renaissance. *Passing* is a book filled with rich themes like loyalty as well as infidelity, and I look forward to working through some of these ideas together with you. So be courageous and dive in.

Assignment

Try to read the entire novel for our first class. If not, read at least until page 65.

Big Questions in the Novel

- *The Desirable and The Good*: Are the desirable things in life always the same as the good things? Here are some options for how to think about the term ‘good’ in the question above: (a) ‘good’ might mean whatever is virtuous, (b) ‘good’ might also mean whatever helps one live well, (c) ‘good’ could also mean whatever is most prized or valued by some group, or (d) ‘good’ might just mean whatever is desirable. There are plenty of other ways to think about the term ‘good,’ and so you should not take this list to be complete. However you want to think about the term ‘good,’ consider while you read *Passing* whether or not the desirable things and the good things in life are the same. (That is, consider whether or not you think option (d) seems right.)
- *Loyalty*: One important similarity between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry is that they are fair enough in color that they both *could* pass for white women. However, it is Clare, and not Irene, who primarily lives by passing. Not only has Clare married Jack Bellew, a white man, but she is raising a ‘white’ child with him, doing so at great risk to her own safety. While you read, consider how this difference in life choices between the two affects Irene’s sense of loyalty, be it gender-loyalty or race-loyalty, to Clare.
- *Moral Sense*: Though I personally prefer to talk and think about morality in down-to-earth terms (or what many philosophers will call a *deflationary* view of morality), I still believe that it is an indispensable part of life, be it in our real one or the fictional world of *Passing*. What this means is that we all live with a moral sense to some degree, and our sense of morality – namely, of

what we take to be *the good* – influences what we think is worth desiring. For Irene Redfield, “security [is] the most important and desired thing in life” (p. 87). It is what she takes to be *the good* in the sense that “not for any of the others, or for all of them, would she exchange it” (p. 87). We can say similar things for Clare Kendry and Brian Redfield. Clare takes *the good* to be getting whatever it is that she desires at some moment, and Irene describes this as her “having way” (p. 11). Brian, on the other hand, takes *the good* to be obtaining the things in life that are “strange and different,” even if it would be costly for him to have them (e.g., going off to Brazil) (pgs. 36, 47). While you read, consider how these differences in moral senses generate both conflicts and feelings of intimacy between some of the main characters in the story.

Questions As You Read

1. How do you think Irene feels about Clare after first encountering her again at the Drayton in Chicago? Does Irene’s feeling about Clare ever change in the first part of the book? Pick passages that you find important and that support your opinion.
2. Like Clare, Gertrude marries a white man named Fred Martin. How is Gertrude’s marriage to Fred different from Clare’s marriage to Jack (John) Bellew? Pick passages that you find important and that support your opinion.
3. What are some of the general risks that both Clare and Gertrude face as passing women who are married to white men? Are there particular risks that Clare faces that Gertrude does not? Why or why not? Pick passages that you find important and that support your opinion.
4. At page 28, the narrator notes the following about Irene Redfield

- a. John Bellew came into the room. The first thing that Irene noticed about him was that he was not the man that she had seen with Clare Kendry on the Drayton roof.

Later, on page 32, we see a conversation between Jack (John) Bellew and Irene about her time at the Drayton, and she answers him carefully, not wanting to reveal who she saw there with Clare, his wife. Recall that when Irene saw Clare, who she did not at first recognize, with the other man at the Drayton, the narrator *suggested* that Irene thought that Clare, the mysterious woman, and the other man had an intimate relationship, though there was no implication that she thought that the two had a romantic relationship (p. 6).

Suggestions are things that we say when we want to hint at facts. For example, when a mother says, “I would not do that if I were you,” to her child who she caught sticking his hand in the cookie jar, she *suggests* (hints at the fact) that stealing cookies will result in bad consequences for him though she does not *assert* that it will. Narrators make suggestions all the time to hint at facts that will be important to the plot of a story. Read the passage cited above, and tell me in your own words what you think the narrator is suggesting about Irene’s thoughts concerning Clare.

5. At the end of the first part of the book, Encounter, we learn that Irene no longer desires to see Clare again. Why does Irene no longer desire to see her? Pick passages that support your opinion.
6. For each of the main characters that you identify in Encounter, pick a passage that best indicates what they take *the good* to be.
7. Why does Clare Kendry desire to visit Irene so much? Is it out of “a joy or a vexation” (62)? That is, does Clare do so because she *enjoys* the company of the Redfield’s,

specifically that of Brian's, or is it because she *despises* married life with Jack Bellew?

Might Clare's desire to visit Irene so frequently stem from both reasons?

Re-Encounter passages to look at: p. 38 (on loyalty).