

A LEVEL
Different Interpretations
**ENGLISH
LITERATURE**

Passing
by Nella Larsen

Teacher Guide

H472/02



RUNNYMEDE

Lit in colour

Overview

This resource is intended as a starting point for engaging with a range of different interpretations and views of *Passing* by Nella Larsen.

The selections identified can be used as sources for understanding, support for discussions as well as starting point for further reading and research as well as being accessible and student friendly.

We offer a reminder here that engagement with literary criticism is only one way of approaching AO5. Excellent answers are unlikely to include more than two or three quotations from critics on any single text, and may include none. There is no requirement that students quote specific critics or literary theory in order to succeed.

Lit in Colour

Lit in Colour partnership

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Our involvement provides us with additional expertise and support as we diversify our own Literature qualifications.

The research led nature of this work gives us access to a comprehensive view of what teachers and students might want from us as an awarding body.

Through our work with Lit in Colour, we are able to offer a wider range of high quality learning and teaching resources. Our new GCSE and A Level texts are not just accessible but exciting, challenging and enriching learning opportunities for our teachers and students.

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Content warning: There is mention of racism, assault and potential suicide within original text, as well as potentially outmoded terminology, which may then be repeated or referred to in critical material related in this resource.

Contemporaneous reviews

Alice Dunbar-Nelson, 'As In a Looking Glass', *The Washington Eagle*, 3rd May, 1929



You feel as you lay the book down that the real tale begins at the end; that there has been only a preface in the printed pages [...] It is so surprising, so unexpected, so startling, so provocative of a whole flood of possibilities, so fraught with mystery [...] the subtle artistry of the story lies in just this – its apparent innocuousness, with its universality of appeal. [...] Clare is an adventuress; Irene, the ordinary woman, afraid of life, wrapped in home, child, husband, gone Berserker when these latter are threatened.



Dunbar-Nelson's review is generally more positive, particularly about both the narrative style and the ending. Nelson suggests that Larsen 'delights again' with her novel, and that it is deceptively deep. Whilst the story may initially seem quite slight, she argues that the shock of the ending changes everything and makes you realise you have been reading "a masterpiece all along."

Dunbar-Nelson insists that, despite the novel focusing explicitly on passing, it is truly universal in its depiction of a love triangle, those outside of the social elite and in its interest in the hunger for childhood friends displayed by Clare Kendry. She also praises the "compact and terse" style for its effectiveness and precision. She ends by recommending that the best way to enjoy the novel is to read and discuss with friends to get different interpretations of the ending.

Find out more

Dunbar-Nelson, Alice, 'As In a Looking Glass', *The Washington Eagle*, 3rd May, 1929 as extracted in Kaplan, Carla (ed.) *Passing*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2007

Mary True, 'Nella Larsen's New Tragedy of Mixed Marriage in Harlem', *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 15th June 1929



You are made vividly aware of the intellectual Negro temperament, of the barriers existing between blacks and whites and of the utter inability of either side to remove them. [...] *Passing* will interest both the prejudiced and unprejudiced mind because of its straightforwardness, its bold dramatic strokes, and its sincere appeal for analysis from a writer who must herself have been through the conflicts of the characters she portrays.



True's review is positive, if ending on a rather biographical reading of the novel. She offers a thoughtful summary of the novel's events and characters, seeming particularly impressed by the psychological elements of Clare's characterisation.

True notes the novel's engagement with segregation and the black community's need for "an impenetrable defence" from the wider hostile world. True also asks questions about the end of the novel and the possible space for a sequel of sorts where Larsen could focus on the impact on Clare's daughter.

Find out more

True, Mary, '[Nella Larsen's New Tragedy of Mixed Marriage in Harlem, Baltimore Evening Sun, 15th June 1929](#)

W.E.B Du Bois, 'Review of *Passing*', in *Crisis* (36.7), July 1929



It is a good close-knit story, moving along surely but with enough leisure to set out seven delicately limned characters [...] [Larsen] explains just what "passing" is: the psychology of the thing; the reaction of it on friend and enemy. It is a difficult task, but she attacks the problem fearlessly and with consummate art.



W. E. B. Du Bois reviews *Passing* very positively, referring to it as "one of the finest novels of the year." He suggests that the novel would not receive the response that it deserved because of its subject matter (he highlights particularly Clare's marriage as the issue). He notes that this is a topic that has been a popular subject of late (naming Walter White and Jessie Fauset's work) but implies that Larsen's approach is more psychological.

Du Bois argues that Larsen's treatment of the theme of passing is superior to that of others, because she considers its psychological impact on a range of characters with different experiences and backgrounds. He finishes his review by commending the novel for its "sincerity, simplicity and charm", and by giving a clear directive: "Meantime, your job is clear. Buy the book."

Find out more

Du Bois, W. E. B., 'Review of *Passing*', in *Crisis* Vol. 36. No. 7, July 1929 as extracted in Kaplan, Carla (ed.) *Passing*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2007

Mary Fleming Labaree, 'Passing', August 1929



I like 'Passing' for its calm clear handling of a theme which lends itself to murky melodrama. [...] The tragedy is told with an economy of words, but is [sic] full import is unmistakable. A throb of *the urge to speak out* runs through it. [...] We have a competent piece of story-telling: both plot and people move logically to their appointed end.



Labaree's review focuses on Larsen's narrative method, suggesting that if Clare Kendry provided the central viewpoint for the novel, there would be gains in terms of drama and feeling; however, she argues that we would also lose the novel's "shades of intellectual and emotional reaction to the fact of *passing*." Labaree comments on the more closed settings of this novel in comparison to Larsen's debut, *Quicksand*.

Labaree admires the novel's "urge to speak", implying that it is in a sense a work of protest. She compares the work favourably to more shocking and colourful productions of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* which focuses on street life. Labaree closes by hoping that Larsen's next work appears after a great period of rest and thought.

Find out more

Labaree, Mary Fleming, 'Passing', Opportunity: *Journal of Negro Life* Vol. 7, August 1929 as extracted in Kaplan, Carla (ed.) *Passing*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2007

M. L. H. 'Passing', in *The Wilson Bulletin*, December 1929



[T]he book contains, especially in its last half, an absorbing account of the inner life of a somewhat divided personality [...] Irene's experience seems to outtop the other events and steal the title of "main character" away from Clare.



M.L.H.'s review is brief and opinionated, describing initially the way the novel characterises "the social life of the upper middle class Negro", containing "all the refined detail of the luxurious living of the corresponding white strata." There seems to be a fascination here with the emerging black middle classes of Harlem.

The second part of the review picks up on a question which preoccupies many of the novel's early readers: who is the more important character, Irene or Clare? M.L.H. suggests that Irene 'steals the title' from Clare at the novel's close.

Find out more

M. L. H., 'Passing', *The Wilson Bulletin* Vol. 41 No. 4, December 1929 as extracted in Kaplan, Carla (ed.) *Passing*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2007

Later analysis and criticism

Claudia Tate, 'Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation'

Tate's article offers a repositioning of the novel and offers a way to interpret the novel more fully. Initially she tackles the way the novel has been seen as a typical story of the "**tragic mulatto**" suggesting that Larsen's work is altogether more skilful and nuanced.

Much of the article offers a close reading of Larsen's lexical and structural choices in the novel. She touches on the way Irene describes how Clare makes her feel; the ambiguous and emotional language Irene chooses to refer to Clare's letter; the progression in anxiety and insecurity of Irene's narration over the course of the novel. She examines the book from the perspective of a 'romance of psychological intrigue' and ultimately discards Clare as the protagonist but instead emphasises the role of Irene.

Tate argues that Clare's "psychology is inscrutable" and that her yearning for reconnection with Irene and her community is not out of a sense of pride or solidarity, merely a need for excitement. Tate also firmly sees the ending's ambiguity as a strength, offering a closer look at the possible readings of Clare's demise.

- "The real impetus for the story is Irene's emotional turbulence, which is entirely responsible for the course that the story takes and ultimately accountable for the narrative ambiguity."
- "[I]t is essential to ascertain precisely who is the tragic heroine – Irene who is on the verge of total mental disintegration or Clare whose desire for excitement brings about her sudden death."
- "In fact, Larsen seems to have deliberately avoided narrative clarity by weaving ambiguity into Irene's every thought and expression."

Find out more

Tate, Claudia, '[Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation](#)', *Black American Literature Forum* Vol. 14, No. 4 (Winter, 1980), pp. 142-146

(Note, a login is required to access this content)

A tragic mulatto

A stereotype of American literature where a mixed race person of white and black parentage is assumed to be tragic due to their failure to fit in either the white or the black world.

Find out more:

Pilgrim, David, '[The Tragic Mulatto Myth](#)' *Jim Crow: Museum of Racist Memorabilia*. Ferris State University

Jonathan Little, 'Nella Larsen's *Passing*: Irony and the Critics

Little's article hinges on the idea that although other critics have done much to bring Larsen's work back under a critical gaze, their disappointment with her endings "miss some of the insights that Larsen's pervasively ironic vision offers."

Little's piece offers a brief survey of the ways in which the "passing-for-white" plot, as he calls it, was a particular trope in late 19th century and early 20th century American literature, detailing examples like Frances E.W Harper's *Iola Leroy*, Walter White's *Flight* as well as two novels published after Larsen: Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and *American Style*. He indicates that Larsen was familiar with White's novel as she defended it against negative reviews in 1926.

His perspective on *Passing* focuses on the ways the ending demonstrates a turn away from convention and "substituting ironic tragedy where there had been joy." His article clearly sees the ending as one of murder, of Clare by Irene, and this perspective does shape his understanding of the novel and his arguments. Little examines the figure of Clare closely, surveying the textual evidence for her "background of grinding oppression and physical abuse" before digging into her relationship with Irene.

Little offers a close reading of the impact of narrative perspective and Irene as an unreliable narrator of the novel. He explores the interplay between Irene's jealousy and middle-class bias in her perception of Clare, as well as how Irene's descriptions of Clare cast light on "Irene's deepest and unacknowledged impulses and desires."

Find out more

Little, Jonathan, '[Nella Larsen's *Passing*: Irony and the Critics](#)', *African American Review* [Vol. 26, No. 1, \(Spring, 1992\)](#), pp. 173-182
(Note, a login is required to access this content)

- "Larsen, obviously aware of the traditions before her, chooses not to depict such serene returns for her characters [...] Even after returning back across the color line into the Black community, Clare Kendry finds no peace, rest, loyalty"
- "We learn of [Clare] only through Irene, whose increasingly paranoid and unreliable vision and projections cloud our access to all of the characters and action. Irene's problematic influence has been underestimated as a power in shaping readers' interpretations of Clare as an unsympathetic character."
- "At the narrative's end, Irene is becoming increasingly fragmented and alienated from herself, embodying writer and reader, defendant and advocate, prosecutor and judge."

Richard Bernstein, 'Books of the Times; Anguish Behind the Harlem Renaissance'

Bernstein's piece is a reflective review prompted by the Modern Library's reissuing of the text, with an introduction by Ntozake Shange. Bernstein's review is thoughtful, focusing on the ways in which the novel is a deeply American and psychologically convincing.

His focus in the review is on the ways in which Irene and Clare are drawn by Larsen, particularly their entwined desires and fears. He posits that Irene's strength is in her security in identity and Clare's in her defiance and recklessness, both of which are a source of some anguish to the other.

As his review focuses on the 2001 reissue, he comments only briefly on Shange's introduction, which "stresses the homoerotic strand in Clare's desire for Irene's company", though Bernstein's reading of the text does not seem convinced of this.

- "It is a tragic story rooted in inescapable facts of American life: that whiteness conferred an almost universal unearned advantage, and that loyalty to a black racial identity was not only an act of pride but also one of courage."
- "Essentially, "Passing" is about two women whose choices were opposite and whose fates were strangely intertwined."
- "[Irene] acknowledges that her greatest concern is for security, for the avoidance of danger, and she never accepts Clare's gestures of defiance as anything but foolishly risky."

Find out more

Bernstein, Richard, '[Books of the Times; Anguish Behind the Harlem Renaissance](#)', *The New York Times*, 15th January 2001

Brooke Kroeger in 'Hiding in Plain Sight' in the *Los Angeles Times*

Brooke Kroeger is a journalist and a professor at New York University who has written a book called *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are* (2004); this piece, written for the *Los Angeles Times*, discusses Nella Larsen's novel.

Kroeger meditates on 'passing', or hiding one's origins to sustain a life which would otherwise be unobtainable. She suggests that Irene's whole life, although she only rarely aims to pass as a white woman, is based in other ways on dishonesty – on showing herself to be something other than she really is. Kroeger shows how, if "passing" is understood to mean "playing a role", it can have a very wide application, dealing with any kind of pretence, hypocrisy or deception.

Kroeger explains the impact that passing can have on the individual who is carrying it out, but also on the community in which they live: Kroeger argues that, in tales about this theme, "the typical moral of the story is that passing, if not bad, is at least a really bad idea, and that life will punish the passer for breaking the rules"; however, she suggests that stories of passing, in fiction and in life, are usually complex, and require at least the examination of "an unjust system [which] forced them to pass in order to live the lives they wanted to live".

- "[W]e might ask if Irene is also passing when she postures as the 'New Negro' paragon – doctor's wife, mother, social do-gooder – even though she long ago spent her passion for these roles and cares only about maintaining her comfort level and position."
- "Passers hide their origins. They need the complicity, the safe distance or death of those who knew them [before]... Clare, having involved herself with the Harlem elite, knows the 'race loyalty' of her friends old and new will keep them from outing her."

Find out more

Kroeger, Brooke, '[Hiding in Plain Sight](#)', *Los Angeles Times*, 4th August 2002

Applying a theoretical lens

As stated in our introductory overview, there is no requirement for students to engage with specific fields of literary theory to succeed in their study of this text. We provide the below to give an introduction to some of the theoretical lenses academics and critics have employed when examining Larsen's work.

Some of the articles mentioned here may demonstrate more than one theoretical lens at once but we've focused on highlighting key themes of analysis. Theoretical approaches we often see with Larsen's work are studies in race and class, Queer studies and material approaches. These are by no means exhaustive.

Studies in race and class

Understandably, looking at Larsen's novel through the twin lenses of race and class is a particularly fruitful approach to the text. It's one that has been particularly developed since the novel's critical rediscovery. In examining the presentation of Clare and Irene, ideas of **intersectional feminism** can help illuminate the ways their presentation engages with both race and class.

The concept was originally developed in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw to show how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics 'intersect' with one another. Initially, the term was used to illustrate the range of disadvantages experienced by women of colour in the fields of employment and the law, but has come to be much more widely used and is another, perhaps more nuanced way, to provide a feminist analysis of texts by women with other marginalised identities.

The novel's preoccupation with **passing** is central to examining this text through the lens of race and class. 'Passing' is the social practice of a member from one group presenting as another. In the context of Larsen's novel, and America more generally, this term relates to racial passing of light-skinned or mixed-race Black people presenting as white, being assimilated into white culture, and receiving its attendant socio-economic benefits. The ability to pass is inextricably bound up in **colourism** (a term widely attributed to Alice Walker's 1983 text *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*) referring to discrimination on the basis of skin colour.

Find out more

Crenshaw, Kimberlé, '[Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color](#)', *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.

(Note, a login is required to access this content)

hooks, bell, '[Chapter 1: Loving Blackness as Political Resistance](#)', *Black Looks: race and representation*, (South End Books, 1992)

Davis, F. James, excerpt from [Who is Black? One Nation's Definition](#) (Duke University Press, 1991) provided by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)

National Museum of African American History, '[Historical Foundations Of Race](#)'

Cheryl A Wall, 'Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels'

Wall develops the work begun in Tate's re-examination of the novel. From the outset, Wall contends that Larsen's use of the tragic mulatto is one of subversion and deviation from literary convention, a tool through which to "demonstrate the psychological costs of racism and sexism".

As Wall discusses both Larsen's novels, her focus on *Passing* occurs from p.105 onwards. Initially she offers an overview of the less favourable critical treatment it has received but identifies that the novel continues similar threads as set out in *Quicksand*. In her exploration of Clare's character, Wall notes "[Clare's] motives for 'passing' are ambiguous", appearing to be not just about race but class and material comfort. Wall explores how Clare's use of her lighter skin tone to pass grants her structural power over darker skinned women.

Wall draws on Annie Pratt's scholarship in examining Larsen's focus on the veneer of Clare's life and the pull between satirising her desires and depicting admiration for her. Wall also proffers that all the women in the novel are reliant on what safety and security their husbands provide and that Clare is "merely an extreme version" of this predicament. She also draws attention to the ways in which Larsen exposes Irene's failing strategies at drawing too great a line between her and Clare.

Wall also briefly expands the ways in which Irene constructs her sense of self through the dismissal of her inferiors and jealousy of her superiors. She draws attention to a moment between Irene and Gertrude, indicating the ways in which Irene's conception of class affects her narration. These ideas are extended in Lewis and Wilson's work elsewhere in this pack.

- "As they navigate between racial and cultural polarities, Larsen's protagonists attempt to fashion a sense of self free of both suffocating restrictions of ladyhood and fantasies of the exotic female Other."
- "Each of these [other female] characters, like Clare, relies on a husband for material possessions, security, identity. Each reflects and is a reflection of her husband's class status. Clare's is merely an extreme version of a situation all share."
- "When, for example, Gertrude expresses her anger at Bellew's racism – a deeper anger than Irene can muster – Irene dismisses her. After all, Gertrude looks like the butcher's wife she is; her feelings could not matter."

Find out more

Wall, Cheryl A. "[Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels](#)." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 20, no. 1/2, 1986, pp. 97–111.

(Note, a login is required to access this content)

Charles Lewis, 'Babbled Slander where the Paler Shades Dwell: Reading Race in *The Great Gatsby* and *Passing*'

Lewis opens his article by suggesting that "The resemblances between F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) are remarkably extensive and largely unrecognized."

Lewis demonstrates how the main characters of *Passing* can be mapped on to those of *The Great Gatsby*. Each novel is driven by a desire to 'pass', primarily on the part of Clare, passing for white, and Gatsby, passing for a member of the elite set who can aspire to Daisy's love. He also notes the narrative conceit of both these characters being observed by another, "whose perspective infuses the narrative with a highly charged mix of desire and dread."

Lewis discusses the ways in which both novels engage with ideas about race, passing and identity. Lewis identifies how in *Passing*, Clare's mixed-parentage problematises her relationship to race, but that the novel itself passes as a novel about racial passing, when it could be said to be an exploration of repressed lesbian desire (see McDowell and Butler later in this pack.) Lewis contrasts this with the way that Gatsby's passing for upper class and the elision of his possibly Jewish background, is figured by Tom Buchanan as a first step towards miscegenation, thereby drawing a connection between class, race and otherhood.

Lewis further explores the ways Fitzgerald's novel makes white anxieties about race quite explicit, whether from Tom's explicitly white supremacist espousal of Great Replacement thought to Daisy's racial purity with her 'white girlhood' and good breeding.

- "These two short novels offer surprisingly similar portraits of an America whose bright notes of progress and prosperity were dampened by widespread racism and nativism."
- "[T]he main character is a passer closely observed by another admiring but ambivalent character whose relationship with the passer is fraught with tension and ambiguity, whose own position in society similarly entails an element of passing, and whose perspective infuses the narrative with a highly charged mix of desire and dread."
- "Nick and Irene are obsessed with passing in part because they also are passing in order to enjoy economic and social mobility, albeit in more attenuated configurations since both possess a sense of pedigree that makes them feel superior to the main characters."

Find out more

Lewis, Charles, ['Babbled Slander where the Paler Shades Dwell: Reading Race in *The Great Gatsby* and *Passing*'](#), *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 18:2, 173-191, 7th June 2007

(Note, a login is required to access this content)

Mary Wilson, “Working Like a Colored Person”: Race, Service, and Identity in Nella Larsen’s ‘Passing’

Wilson takes her title from a letter Larsen sent to another author, Carl Ven Vechten. The article takes a very minor character from *Passing* and uses her role to bring issues of work, colourism and class into perspective. She focuses on Zulena, Irene’s dark-skinned maid and the role Zulena’s character has in exposing complexities in the novel’s engagement with race, skin tone and class.

Significantly, Wilson argues that Zulena’s placement in the novel is a way of exploring class and exposing the home as a site of conflict and complexity for black women in the novel, particularly Irene. Wilson explains that it was relatively unusual for prosperous, middle-class people of colour like the Redfields to have black women as servants, often because these women refused to serve other African-Americans.

Wilson draws out the ways in which Zulena’s dark skin is inherently linked, by Irene, to her servitude and argues that in depicting Irene with darker skinned Black women as servants, Larsen illuminates Irene’s colourist prejudices and how her own lighter skin tone helps to solidify her position with the social hierarchy. Wilson draws out the exotifying and objectifying description of Zulena’s dark skin as “mahogany”, being referred to as a “creature”, emphasising her servility and efficiency: ‘For Irene, Zulena’s domestic labor is legitimized by her legible blackness.’

Irene’s charity work, an essential component of her middle class persona, is described in the article as an occupation aimed at a white audience and questions who truly benefits from this ‘uplift’ work. Wilson suggests that this work enables Irene to align “with the values of the black middle class while maintaining her distance from (and dependence on the lower position of) those supposedly being lifted up.”

Wilson also notes that Clare is ‘a “black” maid turned “white” housewife’ and as such her social mobility is not just between races but classes too. Larsen makes a point of emphasising Clare’s ease in chatting freely to Irene’s servants in a way Irene finds unsettling. Wilson contends that both Clare and Zulena operate to support and question Irene’s sense of identity and position.

Find out more

Wilson, Mary, “[Working Like a Colored Person”: Race, Service, and Identity in Nella Larsen’s Passing](#)”, *Women’s Studies*, 42:8, 979-1009, 2013 excerpted from *Working like a colored person’: Race, Service, and Identity in Passing*,” in Mary Wilson, *The Labors of Modernism: Domesticity, Servants, and Authorship in Modernist Fiction* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 85–117
(Note, a login is required to access this content)

- “Larsen gives Irene Redfield not one but three apparently dark-skinned black servants, making the contrast between Irene’s elite paleness and Zulena’s mahogany skin an integral part of the character’s world. [...] Irene does use her white skin at times to escape racism, more often she seeks to stabilize her membership in a specifically *black* bourgeoisie.”
- “Clare and Zulena both simultaneously support and test Irene’s carefully constructed domestic identity as selfless wife and mother, reasonable mistress, and caring uplifter of the race.”
- “Irene’s grasp on middle-class status is anchored by her husband’s service profession (he is a doctor) and her own service “to the race” through uplift programs. [...] Irene requires both service to and service from working-class African-Americans in order to reaffirm her middle-class black identity.”

Queer & Sexuality Studies

The growth of **Queer Studies** since the 1980s has led to a body of literary criticism focusing on gender and sexuality, which challenges heteronormative readings and meanings in texts. A key element of the resurgence of critical interest in Larsen's work has been through queer readings and consideration of Larsen's exploration of sexuality in her work.

Deborah E McDowell in the introduction to her edition of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*

Deborah E McDowell's 1986 edition of Nella Larsen's novels introduces a significant line of discussion: she sees Larsen as exploring "the urgent problem of female sexual identity", and prioritises this reading in her consideration of the novel.

She describes the problem faced by black female novelists of the Harlem Renaissance in dealing with the issue of sexuality. She suggests that they were hampered by prevailing social attitudes imposing the need to present black women as self-controlled and respectable (in response to racist myths depicting black women as hypersexual). McDowell suggests that the solution in many novels to the problem of female sexuality is either abstinence or commitment to marriage and child-bearing, as happens in *Quicksand*.

McDowell focuses in most closely on *Passing* in Part III of the introduction. McDowell suggests that Irene's relationship with Clare is erotically charged throughout. Discussing how "the narrative traces this developing eroticism in spatial terms". McDowell demonstrates how the narrative begins at the Drayton hotel, moving towards Clare's party, before finally erupting in Irene's bedroom.

McDowell considers the sexual overtones of Clare's letter in its discussion of loneliness and aching caused by Irene. McDowell highlights Irene's bodily response to the letter with its focus on flushing and unnameable feelings as a possible representation of repressed sexual desire. The introduction further develops this textual analysis by considering the novel's descriptions of Clare's striking attractiveness and from moments of physical contact between the two women, arguing that "Larsen envelops the subplot of Irene's developing if unnamed and unacknowledged desire for Clare in the safe and familiar plot of racial passing."

The introduction also posits that Irene's suspicion of an affair between Clare and Brian is an act of displacement, projecting her desires in the absence of any real cause to suspect Brian. After considering the passage where Clare chides Irene's lack of response and Irene reminds Clare of the dangers of passing, McDowell suggests that Irene's hypocrisy (as she too occasionally passes) as offering the possibility of reading Irene's concern about passing as a deflection from her concern about their relationship.

McDowell notes the novel's ambiguous ending but follows Wall's suggestion that Irene is responsible for Clare's death, committing an ultimate act of repression. She draws a connection between this and Irene's habit of lighting and stubbing out cigarettes.

McDowell advances the idea that that the novel itself can be read as a tale of lesbian passion 'passing' as one about race: "Larsen envelops the subplot of Irene's developing if unnamed and unacknowledged desire for Clare in the safe and familiar plot of racial passing." The introduction acknowledges that the lesbian theme is never made explicit, and also demonstrates awareness that other critics at the time of writing have not read *Passing* in the same way.

- "[T]he narrative suggests that [Irene's] most glaring delusion concerns her feelings for Clare [...] Lest the reader miss this eroticism, Larsen employs fire imagery – the conventional representation of sexual desire – introducing and instituting this imagery in the novel's opening pages."
- "The awakening of Irene's erotic feelings for Clare coincides with Irene's imagination of an affair with Clare and Brian. Given a tendency to project her disowned traits, motives, and desires onto others, it is reasonable to argue that Irene is projecting her own developing passion for Clare onto Brian."
- "In other words, Clare is both the embodiment and the object of the sexual feelings that Irene banishes. [...] The novel performs a double burial: the erotic subplot is hidden beneath its safe and orderly cover and the radical implications of that plot are put away by the disposal of Clare."

Find out more

McDowell, Deborah E, ed. '[Introduction](#)', *Quicksand* and *Passing*, Rutgers University Press, 1986

Judith Butler, 'Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge'

Butler, a philosophical theorist, offers a literary and psychoanalytical examination of Larsen's work in their 1993 book. Butler's examination of the novel begins by exploring the scene where Irene finds Claire in the living room with Brian in her black taffeta gown. Butler explores the syntactical confusion of the tableau, of Irene's inability to voice herself.

Butler focuses on a range of moments where Irene's desire towards Clare is figured through critique and frustration, for example Clare's discussion with Felise's husband that causes Irene to break her teacup. In that instance, Butler posits that "this shattering prefigures the violence that ends the story" and the ways in which there is both a literal shattering of Clare's body and the shattering of her social mask as a white-passing woman.

Butler also looks at the implications of the ways in which both Clare and Irene can pass as white and its relationship with class, agency and marking. Halfway through this chapter, Butler explores the role of Clare's husband, the ways in which he perceives and marks Clare, as well as the significance of his name. Butler also upholds the ambiguity of the end of the novel, not arguing for a particular interpretation of this 'blinking out'.

Butler also argues for a consideration of the novel that takes its temporal specificity and its psychological complexity into account. Butler also examines the use of the word 'queer' and 'queering' within the novel, acknowledging that it had not yet been aligned with a specific sexuality but a deviation from normalcy but that it 'is what upsets and exposes passing' in the novel. There is also some consideration of the ways in which Irene's paranoid assumption of an affair between Clare and Brian is actually projection on her part, developing in greater depth the argument made by McDowell.

The latter half of the chapter offers a survey of potential psychoanalytical readings and what this brings to bear on considerations of both race and sexuality, primarily informed by an engagement with Freud and Lacan.

Find out more

Butler, Judith, '[Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge](#)' in *Bodies That Matter*, Routledge, 1993

For another digest of this chapter please see:
Brigley Thompsom, Zoë, '[Another View of Passing in Butler's "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytical Challenge"](#)',
The Midnight Heart, University of Warwick blog, 17th June 2007

- "The question of what can and cannot be spoken, what can and cannot be publicly exposed, is raised throughout the text, and it is linked with the larger question of the dangers of public exposure of both color and desire."
- "Clare embodies a certain kind of sexual daring that Irene defends herself against, for the marriage cannot hold Clare, and Irene finds herself drawn by Clare, wanting to be her, but also wanting her. It is this risk-taking, articulated at once as a racial crossing and sexual infidelity, that alternately entrances Irene and fuels her moral condemnation of Clare with renewed ferocity."
- "[T]he narrator, who is usually able to say what Irene cannot, appears drawn into Irene's nonnarrativizable trauma, blanking out, with drawing at the crucial moment when we expect to learn whose agency it was that catapulted Clare from the window and to her death below."

Charles Scruggs in 'Sexual Desire, Modernity, and Modernism in the Fiction of Nella Larsen and Rudolph Fisher'

Scruggs refers to *Passing* as a kind of detective story which, although it lacks closure, allows the reader to access certain truths. He introduces the question, commonly considered by critics of the novel, as to whether Irene's paranoia over Brian and Clare hides a latent lesbian desire for Clare. Scruggs does not pick a side but suggests "Irene and Brian seem to live with conflict and frustration in their marriage." Irene fears Brian's desire for change, but can't help wanting things to be different herself, and this makes Clare a figure of fascination for her.

Ultimately, Irene's rejection of Clare leads in some sense to Clare's death. Scruggs reflects that, whether or not Irene pushes Clare from the window, she certainly desires Clare's removal from her life, and remains silent when she could give Clare a warning following her meeting with Bellew in the company of Felise, who is obviously black.

Scruggs also explores the issue of social class: Clare is obviously a social climber and an opportunist, but also wishes to keep her origins in the black community alive, and to 'pass' between the different worlds she inhabits. Irene, more cautious and dependent on her hard-won status, is threatened by Clare's risk-taking.

- "Although critics argue over this point, one thing about Irene's sexuality is obvious. It has been replaced by her desire for safety and 'security' which she refers to as 'the most important and desired thing in life.'"
- "Larsen...believed that sexual desire is a primary force in human nature but one shaped by the ubiquitous presence of modernity."
- "Paradoxically, Irene is both attracted to and appalled by Clare's desire to live on the edge."
- "Throughout the novel, Irene assumes a moral superiority over Clare because Irene is grounded in the black bourgeoisie whereas Clare's father was an alcoholic janitor."

Find out more

Scruggs, Charles, "[Sexual Desire, Modernity, and Modernism in the Fiction of Nella Larsen and Rudolph Fisher](#)", *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by George Hutchinson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 155–169. Cambridge Companions to Literature.
(Note, a login is required to access this content)

Material Studies

Material studies is a discipline originally derived both from philosophical ideas about things and museology's examination of material culture (i.e. objects). In literary studies, looking at texts from a material studies perspective takes into account the physical production and existence (materiality) of the text. This is a useful way to examine editorial interventions, as well as the impact of physical printing of texts. Larsen's novel historically has two endings, depending on which printing an edition relies on.

John K. Young in 'Teaching Texts Materially: The Ends of Nella Larsen's *Passing*'

Young's article deals with the 'Ends' of *Passing* and the pedagogical benefits of teaching a text's material history. To provide some context for these different ends, Young considers questions about the relationships between white publishers and black authors.

Exploring the editorial experience of Gwendolyn Brooks and Toni Morrison, Young returns to an argument about how white publishers were inclined to present such writers as "a black literary commodity for white consumption". He suggests that textual alterations might well be carried out by the publisher, with or without the knowledge or approval of the writer, giving further examples of changes made to Richard Wright's *Native Son* to make it more acceptable to a white readership.

He also considers the value of exploring textual instability in the classroom and the way it can develop interpretation of literature by students. Young explores the two different versions of the novel's ending (the 'Ends'). The first edition of the novel, in common with the current Penguin text, concludes with a final paragraph as follows:

"Centuries after. [...] Let's go up and have another look at that window."

The ending is ambiguous, but the ambiguity only grows when one learns that the third printing of the original Knopf edition (in common with some other more recent editions) appeared without this short final paragraph. Young explains that, despite some critics' speculations, it is not known why the final paragraph dropped off and that there's no specific evidence that this edit is at Larsen's request.

Find out more

Young, John K., '[Teaching Texts Materially: The Ends of Nella Larsen's *Passing*](#)', *College English*, vol. 66, no. 6, 2004, pp. 632–651
(Note, a login is required to access this content)

He then examines the ways in which he has used these different endings in the classroom and how discussion alighted on two main impacts of this editorial choice: in removing the final paragraph, the ambiguity of Irene's role in Clare's death is more apparent; the last voice is not of a white male police officer.

If the last words of the novel are 'Then everything was dark', the reading is clearly affected. Here Young draws on his class discussion of this potentially suggesting a return to the novel's black community for Irene; finality; the darkness of Irene's wish for Clare's death. It also offers a more circular construction to the novel: beginning and ending with Clare's appearance and disappearance from Irene's life.

- "[A]n important pedagogical parallel operates between these kinds of narrative instability and the textual instability produced by the insoluble problem of the last paragraph."
- "The penultimate (or closing [in the third printing]) paragraph thus ends with a clear sense of Irene's guilt, but without a definite resolution of the plot, at least as far as the legal consequences of her guilt are concerned."
- "Rather than seeing one last paragraph as a queer ending and the other as straight, or one as 'black' and the other as 'new Negro', we see that various, and sometimes opposing, interpretations of *Passing* can ultimately be derived from either last paragraph."

Adaptations

There is a 2021 film of *Passing* directed by Rebecca Hall and starring Tessa Thompson, Ruth Negga, André Holland, Alexander Skarsgård and Bill Camp. It had its world premiere at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival on January 30, 2021, and will be available on Netflix from 10th November.

The film was made in black and white in a 4:3 aspect ratio, a decision apparently influenced by limitations of budget, but has generally received praise for its positive impact on the film. It has generally been well-received, often being described using terms such as 'delicate' and 'subtle'. Both actresses, Thompson and Negga, have received strong reviews for their performances as Irene and Clare respectively. A selection of reviews are linked below.

Reviews

Erbland, Kate, "[Passing' Review: Tessa Thompson and Ruth Negga Shine in Rebecca Hall's Elegant, Searing Period Piece](#)," *IndieWire*, 30th January 2021

Kiang, Jessica, "[Passing' Review: Rebecca Hall's Subtle, Provocative Directorial Debut](#)," *Variety*, 31st January 2021

Rooney, David, "[Passing': Film Review | Sundance 2021](#)," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 31st January 2021

Lee, Benjamin, "[Passing' review – Rebecca Hall's elegant but inert directorial debut](#)," *The Guardian*, 31st January 2021

Find out more

Als, Hilton, "[Acting Black and White Onscreen](#)," *The New Yorker*, 22nd February 2021

Mead, Rebecca, "[Rebecca Hall's Complicated Inheritance](#)," *The New Yorker*, 3rd June 2017

Shaffer, Marshall, "[Interview: Rebecca Hall on The Night House, Passing, and Existing in Gray Areas](#)," *Slant*, 19th August 2021

Video interviews with cast and director

["Passing' Stars And Director Rebecca Hall On The Complexity of Racial Identity](#)," *Variety* 2nd February 2021

[Tessa Thompson, Ruth Negga, and Rebecca Hall Want to Stoke the Conversation on Race with 'Passing'](#), *IndieWire*, 3rd February 2021

[Film Talk: Passing](#), *The Atlantic*, 2nd February 2021

Additional sources

About the author

George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of The Color Line*

George Hutchinson's 2006 biography of Nella Larsen is a comprehensive look at her life and career, often examining reviews and personal correspondence.

Find out more

Hutchinson, George, [In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of The Color Line](#), Harvard University Press, 2006

Michelle Dean, 'Passing Through', *Lapham's Quarterly*

Dean's piece is a biographical examination of Larsen's life and particularly the end of her career as a writer. Drawing on Hutchinson's work as well as other sources, it's a useful introduction.

Find out more

Dean, Michelle, ['Passing Through'](#), *Lapham's Quarterly*, 3rd April 2015

By others

South Atlantic Review, 'Special Issue: Nella Larsen's *Passing* at Ninety'

The South Atlantic Review has made its special edition on *Passing* publicly available. Featuring a wide range of recent scholarship on Larsen's novels, it is an extremely valuable source for further engagement with the novel.

Find out more

Ramon, Donovan L, ed., ['Special Issue: Nella Larsen's *Passing* at Ninety'](#), *South Atlantic Review*, Volume 84, No. 2-3, Summer/Fall 2019

Emily Bernard, 'Introduction'

Bernard's introduction to the 2018 Penguin edition of *Passing* is also extracted on Electric Literature. This offers another overview of the critical reception of the novel as well as drawing on some of the scholarship excerpted or mentioned in this pack.

Find out more

Bernard, Emily, ['In Nella Larsen's 'Passing,' Whiteness Isn't Just About Race'](#), *Electric Literature*

Elizabeth Dean, 'The Gaze, The Glance, The Mirror: Queer Desire and Panoptic Discipline in Nella Larsen's *Passing*'

Dean's article is a recent examination of queer desire in the novel, expanding previous scholarship by drawing on Foucauldian ideas of self-surveillance.

Find out more

Dean, Elizabeth, ['The Gaze, The Glance, The Mirror: Queer Desire and Panoptic Discipline in Nella Larsen's *Passing*'](#), *Women's Studies*, 48:2, pp.97-103

Heidi W. Durrow, “Passing” Across The Color Line In The Jazz Age’

In this ‘You Must Read This’ section of an All Things Considered episode for National Public Radio (NPR), Durrow offers a review of the novel. NPR has transcribed the section and provided the three minute clip of Durrow’s discussion of the novel.

Find out more

Durrow, Heidi W. [“Passing” Across The Color Line In The Jazz Age’](#), NPR: *All Things Considered*, 7th April 2010

Gloria Naylor, ‘Novel Reflections on the American Dream’, an *American Masters* interview

This interview by Michael Epstein was originally intended for his 2007 television documentary *Novel Reflections on the American Dream*. Here, he interviews Gloria Naylor, an African American novelist best known for her novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983), who died in 2018.

In the interview, Gloria Naylor reflects on the nature of the American Dream, relating it especially to Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, F Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. We expand on this incredible source in our Contextual Information pack.

Find out more

Epstein, Michael, [‘Gloria Naylor, Novel Reflections on the American Dream’](#), American Masters Digital Archive (WNET), 28 Jun 2000

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