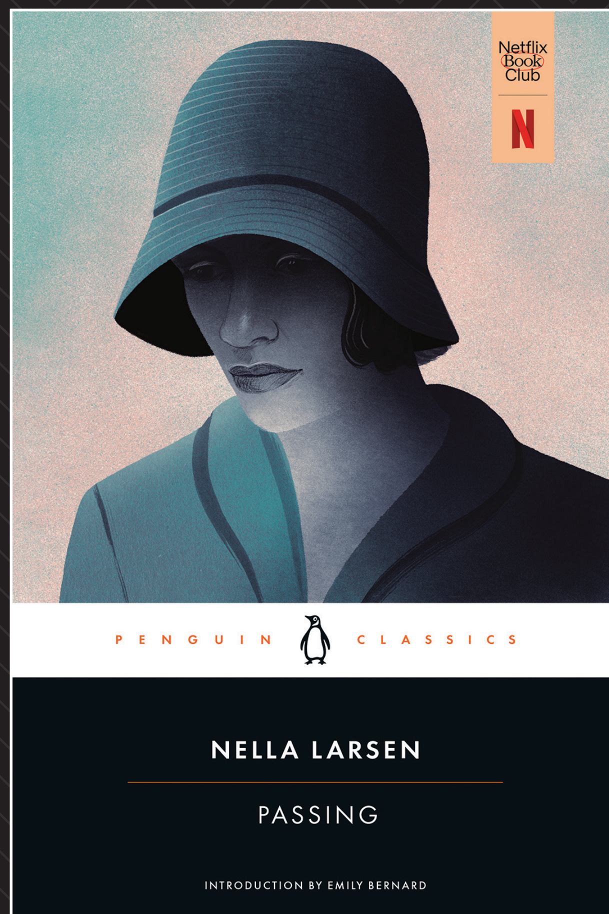
Passing

by Nella Larsen



A #DISRUPTTEXTS EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

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#DISRUPTTEXTS

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WHAT IS #DISRUPTTEXTS?

#DisruptTexts is a crowdsourced, grassroots effort *by* teachers *for* teachers to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve. Cofounded by Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán, Dr. Kimberly N. Parker, and Julia Torres, #DisruptTexts' mission to aid and develop teachers committed to antiracist/antibias teaching pedagogy and practices.

There are four core principles to #DisruptTexts:

1. **Continuously interrogate our own biases and how they inform our thinking.** As teachers, we have been socialized in certain values, attitudes, and beliefs that inform the way we read, interpret, and teach texts, and the way we interact with our students. Ask: How are my own biases affecting the way I'm teaching this text and engaging with my students?
2. **Center Black, Indigenous, and voices of color in literature.** Literature study in U.S. classrooms has largely focused on the experiences of white (and male) dominated society, as perpetuated through a traditional, Eurocentric canon. Ask: What voices—authors or characters—are marginalized or missing in our study? How are these perspectives authentic to the lived experiences of communities of color?
3. **Apply a critical literacy lens to our teaching practices.** While text-dependent analysis and close reading are important skills for students to develop, teachers should also support students in asking questions about the way that such texts are constructed. Ask: How does this text support or challenge issues of representation, fairness, or justice? How does this text perpetuate or subvert dominant power dynamics and ideologies? And how can we ask students to wrestle with these tensions?
4. **Work in community with other antiracist educators, especially Black, Indigenous, and other educators of color.** To disrupt and transform curriculum and instruction requires working with other educators who can challenge and work with us as antiracist educators. Ask: How can we collaborate to identify, revise, or create instructional resources (like this guide) that can center and do justice to the experiences of historically marginalized communities?

Each principle stands for actions that are culturally sustaining and antiracist. Through each principle, teachers aim to offer a curriculum that is restorative,

inclusive, and therefore works toward healing identities and communities. As you read this guide, you'll see how each of these principles informs the approach recommended to teach Nella Larsen's *Passing*.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Clare Kendry is living on the edge. Light-skinned, elegant, and ambitious, she is married to a racist white man unaware of her African American heritage, and has severed all ties to her past after deciding to "pass" as a white woman. Clare's childhood friend, Irene Redfield, just as light-skinned, has chosen to remain within the African American community, and is simultaneously allured and repelled by Clare's risky decision to engage in racial masquerading for personal and societal gain. After frequenting African American-centric gatherings together in Harlem, Clare's interest in Irene turns into a homoerotic longing for Irene's Black identity, which she herself abandoned and can never embrace again, and she is forced to grapple with her decision to pass for white in a way that is both tragic and telling.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

SETTING THE STAGE: CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

Race and racism are often among the most difficult topics for teachers and students to navigate in classroom conversation. It is impossible to teach *Passing* effectively without discussing the impacts of race and racism in a novel that is centered on the racial experiences of its characters. Furthermore, the issues related to race and racism explored in the novel are still very much present today, generally in society, but also for many of our students. **Any discussions of race and racism—and, therefore, the study of any text that asks students to engage on the issues—must be taken with care.**

Before considering teaching this novel, teachers must ask themselves if they have created the classroom community that is necessary for critical conversations related to the novel.

- What working definitions of race and racism do I and my students have? What additional background knowledge about race and racism do my students need in order to engage with this text?
- How do students respond when they are invited to discuss issues of personal and social identity, including but not limited to race? How have students responded to previous conversations related to race and racism in this class?
- How have I intentionally created space for students to discuss their own racial identity?
- How can I scaffold instruction so that students can effectively engage with the complexities of race-related issues in this text? (Or, put another way, what learning experiences do students need before reading this book that will help them find meaning and be better informed?)
- What areas of this text will be especially challenging for this particular group of students? Why? Am I able to effectively address this challenge as a teacher?

It is critical that teachers reflect on these questions before moving forward with the novel, especially in multiracial classrooms where conversations about race and racism will have a different impact on students of color. These questions are not meant to deter teachers from teaching the novel, but to help teachers mitigate potential harm and increase authentic and meaningful engagement with the text.

RACE AS PERSONAL AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

Because reading is informed by our personal and social experiences (or lack thereof), before teaching the novel, teachers should assess their own knowledge and understanding of the issues that Larsen explores in the story, especially regarding race *and* how race intersects with social class and gender identity. This is a novel that intentionally troubles and challenges its readers' concepts of race and identity, and teachers must be ready to hold space for complex and nuanced discussions of both.

Throughout the novel, both Irene and Clare wrestle with their identities as light-skinned Black women who can, depending on the context, "pass" as white. In order for teachers to effectively guide students through nuanced and complicated conversations around passing—as well as the related

issues of colorism and anti-Blackness—teachers should themselves have a strong understanding of their own *personal racial identity* and how that racial identity *informs and has been informed* by social class and gender.

Likewise, teachers need to have a strong understanding of *race as a social identity* and that racism can occur at both interpersonal and systemic levels. Although Larsen focuses on each character's individual and interpersonal experiences with race and racism, students should also understand that any racism felt on an individual or interpersonal level is always connected to and reflective of larger systems. It would not only be a missed opportunity but also a mistake to allow students to walk away from the novel assuming that Irene's and Clare's experiences are strictly individual ones and not informed by larger societal or historical contexts.

Again, this understanding is especially important in multiracial classrooms so that teachers can more effectively support students by anticipating what assumptions, racial biases, or stereotypes may surface during class discussion. **Only when teachers anticipate and plan for potentially harmful conversations can they mitigate the negative impact on all students, especially students of color.**

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In many high school classrooms, texts like *The Great Gatsby* have been the standard to teach students about America in the 1920s. Search the internet for "Gatsby" and many common teaching resources direct teachers to have jazz and 1920s-themed parties. Of course, we know that the 1920s was so much more than glamorous parties thrown by the uber New York elite. Teachers should provide students with enough background knowledge to understand and appreciate the range and diversity of experiences of individuals and communities in the United States during the 1920s, especially if the only text students are familiar with from this time period is, in fact, *The Great Gatsby*. In many ways, *Passing* makes an excellent text to juxtapose against Fitzgerald's novel, as both texts deal with issues of identity, power, social class, gender, and race. (Of course, *Passing* is also an excellent alternative to reading *Gatsby* altogether.)

Teachers can begin by challenging students to consider what else they know about the 1920s beyond flappers and jazz music. Connect with students' social studies teachers to get a better sense of what students might know or

not know. For example, while the name "Roaring Twenties" alludes to the economic growth of the time, students should understand that, like today, this economic prosperity was not experienced equally, if at all, across different communities. After all, Larsen's *Passing* is also limited, providing a glimpse into the fictionalized experiences of middle- and upper-class Black Americans in Harlem, and is in no way representative of the experiences of all Black communities during this time. Provide background on historical events like the 1921 Tulsa Massacre, or rising nativist movements, propelled by an increasingly powerful Ku Klux Klan.

Teachers should also put Larsen's novel in the historical context of the Harlem Renaissance, providing students with ample background about the literary movement's place in American literature and the art and music the movement inspired. In particular, Countee Cullen's poem "Heritage," which Larsen used in the epigraph to her novel, is a necessary text for students to engage with. The novel also alludes to other notable Harlem Renaissance figures, including Josephine Baker, Carl Von Vechten, and Ethel Waters, who can be discussed and explored before or while reading the novel.

Of course, as Isabel Wilkerson has pointed out (https://prhlink.com/wilkersontedtalk), much of the art and music associated with the Harlem Renaissance would not have been possible if not for the Great Migration. Teachers should help students place the issue of racial identity in the novel—and its ambiguity and shiftiness—in the context of this migration. Millions of Black Americans and their families migrated north and west, seeking to escape racial terror and find freedom, while still being met with resistance and racial violence. In an essay for *Smithsonian Magazine,* Wilkerson notes (https://prhlink.com/greatmigration), "They were seeking political asylum within the borders of their own country, not unlike refugees in other parts of the world fleeing famine, war and pestilence." (One could argue that "The Great Refugee Crisis" is a more fitting description.) In *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (https://prhlink.com/chosenexile), professor Allyson Hobbs documents the personal stories of light-skinned Black Americans during the Great Migration who were able to pass as white and chose to do so, believing they would find relative safety and power in doing so. Thus, students should understand that Clare's and Irene's decisions to pass as white cannot be separated from this historical context.

LANGUAGE AND CONTENT

Because our relationship with language changes over time, authors may use certain words that are no longer considered appropriate for today's context and the students in our classrooms. Furthermore, there are some words that were never appropriate for any time period. One of these words is the n-word, which should never be spoken or read aloud in a classroom. While we should not censor books, **we should be mindful of language in any text that may be upsetting, even traumatic, for students to hear, *regardless of whether or not we personally, as teachers, take offense*. Since we cannot predict nor dictate how others are or are not offended, as educators, it is our responsibility to err on the side of caution and care.**

The n-word is used several times in *Passing*. Students should be made aware of this before reading the book. Teachers must make clear that while Larsen, as a Black author, might be using the word in her novel to make a specific point as a writer, **again, under no circumstances should the n-word be spoken aloud in class**. Because of the history and trauma associated with the word, the potential harm to all students, especially Black students, is too great. Teachers cannot assume that all students will know this, and thus, they must make this point clear and explicit. Teachers should prepare students for the book by making sure they know what to do and not do when they encounter this racial slur and others like it. If students find it necessary to quote a passage from the book that contains the slur, direct them to abbreviate it. To support this conversation, teachers may want to view and discuss Ta-Nehisi Coates's explanation (https://prhlink.com/coatesonwords) with students. Learning for Justice's Straight Talk About the N-Word (https://prhlink.com/straighttalk) is another essential resource for teachers to consult as they prepare to discuss these issues with students.

Teachers should also pay particular attention to the character of John Bellew, as he expresses deeply white supremacist and racist points of view. His character first appears in Chapter 3 of Part 1 when he comes home and finds Clare, Irene, and Gertrude gathered. It is here that readers learn of his nickname for Clare, which is a shortened version of the n-word. ***Similar to the n-word, under no circumstances should this nickname be stated or read aloud, and students should be directed not to do so either.***

Before students read this chapter, teachers should preview the material and alert students to harmful, racist words and beliefs he will express. Below is a script that you may want to adapt when you speak to kids about this section of the text:

> "In this upcoming chapter, we will be introduced to John Bellew, who is Clare's white husband. Not only does he not know that Clare is Black, John also holds racist views, which he will express in this chapter. Before you read, I want to make clear that his views are wrong and racist. Period. Larsen is using his character to expose the racism that Black people could face even in their own homes. As you read, you will also learn about John's nickname for Clare, which is derived from a racial slur. Under no circumstances should we ever say a racial slur aloud or any word that is related to one."

In addition, the word "Negro" is found throughout the book. This is a word that we no longer use to refer to African Americans or Black people. Explain to students that while the word is found in the book, it is because it was the word that was in common use at the time. Teachers might say something like, "Although that word was used historically, when we refer to African American or Black people in class discussion, we will use these contemporary terms instead."

THEMES AND ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Who am I? This is perhaps the most critical question for many of our students (and, really, for all of us). Defining who they are, especially in the context of their relationships with others, is a pressing tension for many young people. Thus, *Passing* makes an excellent choice for the classroom as Larsen's characters grapple with issues of identity and what it means to belong to a community. Throughout the novel, we see into the intimate thoughts of the protagonist, Irene, as her sense of self is challenged when she reconnects with her childhood friend, Clare. The identities that Irene has so meticulously carved out for herself—wife, mother, member of an active middle-class Black community in Harlem—are threatened with Clare's growing presence in her life. To draw students in, teachers might introduce *Passing* as a novel about what happens when who you are—and what you've fought to create—is challenged by someone from your past.

Of course, Larsen's novel isn't just about identity, generally speaking, but

specifically about *racial* identity. Larsen asks readers to consider how we *read* race, *perceive* race, and, thus, how we *experience* race. Throughout the novel, readers see how characters navigate issues of race in their lives and, in doing so, how their thoughts and actions both subvert and perpetuate existing power structures.

Because Larsen's novel covers so many complex issues of identity, below are some themes and essential questions from which teachers can choose to bring focus to students' reading. The essential questions are also aligned with Learning for Justice's Social Justice Standards (https://prhlink.com/socialjustice) and their domains of identity, diversity, justice, and action. Prior to starting the novel, teachers may use the first essential question around identity as an entry point for students, moving through the remaining essential questions as they progress through the novel.

RACE AND IDENTITY

- How does my race influence who I am? (Identity)
- How are my experiences similar to and different from people of other racial backgrounds? (Diversity)
- What types of bias and privilege do individuals and groups experience because of their race? (Justice)
- What can we do to address racial prejudice and advocate for racial justice? (Action)

FREEDOM AND AUTONOMY

- How do I define freedom? How do I experience autonomy in my life? (Identity)
- How are my definitions of freedom and experiences of autonomy different from others? (Diversity)
- How do personal, interpersonal, and systemic biases and other forms of discrimination impact how individuals and groups experience freedom and autonomy? (Justice)
- What changes are necessary, in ourselves, others, or systems, to ensure that each person experiences freedom and autonomy? (Action)

POWER

- How do I define and experience power in my own life? (Identity)

- How are my definition and experiences of power similar to or different from those of others? (Diversity)
- What facilitates or prevents access to power for people of different racial, gender, or social identities? (Justice)
- What can be done to ensure equitable and just access to power? (Action)

COMMUNITY AND BELONGING

- What groups or communities do I belong to? (Identity)
- In what ways do others define and experience belonging in different groups and communities? (Diversity)
- How are individuals or groups made to feel like they belong and are welcomed or excluded and discriminated against? (Justice)
- What can be done differently to ensure all individuals and groups feel a sense of belonging and inclusion? (Action)

KEY CONCEPTS AND VOCABULARY

RACE

Every person has a racial identity and racialized experience. In the United States, and in many places in the world, race is based primarily on physical features such as skin color, hair texture, facial features, and cultural heritage (Jewell, p. 24). However, **race is also a socially constructed identity**; what it means to be white, Black, or Asian in the United States, for example, is different from what it means to be white, Black, or Asian in other countries. Race can also be perceived and experienced differently based on where a person lives. In some parts of the United States, a person may be perceived as having one race, while they may be perceived—and, therefore, treated—as having a different race.

Before reading the novel, make space for students to define what race is and how it has affected their own lives. One excellent resource for this prework is Tiffany Jewell's *This Book is Antiracist*. In particular, teachers may use Chapters 2 through 4, which include activities and journal prompts that guide students to reflect about race.

Teachers can then deepen students' understanding by looking at additional models for defining race. For example, Professor H. Richard Milner IV defines

race as being constructed in four different ways: 1) physically, 2) socially, 3) legally, and 4) historically. On the other hand, in *Courageous Conversations about Race*, Glenn E. Singleton asserts that race is experienced in three distinct ways: 1) color, 2) culture, and 3) consciousness. In Singleton's model, race is comprised of what we see (color), how we behave (culture), and how we think (consciousness).

Both Milner's and Singleton's models for defining race are reflected in the novel, and students can identify how race impacts the characters in these different ways. For example, although Clare can physically pass as white, in order to maintain a white racial identity, it is likely that Clare has had to also learn how to pass as white in terms of culture and consciousness as well. Provide students with an overview of these additional models, either at the beginning of the novel or even partway through the text. By making sure that students have a shared working definition of race, teachers can guide students to revisit their definition and pay attention to how Larsen challenges this definition of race and for what purpose.

RACIAL PASSING

In her PBS series, *Origin of Everything*, African American studies professor Danielle Bainbridge describes racial passing (https://prhlink.com/whatisracialpassing) as what happens "when people change their background and other social identifiers in order to gain certain benefits." Historically, the concept of racial passing has been most frequently associated with Black Americans with lighter skin tones who could pass as white, especially during the Great Migration. However, as Bainbridge points out, racial passing was also used by individuals of other racial groups during different periods of history where passing as white or another race allowed those individuals to access greater economic or social opportunity.

Be sure to provide students with some historical background related to racial passing. Below are some resources that may be helpful for students. One possible activity would be to have students choose one of the sources below, discuss in small groups, and then come back as a whole class to share what they learned about the concept of racial passing. Alternatively, teachers might choose one or two of the sources and discuss with the entire class.

- What is Racial Passing? (https://prhlink.com/whatisracialpassing) (PBS) – video*

A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life (https://prhlink.com/passingtoescapeslavery) (U.S. National Archives) – *article*

Passing for White to Escape Slavery (https://prhlink.com/passingtoescape) (JSTOR Daily) - *article*

'A Chosen Exile': Black People Passing In White America (https://prhlink.com/passinginamerica) (NPR's Code Switch) – *podcast*

A History of Racial Passing in the United States (https://prhlink.com/passinginunitedstates) (DIG History Podcast) - *podcast*

* **Please note:** This video contains some historical artifacts that include racist and disturbing imagery. Teachers should preview before deciding to use it with students. If using with students, teachers should provide students with a content note and historical context regarding the images.

Please Note: In discussion of racial passing or other forms of passing, students may make connections to their own experiences of having to change who they are in order to fit in with others. This is understandable given the nature of adolescence and this text-to-self connection should be invited and welcomed into the classroom space. That said, students should understand that racial passing is a specific act that has a historical context related to racial oppression, and therefore should not conflate the act of racial passing with other forms of fitting into society.

COLORISM

While not explicitly addressed in *Passing,* students would benefit from having some background knowledge (or may bring background knowledge) of colorism. In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker defined colorism as "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color." Or put another way, colorism is a bias that positions lighter skin color as superior. Like racism, colorism can be experienced on an interpersonal and systemic level. Readers can see colorism when Irene's childhood friend, Gertrude, speaks about marrying a white man in order to have light-skinned children, or through Irene's attitude towards the darker skinned "mahogany" Black women who work for her. The article "The Difference Between Racism and Colorism" (https://prhlink.com/colorism) may provide a helpful primer for students on the difference between racism and colorism.

JOURNAL PROMPTS

The following journal prompts can encourage students to make text-to-self connections, as each of the situations described in the prompts below has a parallel in the novel. Teachers might use a prompt to start or end a class, to prepare for reading the next chapter, or to reflect on the chapters they have just read.

- Reflect on the various elements of your identity and all the things that make you who you are. What parts of your identity feel essential to who you are? Why? What parts of your identity do you think you could change and still be the same person?
- Write about a childhood friend that you no longer have or are no longer close to. What was your friendship like? What changed in you, your friend, or your friendship? How do you feel looking back?
- Reflect and write about a time a friend or acquaintance put you in an uncomfortable social situation, especially one in which you felt like you had to be polite or refrain from speaking about something bothering you. What was this situation? What prevented you from speaking?
- Reflect and write about a time that a friend asked you for a favor that you did not feel comfortable agreeing to but did so anyway. What were the circumstances? Why did it make you feel uncomfortable? Why did you agree to do this favor?
- Consider your closest friendships. What power do you have in your friendships? What power do your friends have? How do you know?
- Define jealousy. What is it and how do you know when you're experiencing it? What instigates it? How does jealousy go away (or can it)?
- Reflect and write about a time that you changed something about yourself in a social situation or when you were with others. What did you change about yourself? Why? What was easy or hard about changing yourself? If you faced a similar situation, would you do the same thing?
- Describe a time where your position or identity may have felt threatened by something or someone else. What happened and why did you feel this way? How did your feelings impact your actions?

Please note: While having students engage with the text in personal ways is an important part of reading, it is critical that in making personal connections

with the text that students do not inadvertently engage in false equivalency. For example, a student might know what it's like when a childhood friendship comes to a natural end as a part of growing up, but this is different from the experience of ending a friendship out of necessity in order for a Black person in the 1920s to pass as white. Likewise, while all friendships may experience moments of jealousy or resentment, this is different from the jealousy and resentment that can be aggravated or even fueled by racism.

DISCUSSION AND LESSON IDEAS

The novel is divided into three parts: "Encounter," "Re-Encounter," and "Finale." Teachers may want to have students read each part in its entirety and then discuss. Alternatively, teachers may opt to divide the reading into shorter chunks of reading. How teachers divide the reading and discussion of the book will depend on each teacher's professional judgment about what will work best for the students in their class.

BEGINNING THE NOVEL

Examine the title. To introduce the novel, teachers may want to use the title to help students make predictions about the book's plot and characters. Before distributing copies of the text, display or write the word "passing" in the front of the room and ask students to discuss what other words, ideas, or associations they have with this word. After a few minutes, teachers might distribute copies of the book and then invite students to read the summary on the back cover. Ask students how many of them are familiar with the idea of racial passing and in what ways. Depending on your class, you may want to share some of the resources about racial passing listed earlier in this guide, but it may be more effective to wait until after the students read the first chapter and see how Irene and Clare pass as white at the Drayton Hotel.

Read the poem "Heritage" by Countee Cullen. Countee Cullen was one of the great literary artists of the Harlem Renaissance, and Larsen chose to excerpt lines from his poem "Heritage" for the epigraph for *Passing*. Thus, the critical question for readers of *Passing* is why Larsen chose "Heritage" for the epigraph and how it illuminates the novel's central themes. Teachers may use the TPCASTT Strategy (https://prhlink.com/analyzingpoetry) to help students respond to and analyze the poem. Alternatively, teachers may also wait until students finish reading the novel and then read the poem in its entirety (see discussion prompts below).

Closely read Chapter 1. Because the opening chapter is relatively brief but dense, students would benefit from some close annotation. To provide additional scaffolding, teachers could ask students to read Thomas C. Foster's list of eighteen things to look for in an opening scene from his book *How to Read Novels Like a Professor* and apply that to Chapter 1 of *Passing*. Foster asks readers to consider literary elements like style, tone, mood, diction, point of view, narrative presence, and so on. The class can be divided into small groups, with each group in charge of analyzing three or four of the items on Foster's list. Alternatively, teachers can zoom in specifically on Irene's and Clare's characters:

- Irene spends much of the first chapter thinking about Clare, whom she describes as "stepping always on the edge of danger," "catlike," and that Clare could be "selfish, and cold, and hard" but also had "warmth and passion." What can we tell about Clare based on Irene's descriptions? What can we tell about how Irene feels about her?
- Irene recalls several moments from her childhood with Clare. What do these memories suggest about Clare? About Irene?
- Although the novel is told from Irene's perspective, we do hear from Clare directly through her letter to Irene. Ask students to notice the word choice and tone in Clare's letter. What do these suggest?
- The heart of this novel will be the relationship between Irene and Clare. What does this first chapter tell us about their past, where they are in the present, and what might happen in the future between the two women?

Examine the dialogue of Chapter 2. In Part 1, Chapter 2, Irene and Clare reunite at the hotel for the first time in twelve years. Have students revisit this conversation. This scene is critical to understanding the concept of passing, as it affects the lives of both Irene and Clare. Ask students to review each character's perspectives on the issue of passing. Place students into groups of four. Two students will be readers, while the other two students will be listener-notetakers. Assign one of the readers to read aloud Irene's lines, while the other reads aloud Clare's dialogue. Similarly, assign one of the listener-notetakers to Irene's character and the other to Clare. As they read aloud the dialogue, the listener-notetakers should list their assigned character's attitude towards passing: What does that character perceive to be the advantages (or benefits) and disadvantages (or challenges) of passing as a white person in society?

After reading the chapter, regroup students so that they are only with other students who were assigned the same character (example: new groups would include two students who read Irene's lines aloud as well as two students who were listener-notetakers for Irene's character). In these character-focused groups, students should compare notes: What important background information does Larsen reveal about this character? What does this character value or believe regarding passing? What else do we learn about this character based on what they say, think, do, and especially in how they react to each other?

DURING READING: NOTE-TAKING

As they read, students should take notes about the characters, conflicts, timeline of events, and themes that emerge. Because there are relatively few characters in the novel, reading *Passing* is an opportunity for students to closely track how characters are developing—or, more precisely, how Larsen is developing these characters. Have students keep a character development chart; at the end of each chapter, students should note not just the character's important words, thoughts, or actions, but also what their words, thoughts, or actions reveal about the values, beliefs, and attitudes the character has toward themselves or others. Tracking these will also help students begin making connections to important internal or external conflicts. A note-catcher like the one below may be helpful.

Section	Important words, thoughts, or actions (text evidence)	What does this reveal about the character's values, beliefs, or attitudes about themselves or others?	How might this reveal a conflict or lead to a conflict for the character, either internal or external?
Part 1 Ch. 1	When Irene gets Clare's letter, she hesitates opening it and is sure that there is something dangerous in it, in the same way Irene thought Clare was "stepping always on the edge of danger."	Irene believes that Clare is reckless, someone who transgresses boundaries in ways that may put herself or others at risk. Irene is wary of Clare.	Internally, Irene may struggle with her feelings towards Clare. Externally, the two may have different philosophies that cause them to have a falling-out.

DURING READING: DISCUSSION PROMPTS

While the following prompts and close reading invitations can be helpful as students read the novel, teachers can also ask students to revisit these ideas upon finishing the novel. Many of these prompts may also be easily adapted into essay questions.

1. *Passing* can be described as a novel about **remembering.** In fact, the novel opens with Irene reading a letter from Clare, remembering their last encounter, and then adding additional recollections of their childhood together. Ask students to consider the value of remembering and memory. For example, when Irene is alone, she reflects back on her childhood with Clare. When Irene, Clare, and Gertrude are together, they recall shared memories from their childhood in Chicago. What purpose does remembering seem to serve? In what ways does the act of remembering help Irene put her memories—and sense of self—back together? Conversely, in what ways does memory actually dismember Irene's sense of self?

2 In Part 1, Chapter 3, Clare, Irene, and Gertrude are having tea at Clare's home when her husband arrives. Note the **dramatic irony** here as John Bellew, a proud racist and white supremacist, has no idea that he is not only in a room with three Black women, but that his own wife is also Black. After reading this scene, ask students what purpose this scene serves, especially so early in the novel: What does this scene tell us about each of the characters and the potential conflict that may lie ahead for each of them? What prediction can readers make? Students can also revisit this scene after reading the entire novel to more fully unpack its role in the development of the story.

3. In Part 2, Irene reflects, "It's funny about passing. We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with a kind of revulsion, but we protect it." Here, Irene captures the complicated feelings and opinions about passing that African Americans in the 1920s and at other points in history have had. In the novel, Larsen provides readers with three characters who use passing in distinct ways: Irene, Clare, and Gertrude. Ask students to compare and contrast how each of these characters chooses to pass as white. When do they do so and why? What spoken or unspoken "rules"

does each character follow when they pass? Then, in small groups, ask students to use evidence from the text as well as historical examples to discuss the benefits and challenges of passing. In what ways did passing empower and disempower those who engaged in passing?

4. Like other modernist writers, Larsen is deeply concerned with the tensions between the **interior and exterior worlds** of her characters. By choosing to limit the narration to Irene's perspective, Larsen forces readers to consider what pieces of Irene's narration are reliable and which are unreliable. Ask students the question: Can we trust Irene? Is she telling the truth? What is she choosing to tell us and what is she choosing to hide? Discuss with students the term "**unreliable narrator**" and explore how Irene fits this role. Some questions to explore: At what point do readers begin to doubt Irene's version of events? What evidence do readers have to support Irene's perceptions of others? For example, Irene concludes that Brian and Clare must be having an affair, but how reliable is her conclusion? Students can track Irene's development as an unreliable narrator at the end of each chapter or section of reading through a simple four-column chart, using headings such as "What Irene is telling us," "What Irene is hiding from us," "What might really be happening," and "How do we know."

5. Many scholars see Irene and Clare as **doubles** or **foil characters**, two characters whose personalities both complement and challenge each other. At the end of each chapter, ask students to consider how each woman both challenges and supports the other: How does Irene support Clare? How does Irene challenge Clare? How does Clare challenge Irene? How does Clare support Irene? As they track the ways in which the two women challenge and support each other, ask students about any patterns they notice and why these might be important.

6. Early in the novel, Irene describes Clare as "stepping always on the edge of danger." In what ways are Clare's actions dangerous, both for herself and for Irene? Why? Clare, like Irene, has carefully curated and constructed a life for herself that she believes will most benefit her, yet Irene sees how Clare's actions put that life at risk. What does Clare have to gain as she reconnects with Irene and the Black community in Harlem, despite the potential danger to herself or others?

7. In Chapter 1, Irene's first childhood memory of Clare is of a "pale small girl on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together," while

her father "raged threateningly." Ask students to consider why Larsen chose to introduce us to Clare in this way: Why sewing? How does Clare "stitch" together an identity for herself later in her life? Clare uses red pieces of fabric: Where else is the color red associated with Clare and why? Have students review the descriptions of Clare's and Irene's clothing throughout the novel: What does her clothing reveal about each of their characters?

8. The concept of the **American Dream** is one that has been richly explored in American literature as well as deeply embedded in American culture and media. Ask students to define what the American Dream is: What are the tangible and intangible elements of the American Dream? Is *Passing* a novel about the American Dream? How would Irene and Clare define the American Dream? Or would they? In what ways is the American Dream, however it might be defined, available and not available to them? For example, integral to the concept of the American Dream is self-invention. As students read the novel, ask: In what ways does each character invent and reinvent themselves?
9. Ask students to track the development of Irene and Clare's relationship by choosing a **metaphor** to describe how each character perceives the other. Provide students with the following sentence stems. Students might use the same moment in the novel or different ones. Prior to this activity, students could generate a list of important turning points or significant moments in the novel from which to choose.
   - When [moment in the novel], Irene sees Clare as [metaphor] because...
   - When [moment in the novel], Clare sees Irene as [metaphor] because...
10. In simple terms, passing is about **pretending**. While the novel explores the ways that both Clare and Irene use racial passing, other types of passing—pretending—occur throughout. As they read, ask students to consider the ways in which each of the characters pretends to be something they are not. For example, to what extent is Irene pretending to be happy with her situation, her marriage, and her lifestyle?
11. Ask students to analyze the character of Hugh Wentworth, who many scholars believe was based on Carl Van Vechten, who was a photographer of the Harlem Renaissance and one of Larsen's close friends. In some ways, Hugh's character provides insight into perceptions of race at the

time, especially during his conversation with Irene at the dance (Part 2, Chapter 3). Irene observes all the different people who come to dances like this: "young men, old men, white men, black men; youthful women, older women, pink women, golden women . . . " while Hugh scans the crowd, trying to identify the racial background of each person present. Ask students to reread this conversation, focusing on what Irene and Hugh believe passing means, who gets to pass, and for what purpose. Teachers might also use this as an opportunity to connect to more contemporary examples of racial passing of white people, such as the story of Rachel Dolezal, who was a white woman pretending to be Black, or Jessica Krug, a white professor who pretended to be Latina. How are contemporary examples similar and different from how Clare and/or Irene use passing in the novel? What do these choices reveal about race and social power?

12. Examine the novel through the lens of **social order and transgression**. In many ways, Larsen explores the social norms of the time through the ways that characters break, or transgress, those norms. Ask students to generate a list of the social norms and expectations for women like Irene and Clare at the time (students may want to do additional research). In what ways do both Irene and Clare break these norms and for what purpose? Irene is particularly bothered by how Clare has transgressed. Having passed for white her entire adult life, Clare returns to Harlem to reconnect with the Black community there, which Irene believes breaks social rules about passing, putting herself and others in danger if she were to be found out. Yet Clare is accepted and welcomed by the Black community in Harlem. Ask students to examine the unwritten rules about who gets to belong, who doesn't, and why. In what ways is Irene justified in her anger, fear, and/or resentment at Clare's transgressions? In what ways are Clare's transgressions reckless—or are they empowering?

13. Explore the relationship between **power and freedom** through an intersectional lens. Ask students to consider Irene's and Clare's identities across race, gender, class, and sexual orientation and how these impact their motives, obstacles, and conflicts they face. How does each character use each of these identities in ways that benefit them? In what ways do these identities serve as obstacles to them experiencing greater freedom? For example, Irene and Clare are both not only affected by racism, but

also negatively impacted by patriarchy at the same time their social class affords each of them a level of privilege that other Black women (like Irene's servants) do not have. How do the characters navigate their multiple identities to achieve greater power and freedom, and to what extent are they successful? Furthermore, how do characters manipulate oppressive systems such as racism, sexism, or classism to get what they want? For example, encourage students to analyze how Irene reminds Clare several times of her responsibilities as a mother.

14. In addition to examining Irene and Clare as **foil characters**, have students compare and contrast their respective marriages. What can readers conclude about the strengths or weaknesses in Irene and Brian's marriage versus Clare and John's? How do the relationships serve each character's needs? While students might be quick to point out that Clare and John's marriage is based on a lie, in what ways is Irene and Brian's marriage challenged?

15. Throughout their reading, provide students with **"provocative interpretations,"** which can be used to spark class discussion. Using a scale from 1 to 5 (5 = Strongly Agree, 1 = Strongly Disagree), ask students to rate to what extent they currently believe the statement to be true and to provide textual evidence as support. Below are some examples of provocative interpretations, but teachers should also generate their own (or have students do so):

    - Clare represents everything that Irene wants but can't or doesn't have.
    - Clare regrets her decision to pass as white.
    - Irene is a good mother.
    - Irene is a hypocrite.
    - Jealousy prevents Irene and Clare from ever truly becoming close.

16. At the moment of Clare's death, Larsen writes that "there was a gasp of horror, and above it a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony." Ask students to consider this description through the lens of **the literal and the figurative**. Students should not only consider what is literally happening (Who is gasping? What is the "horror" referring to? Who is making the sound? Where are each of the characters in the room and what are they doing?) *but also what this moment means figuratively* (What does Clare's death mean symbolically for Clare? For John? In the larger context

of racial passing? What does it mean that there is a sound "not quite human"? Why is the word "*beast*" used? How might Larsen be using this moment and her description as a commentary on race and relationships?).

17. Larsen deliberately leaves ambiguous the ending of the novel, especially the details of Clare's death. Provide students with different **interpretations of the ending of the novel** and ask them to consider to what extent these interpretations may be valid, based on evidence in the text. For example, here are some interpretations students might consider:
    - Clare accidentally fell off the balcony.
    - Clare deliberately fell off the balcony.
    - John accidentally pushed Clare off the balcony.
    - John deliberately pushed Clare off the balcony.
    - Irene accidentally pushed Clare off the balcony.
    - Irene deliberately pushed Clare off the balcony.

    To extend students' thinking, teachers should ask students about the characters' motives, especially if they believe that Clare's death was deliberate. If, for example, John deliberately pushed Clare off the balcony, what was his motive? Or what would Irene's motive be? How do readers know?

AFTER READING THE NOVEL

1. In his book *Craft in the Real World,* Matthew Salesses argues that traditional interpretations of plot largely focus on a series of events in which a "heroic" protagonist has agency to accept or change these events. However, Salesses points out that a culturally responsive reading of plot understands that characters always act in the context of their positionality, geography, mental health, familial values, trauma, etc. With that in mind, ask students to interpret Irene's and Clare's actions from this culturally responsive view. Examine the symbolism of the ending of the novel. How does the ending—particularly Clare's death—reveal what Larsen sees as possible for Black people, especially Black women like Irene and Clare, during this time? Furthermore, while the ending is tragic, what are the causes of the tragedy? Teachers should encourage students to see the ways in which the historical context, particularly regarding race, contribute to the tragedy of the ending.

2. Furthermore, Salesses also redefines character and story arc, asking readers to consider the ways in which the characters change or fail to change, as well as how society changes or fails to change. Provide students with the table below and ask them to determine how this framework applies to *Passing*. Then ask students to consider how the novel could have been different based on this framework; in other words, what would it look like if *Passing* existed in a different box within the framework?

By the end of the novel...	Character stays the same	Character changes
Society stays the same		
Society changes		

3. Throughout the novel, Larsen explores the concepts of power and freedom. In what ways does each character have power and experience freedom? In what ways are characters disempowered and imprisoned, and who or what is responsible for their disempowerment or imprisonment? Given the ending of the novel, what does Larsen seem to be saying about the possibilities and limitations of freedom for individuals like Irene and Clare?
4. One of the things that makes *Passing* so compelling of a read are the moments of tension (and even danger) that permeate throughout. While Irene may see Clare's actions as reckless, especially given her choice to fully pass as white in her marriage, Irene too engages in activities that also put her in danger. Ask students to reflect on these moments, guiding them to look not just at moments of physical danger, but also moments that feel emotional or mentally dangerous as well. Some scenes that students might review (there may be others teachers can use instead):
    - When Irene meets Clare's husband, John Bellew, for the first time (Part 1, Chapter 3)
    - When Clare attends the Negro Welfare Dance and Irene talks with Hugh (Part 2, Chapter 3)

- When Irene and Clare talk about their personal lives (Part 2, Chapter 4)
- When Brian informs her that Clare is waiting downstairs (Part 3, Chapter 1)
- When Irene drops her teacup at the party (Part 3, Chapter 1)
- When Irene and Felice run into John on the street (Part 3, Chapter 3)
- When Irene and Brian argue about parenting (Part 3, Chapter 4)
- The moments leading up to Clare's death (Part 3, Chapter 4)

After reviewing these scenes, ask students: How do each of these moments help to foreshadow the ending of the novel?

5. Read (or reread) Countee Cullen's "Heritage" in its entirety, paying careful attention to the lines that Larsen specifically used as the epigraph to the novel. Students might consider why these particular lines were used or if other lines could have also been excerpted instead. Provide students with additional poems from the Harlem Renaissance and ask them to consider which, if any, could also be used as an epigraph to the novel and why.
6. While much historical research has focused on the advantages that passing as white afforded Black people who could do so, in her book *A Chosen Exile,* Professor Allyson Hobbs points instead to "what they lost by not being black . . . by rejecting a black racial identity." How does Larsen use Clare's character to help illuminate this loss?
7. The genius of *Passing* is in its richness: the novel can be read and interpreted as many things and, at the same time, about none of those things. To help capture some of this complexity, after reading the novel, provide students the following concepts and ask them to evaluate to what extent *Passing* is about each. "*Passing* is a story about..."
    - friendship
    - sisterhood
    - marriage
    - motherhood
    - jealousy
    - love
    - race and racism

- gender roles
- socio-economic class
- the American Dream
- societal norms in the 1920s
- pretense and identity
- choices and consequences
- power

As a challenge, place students in small groups and ask them to rank these ideas or themes from *most applicable* to *least applicable* to the book. Teachers should then ask each group to share evidence from the text to support their rank order.

8. Ask students to research and apply different literary theories to the novel. For example:
    - Using a **psychological lens**, Irene's conflicts with Clare are less about Clare herself and more about Irene's own inner turmoil. Clare represents, psychologically, the parts of Irene that she either wants for herself or struggles to understand. Reading the novel through this lens, readers might analyze how Irene is threatened by Clare's willingness to break rules that Irene herself wants to break but is unwilling to do so.
    - Using a **Marxist lens**, the conflicts between Irene and Clare are primarily about power and class, and how each character wields their social class status to achieve greater power (and vice versa). Reading the novel through this lens, readers might analyze how each character wants something the other one has, and what each character is willing to trade in order to get what they want. For example, Clare trades her safety and security for access to the Black community in Harlem that Irene has.
    - Using a **feminist and/or queer theory lens**, each of the conflicts that Irene and Clare face is less about their conflicts with each other and more about the obstacles that a patriarchal, heteronormative society has inflicted upon them. Reading the novel through this lens, readers might analyze how Irene and Clare represent two different ways of responding to the restrictive gender roles that society places upon women like them. Readers can also be invited to see Irene and Clare

(and other characters) beyond gender binaries or heteronormativity and how Irene and Clare's relationship is not merely platonic, but romantic.

Alternatively, students may be introduced to literary theory by reading Randy Ribay's ALAN keynote address, "Critical Lit Theory as Preparation for the World," (https://prhlink.com/criticallittheory) in which he shares how students can use literary theory to analyze his novel, *Patron Saints of Nothing*. In his address, Ribay shares four questions students can ask to help them unpack the text through a particular literary theory:

1. Is the character reinforcing ideas about male, white, and/or wealth supremacy, are they challenging those ideas, or are they doing a mix of both? How so?
2. Where does that seem to come from?
3. How does that impact their life and the lives of those around them?
4. Does the character change in this regard throughout the story? Why or why not?

Ribay's framework is especially helpful for students to consider the novel through the lenses of gender, race, and socioeconomic class.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Author Study. Ask students to learn more about Nella Larsen's life and her role in the Harlem Renaissance. Students might be particularly interested to learn about Larsen's close friendship with Carl Van Vechten, who many scholars believe is the inspiration for the character of Hugh Wentworth. Students might also be interested to learn some of the details of Larsen's personal life and her marriage, which ended when her husband left her and later remarried a white woman. How might Larsen's personal experiences be reflected in the novel?

Deepening Understandings of Race. Ask students to revisit Milner's and Singleton's definitions of race (see above). After reading the novel, ask students to consider how race manifests in the novel physically, socially, historically, and legally (Milner) or how race appears in terms of color, culture, or consciousness (Singleton).

Genre Study. Have students watch Rebecca Hall's film adaptation of *Passing*. Ask students to note where Hall seems to be faithful to Larsen's text

and where Hall may have taken more interpretative and artistic liberties. Students should analyze the choices Hall makes as a filmmaker in adapting the novel, and then be invited themselves to imagine what choices they might make if they were to adapt the novel into film. Teachers may also invite students to read background and materials related to Hall's adaptation, such as "'Passing for white': how a taboo film genre is being revived to expose racial privilege" (https://prhlink.com/rebeccahall) by Janine Bradbury, "The Secret Toll of Racial Ambiguity" (https://prhlink.com/rebeccahallpassing) by Alexandra Kleeman, " and Imani Perry's "Passing Is a Film About Race from the Black Gaze" (https://prhlink.com/passingfilm).

Another genre students might consider is drama. In 2017, Kukui Kikuyu Productions adapted Larsen's novel for stage (https://prhlink.com/passingplay) in Washington, D.C. (McKnight). While students may no longer be able to see the stage production, teachers can invite students to think about how the novel could be adapted for the stage. After all, in some ways, the novel lends itself to stage adaptation, as each of the three parts of the novel can be read as three "acts" of a play. Given this, what scenes or moments in the novel should a playwright adapting the novel focus on? What scenes are essential and why?

Harlem Renaissance Poetry. Ask students to browse the American Academy of Poets' Harlem Renaissance collection (https://prhlink.com/harlemrenaissance) online and to choose one or two poems that have similar themes or tensions as *Passing*. Students might write an essay and/or work in small groups to present what they learn to their classmates.

Historical Connections. Have students research historical examples of Black men and women who passed for white and their reasons for doing so. For example, students might learn about Anita Florence Hemmings, Theophilus McKee, Harry S. Murphy, Elsie Roxborough, and Charles W. Chestnutt, among others. Conversely, students might be interested in learning about individuals like Fredi Washington, (https://prhlink.com/frediwashington) who was a light-skinned Black actress who refused to pass as white (Blakemore).

Students might also be interested to learn about the 1924 marriage and separation of Leonard "Kip" Rhinelander and Alice Jones (https://prhlink.com/glitterati). In this case, Rhinelander filed for annulment on the grounds that Jones, who had at least one Black grandparent, had duped him

into thinking she was white. Living in New York, Larsen would have been well aware of the case and, in fact, Larsen directly mentions the Rhinelander case in Part 3, Chapter 3, when Irene reflects on what to do after running into John Bellew in the street.

Students might also read contemporary essays that explore the experience of passing, including but not limited to the following:

"Racial 'passing' is still a reality. Here's why I embraced my complex identity" (https://prhlink.com/racialpassing) by Steve Majors

"The Day I Passed for White" (https://prhlink.com/passingforwhite) by Kelly McWilliams

"My mother spent her life passing as white. Discovering her secret changed my view of race—and myself." (https://prhlink.com/inspiredlife) by Gail Lukasik

Contemporary Literary Criticism. Invite students to read several contemporary analyses of *Passing* from a variety of perspectives. For example, teachers might place students into small groups, assign each group a different analysis, and then have them share back to the class what they've learned. Students can be invited to share what resonated with their own interpretations of the text: What affirmed their understanding of the novel? What challenged it? What is something new they learned in reading the perspective offered in this essay? Here are some suggestions, although teachers will likely find others:

"In Nella Larsen's *Passing,* Whiteness Isn't Just About Race," by Emily Bernard (https://prhlink.com/nellalarsenpassing).

"On the Fine Line Between Antagonist and Love Interest in Nella Larsen's *Passing*" (https://prhlink.com/onthefineline) by Megan Abbott (podcast)

"On Female Friendship and Transgression in Nella Larsen's *Passing*" (https://prhlink.com/onfemalefriendship) by Sandra Newman and Catherine Nichols (podcast)

"Understanding the Legacy of Nella Larsen's Passing" (https://prhlink.com/legacypassing) by Princess Weekes

Paired Readings. Offer students the opportunity to read additional literary works that also explore race, racism, and racial passing. Langston Hughes's

"Passing" and Toni Morrison's "Recitatif," are two excellent short stories that could lead to engaging and provocative whole-class readings, while Brit Bennet's novel *The Vanishing Half* would be an excellent additional whole-class reading, book club selection, or independent reading choice for students.

Personal Identity Essays. Larsen does not come to any easy or simple conclusions about passing. In fact, the physical and social act of passing can be read as a metaphor for the ways in which Black people and people of color must navigate predominantly white spaces. Provide students with additional texts (poetry, essays, videos) that explore this tension and ask them to compare how the author(s) addresses issues of racial identity and how Larsen does so in *Passing*. One excellent example is Brent Staples's "Just Walk On By."

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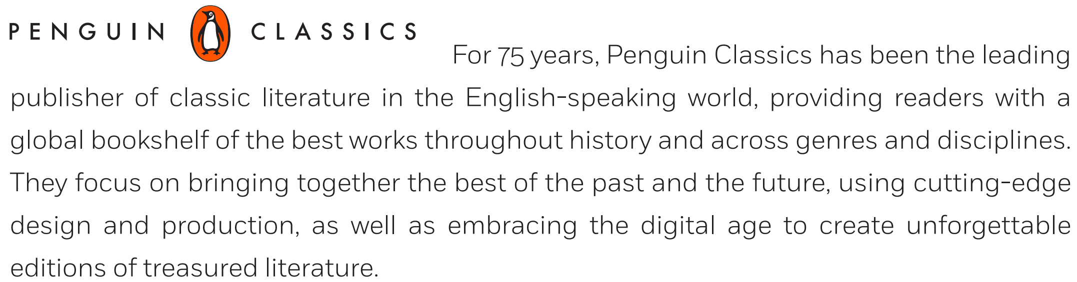

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