

Passing Study Guide

Passing by Nella Larsen

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Plot Summary

Passing is the second novel by Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen. This novel follows the relationship between two childhood friends, one who is proud of her racial heritage and one who has passed into the white world to marry for wealth. Irene Redfield runs into Clare Kendry Bellew on the roof of the Drayton Hotel in Chicago. At first Irene does not recognize the blond beauty, but as they begin to speak Irene realizes exactly who this beautiful woman is. Irene wants nothing to do with Clare, but finds herself pulled in by her charms. Two years later, Irene realizes she is not the only one who is susceptible to Clare's charms. Passing is a unique novel about race, love and human nature.

Irene Redfield is in Chicago to visit her father while her children are away at summer camp. Overwhelmed by the intense heat, Irene hails a cab and allows the driver to take her to Drayton Hotel where she hopes to enjoy a cool wind along with her iced tea. While sitting at her table, Irene becomes aware of a beautiful blond woman at another table who has taken an unusual interest in her. At first Irene worries that the woman has recognized that Irene is black, but Irene decides this is not possible. Finally the blond woman comes to Irene's table and calls Irene by name, causing Irene to recognize that this blond woman is her childhood friend, Clare Kendry.

The two old friends sit and talk for hours, both ignoring the fact that Clare is clearly passing in the white world. Clare invites Irene to tea the following Tuesday and Irene agrees so that she will not hurt Clare's feelings. However, Irene vows not to go. When Tuesday comes around, Clare calls so many times that Irene feels she must go have tea with her. When Irene arrives at Clare's hotel, she finds her entertaining another childhood friend who also married a white man. The women chat for a time and then Clare's husband arrives. Almost instantly Irene realizes the man is highly prejudiced against black people. Clare is outraged by his behavior, but she does not say anything in order to protect Clare.

Two years pass and then Irene gets another letter from Clare. After discussing it with her husband, Irene decides not to answer the letter. However, a few months later Clare appears on her doorstep. Clare convinces Irene to invite her to a dance she has helped to organize. After the dance, Clare becomes a regular guest at the Redfield home. In December, shortly before Christmas, Irene becomes aware that her husband has become inappropriately close to Clare. Irene hides the fact that she knows, however, feeling as though she should be able to deal with the pain. However, Irene begins trying to come up with ideas of how to rid herself of Clare. Irene thinks briefly that she might tell Clare's husband that Clare is really black, but she decides this would not be a good idea because it would be like betraying her entire race.

One after while shopping, Irene runs into Clare's husband while shopping with a black friend. Irene ignores him and walks away, but finds herself unable to tell either her husband or Clare what occurred. That night, Irene decides she can handle her husband having an affair as long as he continues to come home to her. However, when Clare's



husband arrives at a party that the Redfields are attending with Clare, Irene panics. Irene cannot allow Clare's husband to divorce her because then Clare would be free to be with Irene's husband. Without thinking, Irene pushes Clare out of a window.



Part 1, Encounter: Chapters 1-2

Part 1, Encounter: Chapters 1-2 Summary

Nella Larsen is the daughter of a West Indian man and a Dutch mother. Somewhat of an outcast in her own family due to the color of her skin, Nella spends the majority of her childhood in a boarding school. Nella Larsen will later become one of the shining stars of the Harlem Renaissance.

In chapter 1, Irene Redfield reads a letter that arrives in the morning mail from a childhood friend, Clare Kendry. Irene thinks about Clare, recalling the day Clare's father dies and how she stares down at him in silence before bursting into tears. Clare then disappears from the Chicago neighborhood where they all grow up, visiting only a few times before disappearing for good.

In chapter 2, Irene recalls a trip to Chicago two years previously. Irene is shopping, looking for specific gifts for her children when the heat begins to take a toll on her. Irene hails a cab and asks him to take her to the coolest place where she can get some tea. The driver takes Irene to the Drayton Hotel. On the roof of the hotel, Irene is shown to a table and orders tea. A few minutes later, a young couple takes a table beside Irene's. Irene cannot help but notice how charming the couple are and how beautiful the woman. When the man leaves, Irene becomes aware that the woman is staring at her. At first Irene fears that the woman has recognized that Irene is black. However, Irene tells herself that that is not possible because white people can rarely tell what race she might be.

As Irene tries to ignore the beautiful blond woman, the woman comes to her table. The woman knows Irene's name. It takes a moment, but Irene finally realizes that this blond woman is her childhood friend, Clare Kendry. Clare's grandfather was white, leaving Clare golden and pale enough to pass into the white world. Irene recalls that her father once visits Clare's aunts to question why she has never returned to their south side neighborhood, but Irene is too young for her father to tell her the truth. Now Irene realizes that her father was hiding the fact that Clare is passing.

Clare questions Irene for hours about their mutual friends. After a while Irene realizes that Clare has offered little information about her life. Irene asks pointed questions and learns that it is easy for Clare to pass into the white world, especially since her aunts are white. The only part Clare dislikes is her disability to keep in touch with all her childhood friends. Therefore, Clare is quite pleased to see Irene. Clare invites Irene to her hotel, but Irene refuses. Clare pushes the issue until finally Irene can no longer refuse. Irene promises to go to tea at Clare's hotel the following Tuesday. However, as she walks away, Irene tells herself that she will not attend.



Part 1, Encounter: Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The first chapter introduces the main character of the novel, Irene Redfield. Irene is reading her mail and reminiscing about an old friend from whom she never expects to hear again. This causes Irene to move into the flashback that will dominate the rest of this section of the novel. The letter is from Clare Kendry, a childhood friend of Irene's who, like Irene, is a light-skinned black woman who has passed into the white world. Passing is a dangerous thing to do in the time period in which this novel is set. If the whites with whom the passer lives ever find out, it might mean prison or death for the passer. Clare is taking a big chance in passing and a bigger one still by speaking in public with Irene.

These first two chapters set up the setting of the novel, allowing the reader to understand that the novel takes place in the mid to late 1920s, a time long before the civil rights movement of the 1960s and a time in which blacks are often lynched and otherwise persecuted simply for the color of their skin. The fact that Clare is a black woman living as a white woman in this setting adds danger and suspense to the novel as the reader wonders what will happen to this woman should anyone learn the truth. However, it is not this that will propel the plot, it is the relationship between these two women that will take them on a journey together that will end in tragedy.



Part 1, Encounter: Chapters 3-4

Part 1, Encounter: Chapters 3-4 Summary

In chapter 3, Irene is determined not to see Clare Kendry again. However, when Tuesday dawns, Clare begins calling over and over again until Irene finally accepts the call and the invitation to tea. When Irene arrives at Clare's hotel room she discovers that Clare has also invited Gertrude, another childhood friend who also married a white man. However, Gertrude's husband is fully aware of her racial heritage. As Irene listens, Clare and Gertrude talk about the fear they felt during their respective pregnancies that their babies might be born with dark skin. Irene becomes offended by this discussion as one of her own sons has dark skin. The subject then turns to another childhood friend who has adopted the Jewish religion. Again Irene is offended by Gertrude and Clare's amusement at this man's devotion to his religion.

When Clare's husband, John Bellew, arrives, Irene is immediately shocked when he refers to his wife as Nig. Clare asks her husband to explain and he tells the ladies that he calls his wife that because when he married her her skin was white as ivory, but it appears to have darkened over the years. Bellew likes to tease Clare that she is turning into a black woman. Bellew then begins to discuss the black race with Irene, readily admitting that he hates black people and that he has never met one and never wants to meet one. Irene bits her tongue, eager to defend her race, but aware that by doing so she would place herself, Gertrude, and especially Clare in danger. Irene leaves with Gertrude and the two of them talk about John Bellew, exposing their mutual anger. However, Irene finds herself feeling more compassion for Clare than outrage.

In chapter 4, Irene prepares to return to New York the following day. Clare sends a note, but Irene refuses to read it until curiosity gets the better of her. The note does not apologize for John Bellew's behavior. Instead, Clare's note appears to express regret and a desire to return to her own race.

Part 1, Encounter: Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Irene goes to tea with Clare because she cannot resist her charms. This will become a habit with Irene, who continually tries to avoid Clare because of the offense she feels Clare commits against their race, but she finds herself constantly bending under Clare's charm. At the tea, however, Irene is constantly offended by the conversation, finding herself insulted on account her race and her friend's desire to ignore her race. When Clare's husband arrives and it is revealed that he is deeply prejudiced against black people, this heaps injury on the insult that Irene has reluctantly accepted for her friend's sake.

Irene has a compassionate heart, despite feeling insulted. Even though Irene is outraged at the words of John Bellew, she is more concerned for Clare than herself.

Clare clearly has the darker end of this deal and it leaves the reader wondering what might happen if this man learned his beloved wife, and his daughter, are black.



Part 2, Re-Encounter: Chapter 1

Part 2, Re-Encounter: Chapter 1 Summary

Irene is still contemplating Clare's letter when her husband, Brian, comes into the room. Irene is supposed to be dressed and ready for breakfast several minutes ago. Irene distracts Brian by showing him Clare's letter. When Irene is finally ready to go, Brian escorts her down to breakfast. As they eat, they discuss the letter. Brian tells Irene it is common for someone who is passing to desire to return to their own race. Brian claims it is human nature. However, Brian suggests that it would not be a good idea for Irene to encourage Clare. Irene decides she will write Clare back that very day and tell her that they should cut off all contact with one another for both their sakes.

After breakfast, Irene asks Brian to drive her to the printers so she can deal with some business connected with a Negro Welfare League dance she is helping to organize. On the way to the printers, Irene begins to ask Brian about some of the unfortunate things their eldest son, Junior, has been hearing at school from his friends. Irene brings this up with the intention of asking her husband to take Junior to Europe that fall to attend a better school. However, Brian becomes angry and they begin to argue. Brian makes it clear that he thinks it is appropriate for Junior to learn the things his friends have been telling him. Irene stomps away and returns only to tell Brian she intends to walk home.

Part 2, Re-Encounter: Chapter 1 Analysis

This chapter brings the reader back to the present, two years after Irene's encounter with Clare in Chicago. Brian and Irene discuss Clare's letter and agree that Irene should discourage Clare from re-entering the black world. Irene quickly agrees, happy that her husband has taken her side. Later, the two argue over the wellbeing of their child. Irene intends to set up a trip to Europe for her husband because she is aware that he had wanted to live in Brazil years before but she talked him out of it. However, Brian becomes angry at the suggestion that Irene is questioning his ability to do what is right for their children. This shows the reader that there is some discontent in Irene's marriage, allowing the reader to recognize that this marriage is vulnerable to outside influence.



Part 2, Re-Encounter: Chapters 2-4

Part 2, Re-Encounter: Chapters 2-4 Summary

In chapter 2, Irene receives a visit from Clare several months after she decides not to answer Clare's letter at all. Clare is upset and demands to know why Irene has ignored her. Irene is honest and tells Clare that she believes it will only place her in danger if they are to correspond or visit with one another often. They are interrupted by a phone call from Hugh Wentworth, a famous white writer. Clare is impressed and wants to know all about the dance Irene is discussing with Hugh. Clare learns that other whites will be in attendance, so she asks Irene to invite her along as well. Irene resists the idea, again frightened for Clare and herself should the truth come out. However, Clare once again uses her charm to convince Irene.

In chapter 3, it is the night of the dance. Clare arrives while Irene is dressing, causing Irene to miss introducing her to Brian. The dance is a success and Irene is busy keeping all the guests happy. Irene notices that Clare dances with a lot of men, including her own husband. Hugh Wentworth asks Irene about Clare and they get into a discussion about passing without Irene having to come out and admit that Clare is passing. At the end of the night, Brian wants to take Irene home before escorting Clare back to her hotel, but Irene has already arranged a ride for Clare.

In chapter 4, Clare becomes a regular visitor at the Redfield home. Irene is worried about Brian's reaction to this, given his lecture on the perils of passing, but it appears that Brian has fallen under Clare's spell. Even Irene's children and servants seem to really love Clare. Irene and Clare get into a discussion about the dangers of Clare coming to Harlem so often, but Clare bursts into tears and insists that she can no longer give up so many things that are important to her.

Part 2, Re-Encounter: Chapters 2-4 Analysis

Irene has made the decision to shut Clare out of her life both because her husband has counseled her against encouraging Clare to return to her racial roots and partly because Irene feels insecure around Clare. Irene not only feels that Clare is spitting on the racial heritage that Irene is so proud of, but also that she is a distraction. This proves to be a good assessment when Clare shows up and manages to get herself invited to a dance that Irene is helping to organize. Clare is the belle of the ball, dancing with all the men and charming even Irene's husband, Brian. Soon after, Clare worms her way into Irene's home and Irene quickly begins to feel pushed out, as though her family prefers Clare to her. It is a difficult position for someone to be in and Irene is not sure how to deal with it at this point. The reader sees trouble brewing in Irene's future and wonders exactly how she will deal with it.



Part 3, Finale: Chapters 1-2

Part 3, Finale: Chapters 1-2 Summary

In chapter 1, the Christmas season is upon her, but Irene is not much in the spirit. Irene returns home from a shopping trip and climbs into bed instead of preparing for a tea party she is throwing that afternoon for Hugh Wentworth. At four, Brian wakes Irene and tells her that Clare is downstairs. Brian says that he invited Clare to come to the tea party because her feelings were hurt that Irene did not invite her. Irene explains that the party is for Hugh and Hugh dislikes Clare which is why she did not invite her. Brian becomes defensive, however, when Irene says this. Suddenly Clare realizes that her husband is having an affair with Clare.

Irene slowly prepares for the party, dazed and unsure how to react to the information she thinks she has learned. All through the party Irene finds herself struggling with grief, shame, and embarrassment. At one point, Irene realizes that Hugh Wentworth is staring disapprovingly at Brian and Clare as they carry on an intimate conversation in the corner. A short time later, Irene drops her tea cup. Hugh attempts to offer sympathy, but Irene cannot stand the idea that another person might know she knows about Brian and Clare. Irene makes up an excuse for the broken cup, giving the semblance of ignorance.

In chapter 2, several weeks pass as Irene struggles with the reality of Brian and Clare's affair. Irene begins to imagine ways to get rid of Clare. It occurs to Irene that if she tells John Bellew about his wife's true racial heritage that he might divorce her or kill her. This seems like a good way of ending the affair, but Irene decides she cannot do this out of loyalty to her own race.

Part 3, Finale: Chapters 1-2 Analysis

Irene sees the way her husband defends Clare and she begins to think they are having an affair. To Irene the evidence is all over her husband's face. The reader will also recall that when Clare and Irene first reconnect, Clare is with a man who is not her husband. This seems to lend credence to Irene's conviction, but the reader must recall that Irene is jealous of Clare, has been so since childhood, therefore her beliefs and convictions are not necessarily true. However, it does appear to the reader and Irene that Brian is in love with Clare; whether they are sexually involved is something that neither the reader nor Irene will ever know.



Part 3, Finale: Chapters 3-4

Part 3, Finale: Chapters 3-4 Summary

In chapter 3, Irene is shopping with a black friend, Mrs. Felise Freeland, when they turn a corner and run into John Bellew. Mr. Bellew recognizes Irene and attempts to greet her, but Irene turns away without acknowledging him. Belatedly, Irene realizes she could have used this opportunity to tell Mr. Bellew about his wife's racial heritage or at least her frequent visits to Harlem, but she does not.

In chapter 4, Irene does not tell either Brian or Clare about her chance meeting with Mr. Bellew. Irene wonders what Mr. Bellew will do to Clare, but when she calls to say she will be attending Mrs. Freeland's party the following evening, Irene believes that Mr. Bellew did not understand what he saw when he ran into Irene and Mrs. Freeland.

Clare comes to the Redfield home as Irene is still dressing. At first Irene schemes to have Clare stay with her as she dresses, but decides that it does not matter if she spends another hour or two with Brian. In fact, Irene tells herself that she can accept their relationship as long as Clare is unavailable to run away with Brian. This change of heart happens when Clare tells Irene that it is her daughter who keeps her with her husband and nothing more.

At the Freelands', Irene finds herself left to her own devices as Brian mingles with Clare. Irene opens a window to get some fresh air. Just as Mr. Freeland is moving Irene back into the party, someone knocks on the door. Mr. Freeland opens it to find Mr. Bellew there. Mr. Bellew marches into the room and begins yelling at Clare, telling her he knows what she is. Suddenly Clare disappears. Everyone runs downstairs, leaving Irene alone. Irene is in some kind of shock. She knows that if Mr. Bellew divorces Clare now, she will be available to run away with Brian. Irene places her hand on Clare's shoulder and gives her a little shove out the window. Irene goes downstairs to where everyone else has gone out of fear that they will wonder why she is not among them. As she goes down the stairs, Irene worries that Clare might not be dead, but learns that Clare dies instantly. No one sees Irene push her, but Brian is convinced Mr. Bellew did.

Part 3, Finale: Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Irene wants Clare to disappear. Irene believes that if Clare leaves, Brian will come back to her and things will be like they were before. What Irene does not recall is that her marriage is in trouble before Clare coming on the scene, because Irene refuses to allow her husband to move the entire family to Brazil. When Clare runs into John Bellew in town, she misses the chance to tell him that his wife is a black woman and that she has been spending months in Harlem. However, Irene is with a black woman, therefore the reader can assume that Mr. Bellew figures these things out for himself.



Irene tells herself that she can accept Brian's affair with Clare if only they are not free to run off together. However, this changes when Bellew shows up at a party that Clare and the Redfields are attending. Irene becomes convinced that Bellew will divorce Clare and leave her free to run away with Brian. Irene shocks the reader when she pushes Clare out the window, sending her to her death. The reader must recall that Irene does not know for sure that her husband and Clare were having an affair. Therefore, in the end, this novel is not about Clare passing, but Irene putting the responsibility of her failed marriage on someone else and taking homicidal steps to keep what she believes is hers.



Characters

Irene Redfield

Irene Redfield is a doctor's wife. Irene grows up in the south side of Chicago in a predominately black neighborhood. Irene is light skinned, so white people often have trouble deciding if she is black or of another dark race. Irene takes advantage of this one afternoon while visiting her father in Chicago by patronizing a predominately white hotel restaurant. It is here that Irene runs into a childhood friend who is passing, pretending to be white.

Irene seems like a strong, confident woman in the first part of the novel. However, as the novel progresses, the reader realizes that Irene and her husband are struggling in their marriage. Irene will not allow her husband to move the family to Brazil and this has bred resentment that has placed a wedge between them. Irene wants to believe that Brian is content, but when Clare comes into their life and Brian grows more distant, Irene begins to think that Brian is having an affair with Clare. To save her marriage, Irene will go to extreme measures without making sure the affair is real.

Clare Kendry Bellew

Clare Kendry is the daughter of a man whose father is white. This racial heritage causes Clare to have pale skin and nearly blond hair, a fact that allows her to live among the white without anyone guessing her true heritage. After her father's death, Clare goes to live with her white aunts who treat her like a servant. From there, Clare moves into white society where she meets and marries John Bellew. However, after many years of marriage, Clare becomes nostalgic for the friends she leaves behind when she begins passing.

When Clare runs into Irene at the Drayton Hotel, she begins to ache for that part of her life. Clare feels as though she has given up all that matters, that she cannot be close to anyone because her secret might come out. Clare begins spending a great deal of time at the Redfield home, causing Irene to feel pushed out. In fact, Irene comes to believe that her husband, Brian, is having an affair with Clare. This leads to tragedy for Clare when her husband learns her secret.

Brian Redfield

Brian Redfield is Irene's husband. Brian is a doctor, but he dislikes his job and he dislikes living in a country where black people are lynched just because of the color of their skin. Brian wants to move to Brazil where he believes his family can live in peace, but Irene will not allow it. Irene blocks Brian's plans for a move because she believes that it is best for her sons. However, Brian is resentful and this decision will put a wedge between Irene and Brian that will lead to a possible affair with Clare.



John Bellew

John Bellew is Clare's husband. Bellew is a very wealthy man who is able to provide Clare with a comfortable home. However, Bellew is deeply prejudiced against blacks. In fact, Bellew calls blacks terrible names and constantly speaks out against them even though he readily admits he has never met a black person. Irene finds Bellew offensive and she worries about the life Clare must live under his offensive manner. In the end, Irene fears that Bellew will divorce Clare when he finds out about her true racial heritage, something Irene cannot allow to happen.

Hugh Wentworth

Hugh Wentworth is a famous white writer who spends a great deal of time in Harlem. Hugh Wentworth is good friends with the Redfields, especially Irene. Hugh does not approve of Clare partly because he suspects that she is passing. Irene also believes that Hugh dislikes Clare because he believes that Brian and Clare are having an affair. However, Irene never discusses this with him, therefore the reader never knows for sure if this is the reason that Hugh dislikes Clare so much.

Junior and Ted Redfield

Junior and Ted Redfield are Irene and Brian's children. Irene is a hands-on mother and she cares deeply about everything that happens in her children's lives. This leads to a great deal of trouble between Irene and her husband. Brian feels it is his responsibility to care for the children and to make sure that they are raised with all the knowledge they need. In fact, Brian and Irene fight over Brian's desire to tell his children the truth about racial prejudice and Irene's desire to protect them from it.

Gertrude Martin

Gertrude Martin is another person who grows up on the south side of Chicago with Irene and Clare. Gertrude also marries a white man, but this man knows that his wife is black. In fact, Gertrude's husband assures Gertrude constantly that her race has no bearing on his concern for her. However, Gertrude prefers people not know about her heritage and she spends her pregnancy with her twins petrified they will be born with dark skin. Irene meets Gertrude again when Clare invites them both to tea.

Felise Freeland

Felise Freeland is a friend of Irene's. Felise is a dark-skinned black woman. When Clare goes shopping with Felise and runs into Mr. Bellew, it is clear to Mr. Bellew that Irene is not who he thought she was. In fact, this encounter, even though Irene did not say



anything to him, leads to Mr. Bellew finally learning the truth about his wife's racial heritage.

Dave Freeland

Dave Freeland is Felise's husband. At the party in the final chapter of the book, it is Dave Freeland who first encounters an angry Mr. Bellew. It is also Dave Freeland who first notices that Irene is not among the crowd when Clare falls to her death.

Bob Kendry

Bob Kendry is Clare Kendry's father. Bob Kendry's father is a white man, which accounts for why Clare is born with light skin and hair. Bob Kendry dies when Clare is only a child. Bob works as a janitor and his death, preceded by a visit from the police, suggests that he is either a drunk or an activist who has many enemies. Clare is not saddened by her father's death, at least it appears that way to Irene, suggesting that Clare and her father do not get along.



Objects/Places

Letter from Clare

Clare sends Irene Redfield a letter that prompts her to recall their meeting two years previously.

Tea Cup

Irene drops and breaks a tea cup after coming to the conclusion that her husband and friend Clare are having an affair.

Black Taffeta Dress

Clare Kendry wears a black taffeta dress to the Negro Welfare League dance, making Irene feel underdressed.

Brian's Coat

Irene takes Brian his coat after Clare falls to her death out of fear that he will become ill. Instead, Brian wraps it around Irene.

Window

Irene pushes Clare out a window in order to keep her from getting a divorce and running off with Irene's husband.

Books

Ted Redfield is an avid reader. When Clare meets the children for the first time, Ted buries his head in a book to avoid meeting her.

Redfield Home

Clare Kendry becomes a regular at the Redfield home after attending the Negro Welfare League dance organized by Irene Redfield.

Negro Welfare League

Irene is a member of the Negro Welfare League and she organizes a dance for them.

Drayton Hotel

The Drayton Hotel is the hotel in Chicago where Irene runs into Clare again after more than a decade.

Brazil

Brian Redfield wants to move to Brazil but Irene refuses to relocate her children there.

New York City

Irene and her family live in New York City in the area known as Harlem.

Chicago

Both Irene and Clare grow up on the south side of Chicago.



Themes

Passing

Passing is what it is called when a black person pretends to be white in order to live in white society. In this novel, Clare is passing. Clare is light-skinned and her hair is nearly blond. Clare is married to a white man who is not aware that her grandmother was black. Clare thinks she will find happiness in the white world, but she has to give up having close friends and she lives in constant fear of her husband learning the truth.

Irene has also passed a few times, but not to the extreme that Clare has. Irene goes to businesses where most black people would not be served. This includes the Drayton Hotel, the place where she meets Clare again after more than a decade. Irene is offended by Clare's passing, but this seems ironic to the reader since Irene is, in a sense, passing as well.

Passing is a dangerous thing for someone to do in the time period in which this novel takes place. It is entirely possible that a man might kill his wife if he were to learn that she is black. What Clare is doing is dangerous and could lead to her death. However, Clare does not seem to comprehend this danger, not even when confronted by an angry husband at the end of the novel.

Jealousy

Irene dislikes having Clare around. At first, Irene tells herself that she dislikes the disrespect Clare has for their race and the intrusion she creates in the Redfield household. This turns into a conviction that Clare and Irene's husband Brian are having an affair. Irene is filled with grief and shame when she comes to this conclusion. However, Irene is able to hide this shame well and eventually convinces herself she can handle the situation as long as Brian continues to come home every night.

Irene is jealous of Clare. The reader does not realize how deep this jealousy goes until Clare becomes a fixture in Irene's life. Clare begins coming to the Redfield home because she is lonely and she wants good friends that she can talk to. However, Irene sees Clare as an intrusion, as a charming woman who is trying to steal everyone else's husband. In the end, Irene becomes frightened that Clare will run away with Brian. Irene cannot know for sure that this will happen, but she takes action just the same and her jealousy kills her good friend.

Loneliness

Clare is lonely. Clare has built a wonderful life for herself. Clare has married a wealthy man and had a child. Clare fills her days with shopping and tea parties. However, Clare feels as though she cannot have any close friends for fear they might one day figure out

her secret. Clare is also afraid to have any more children out of an uncertainty about what the color their skin will be. Clare is lonely for good friends.

Clare reaches out to Irene because she needs someone she can talk to about her secret. As Clare spends more time in Harlem, she makes more friends and so she moves away from Irene. This includes friendships with all of Irene's friends and her husband Brian. It is these friendships that lead to Clare's ultimate demise. In the end, it is ironic that it is a sense of loneliness that sends Clare to the most dangerous person in her life.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written from Irene's point of view. The point of view is third person omniscient. The reader is allowed to know what Irene is doing and thinking. However, there are also elements of an unreliable narrator in this novel. Although Irene is an intelligent person who is not purposely trying to mislead the reader, there are portions of the novel in which Irene is unclear about the sequence of events. This happens several times, most notably when Irene attends a dance with her husband and Clare, as well as at the end of the novel when Clare falls from a window.

The point of view of this novel works well with the plot. The point of view allows the reader to build a sympathetic relationship with the main character, while taking into account Irene's opinions of other characters and judging them through her eyes. This point of view keeps the reader in the dark about Irene's actions until she begins to deal with them emotionally, adding suspense and surprise to the plot. For this reason, this point of view works well with the plot.

Setting

The novel begins in the city of Chicago where Clare and Irene grow up. This setting is slightly removed from their upbringing on the south side because they meet again in a fancy hotel restaurant. The setting then moves to New York where Irene and her family live in Harlem. This setting takes on new meaning when the reader realizes that it is the late 1920s, the pinnacle of the Harlem Renaissance.

The setting of this novel is important in that it explains to the reader the changing tide in racial tensions. The novel is set in the 1920s, a time that is decades before the civil rights movement in the 1960s. For this reason, racial tensions remain high throughout the country. However, in Harlem an arts movement has blurred the lines between the races, creating an atmosphere of near equality between artists. This sets up the backdrop of Clare's desire to return to her racial roots, therefore the setting is of great importance to the developing plot.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is somewhat formal compared to modern bestsellers. The novel was written about the time it is set, in the late 1920s, therefore the language tends to reflect the more formal speech of that time period. This language is reflective of the characters, shows their depth of education and their intelligence.

The novel's language does not include any of the broken words or awkward grammar that some novels of its kind might include. This novel is filled with more formal



language, a language that tends to pay more attention to words, not the meaning behind them. It is a language that reflects the education level of the main characters and the intelligence they share. It is a language that might cause some minor difficulties for the casual reader, but which a studious reader will find a joy to read.

Structure

The novel is divided into three parts. Each part contains four separate chapters. The parts are divided into the three divisions of relationship that Irene and Clare share. It begins with their first encounter, continuing on to their second, and ending with the final weeks of their relationship. The novel is told both in dialogue-filled scenes and exposition. In fact, many of the chapters are filled with Clare's internal dialogue as she deals with the chaos that Clare brings to her life.

The novel has one main plot and a few subplots. The main plot follows the relationship between Clare and Irene, childhood friends who have taken two very different paths in their lives. One of the subplots centers around Irene's discomfort with Clare. Another plot centers around Irene's marriage, including her conviction that Clare is having an affair with Irene's husband Brian. All these plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"There had been, even in those days, nothing sacrificial in Clare Kendry's idea of life, no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire," (Part 1, Encounter: Chapter 1, p. 2).

"Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?" (Part 1, Encounter: Chapter 2, p. 7).

"A faint sense of danger brushed her, like the breath of a cold fog," (Part 1, Encounter: Chapter 3, p. 30).

"Not so lonely that that old, queer, unhappy restlessness had begun again within him; that craving for some place strange and different, which at the beginning of her marriage she had had to make such strenuous efforts to repress, and which yet faintly alarmed her, though it now sprang up at gradually lessening intervals," (Part 1, Encounter: Chapter 4, p. 36).

"That Clare should have written, should, even all this considered, have expressed a desire to see her again, did not so much amaze her. To count as nothing the annoyances, the bitterness, or the suffering of others, that was Clare," (Part 2, Re-Encounter: Chapter 1, p. 37).

"Most likely she and Clare would never meet again," (Part 2, Re-Encounter: Chapter 2, p. 47).

"The things which Irene Redfield remembered afterward about the Negro Welfare League dance seemed, to her, unimportant and unrelated," (Part 2, Re-Encounter: Chapter 3, p. 58).

"And, no matter how often she came among them, she still remained someone apart, a little mysterious and strange, someone to wonder about and to admire and to pity," (Part 2, Re-Encounter: Chapter 4, p. 64).

"He was discontented, yet there were times when she felt he was possessed of some intense secret satisfaction, like a cat who had stolen the cream," (Part 3, Finale: Chapter 1, p. 67).

"But it did matter. It mattered more than anything had ever mattered before," (Part 3, Finale: Chapter 2, p. 76).

"That instinctive loyalty to a race. Why couldn't she get free of it? Why should it include Clare?" (Part 3, Finale: Chapter 3, p. 80).

"Death by misadventure, I'm inclined to believe. Let's go up and have another look at that window," (Part 3, Finale: Chapter 4, p. 94).



Topics for Discussion

Who is Irene? Why is she in Chicago? Where does she know Clare from? Why does Irene not recognize Clare at first? What do they talk about? What is significant about this conversation? What does Irene realize about Clare? How does Clare explain her situation? Does Irene accept what she has learned about Clare? Why does Irene not want to see Clare again?

Who is Clare Kendry? Why does Irene think about the death of Clare's father when she first receives a letter from Clare? What is significant about this memory? Why is Clare passing? What is passing? Why does Irene become offended by Clare's situation? How does it affect Irene? Is Irene truly offended for her race or is there something deeper going on?

Who is John Bellew? How does he offend Irene the moment they meet? What does Bellew call his wife? For what reason? Is this derogatory? Why does Clare allow him to do it? Why does Bellew say he does not have black servants? For whom is Irene the most upset after her meeting with Bellew? For what reason? Does she do anything about it?

Why does Clare insinuate herself into the Redfield family? To what purpose? Why does Brian initially think Clare should be dissuaded from embracing her true race? Why does Brian change his mind? What causes Irene to become jealous of Clare? Is her jealousy well founded? Explain.

Why does Brian want to move to Brazil? Why does Irene forbid this move? Are Irene's concerns well founded? Are Brian's? What has this disagreement done to their marriage? Could this disagreement be the explanation for Brian's distance late in the novel? Could Irene have misread Brian's behavior with Clare?

Why does Irene decide to tell Mr. Bellew about his wife's true racial heritage? Why does Irene change her mind? Are her excuses believable? What would you do in the same situation? Why does Irene feel telling about Clare's race is wrong, but telling about her habit of going to Harlem is right? Is there a difference? What would the consequences be for Clare?

Discuss the themes of this novel. Why is race not a major theme of the novel? Should race be a larger factor in the plot of the novel? Why is the novel called "Passing"? Is passing a major theme of the novel? Who is passing? For what reason? What other themes can you name? How are these themes illustrated in the novel's plot? Explain.