

Olentangy Local School District Literature Selection Review

Teacher: John Chirico

School: OHS

Book Title: Passing

Genre: Literary Fiction

Author: Nella Larsen

Pages: 122

Publisher: Penguin

Copyright: 1997

In a brief rationale, please provide the following information relative to the book you would like added to the school's book collection for classroom use. You may attach additional pages as needed.

Book Summary and summary citation: (suggested resources include book flap summaries, review summaries from publisher, book vendors, etc.)

Clare Kendry leads a dangerous life. Fair, elegant, ambitious, she is married to a white man unaware of her African American heritage, and has severed all ties to her past. Clare's childhood friend, Irene Redfield, just as light-skinned, has chosen to remain within the African American community, but refuses to acknowledge the racism that continues to constrict her family's happiness. A chance encounter forces both women to confront the lies they have told others - and the secret fears they have buried within themselves.

First published in 1929, *Passing* is a remarkably candid exploration of shifting racial and sexual boundaries. As acclaimed Larsen biographer Thadious M. Davis writes in her introduction, this landmark novel by the Harlem Renaissance's premier woman writer also depicts "the golden days of black cultural consciousness."

(Penguin)

Provide an instructional rationale for the use of this title, including specific reference to the OLSD curriculum map(s): (Curriculum maps may be referenced by grade/course and indicator number or curriculum maps with indicators highlighted may be attached to this form)

Using this book to compare/contrast with *To Kill a Mockingbird* on the basis of identity, figurative language and authorial choices, articulating theme, and development of complex characters throughout a story.

CP10 curriculum blueprint, 'Long-term transfer goal': comprehend, analyze, and evaluate complex texts across a range of perspectives, genres, and disciplines to become more critical (engaged, open-minded, and discerning) thinkers and decision-makers.

CP10 curriculum blueprint, 'Essential Questions': What can we learn from differing views and experiences to help inform our understanding of own views and experiences?

CP10 curriculum blueprint, 'Enduring Understandings': effective close reading requires understanding of diction, author intent, and cultural implications.

CP10 curriculum blueprint, 'Enduring Understandings': reserving judgment in both reading and listening engenders greater understanding.

Include two professional reviews of this title: (a suggested list of resources for identifying professional reviews is shown below. Reviews may be "cut and pasted" (with citation) into the form or printed reviews may be attached to the form)

Review #1

Nella Larsen was a transient literary star in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's and 30's. She left behind two novels and a few stories much appreciated by those who have held her in their minds over the eventful decades. She wrote highly charged interior dramas of the black middle class in Harlem, where the ordinary concerns of family life mingled with the clarifying and deforming pressures of race; then, accused of plagiarism and troubled by the breakup of her marriage, she became a nurse and published no more.

"Passing," Larsen's second novel, first published in 1929, has now been reissued by the Modern Library. It is a tragic story rooted in inescapable facts of American life: that whiteness conferred an almost universal unearned advantage, and that loyalty to a black racial identity was not only an act of pride but also one of courage.

But the genius of this book is that its protagonists, especially its Anna Karenina-like central figure, Irene Redfield, are complex and fully realized and individually responsible as well. Larsen's treatment of race in this sense was both candid and tough-minded. She understood the power of its impact, but she never let her characters escape from the weight of their choices.

Essentially, "Passing" is about two women whose choices were opposite and whose fates were strangely intertwined. Irene is a mother of two boys and the wife of a doctor, Brian, whose fury at American racism leads him to fantasize about moving to Brazil, where he believes skin color will no longer matter. As Larsen's story opens, Irene is contemplating an unwelcome letter she has received from a childhood acquaintance, Clare Kendry, a woman whose light-colored skin has enabled her to "pass over" to white society.

Clare has a strange and not entirely explained yearning for closeness with Irene, but Irene's reflex is to reject what amount to persistent advances. In a short introduction to the present volume, the playwright and novelist Ntozake Shange stresses the homoerotic strand in Clare's desire for Irene's company, though Irene herself attributes it to something else. In her mind, Clare, a sort of adoptive white person, yearns for blackness in the way that other whites in New York do, out of a desire for danger, for the thrill of the exotic.

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"I think that what they feel is -- well, a kind of emotional excitement," Irene tells a white writer named Hugh Wentworth, who attends a Harlem party for the Negro Welfare League that Irene has organized. "You know, the sort of thing you feel in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you; something so different that it's really at the opposite end of the pole from all your accustomed notions of beauty."

Clare's yearnings, whatever their sources, are intensified by a peculiarity of her act of passing. She lives with a husband, a repellent figure named Bellew, who has no inkling that his wife is black and is a blatant racist, a hater of black people, even though he thinks he has never actually met one.

In the course of Larsen's story, Clare, with no perceptible anguish, repudiates him, or, at least, she presses ahead in her embrace of Harlem society not caring that her husband will discover her identity and repudiate her. While Irene nervously warns her of the terrible danger of discovery -- the ever-present cost of "passing" -- Clare welcomes it as an opportunity to end her odious marriage.

Here is where the factor of character intertwines with that of race in Larsen's book. Irene has the strength, lacking in Clare, to be true to her identity, to be an early example of what later came to be called black pride, but she is weak in other ways.

She acknowledges that her greatest concern is for security, for the avoidance of danger, and she never accepts Clare's gestures of defiance as anything but foolishly risky. The crux of the matter is that Irene begins to suspect a special relationship between the beautiful Clare and Brian, her husband. Her greatest fear is that Clare will succeed in engineering a break with the racist Bellew and become unattached.

"She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same," Larsen writes. "Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed."

This mingling of motives, this inverse relationship between racial loyalty and personal security, gives "Passing" its tragic psychological force. This does not mean that "Passing" is successful in every way. Larsen's scheme, especially that part of it that depends on Clare's Simon Legree husband, seems mechanical, a kind of standard fitting in a racial melodrama. The interactions of Larsen's characters, their conversations, also have a scripted and somewhat prissily Victorian quality that makes you wonder: did people in Harlem actually talk that way, or has Larsen tried paradoxically to make them pass, like Clare?

In these respects "Passing" is the work of a highly talented and thoughtful writer still mastering her craft. Reading it and knowing that its author wrote very little after it imparts a sense of loss, giving as it does a glimpse of an original and hugely insightful writer whose literary talent developed no further.

(Bernstein, Richard. "BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Anguish Behind the Harlem Renaissance." The New York Times, 15 Jan. 2001, www.nytimes.com/2001/01/15/books/books-of-the-times-anguish-behind-the-harlem-renaissance.html.)

Commentators have suggested that Nella Larsen's *Passing* rejects the view that there is some sort of black essence. This article challenges this reading. Since Irene is the most vocal advocate of an essence in respect to which all blacks are homogenous, much of the evidence for thinking that *Passing* is skeptical about such an essence amounts to evidence for not trusting Irene's judgment in general, and for not trusting her judgment on this matter in particular. My arguments, then, will often involve explaining why *Passing* is not leading the reader to mistrust Irene's judgment on this matter. Now, what exactly is meant by a black essence is, explicitly in this book, mysterious. Nevertheless, this article intends to shed some light on how *Passing* understands the nature of this something, this *je ne sais quoi*, peculiar to blacks. My tentative interpretation is that this something is an intangible and indefinite manner of being that is neither a conscious choice nor an inborn fact of biology, but rather a given of culture. This article takes this, in effect, blackness manner to be, so *Passing* seems to indicate, a function of one's belief that one is black in a milieu of pervasive anti-black prejudice. *Passing* thus has something to offer those today who struggle to adjudicate between a pull towards essentialism and a pull towards constructionism. What *Passing* emphasizes in this discussion is the possibility that, in addition to biological and societal influences, one's mind state is a crucial ingredient to one's racial identity.

(Istvan, Michael A. "The Manner of Blackness in Nella Larsen's *Passing*." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 100, no. 2, Penn State University Press, 2017, pp. 112–42, <https://doi.org/10.5325/soundings.100.2.0112>.)

What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?

<u>Title:</u> The Great Gatsby	<u>Author:</u> F. Scott Fitzgerald
<u>Title:</u> To Kill a Mockingbird	<u>Author:</u> Harper Lee
<u>Title:</u> Native Son	<u>Author:</u> Richard Wright
<u>Title:</u> The Bluest Eye	<u>Author:</u> Toni Morrison
<u>Title:</u>	<u>Author:</u>
<u>Title:</u>	<u>Author:</u>

Document any potentially controversial content:

Reference to the n-word

Keeping in mind the age, academic level, and maturity of the intended reader, what is the suggested classroom use: (check all that apply)

Gifted/Accelerated Regular At Risk

GRADE LEVEL(S): 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Reading level of this title (if applicable):

9th-12th grade

Date Submitted to Department Chair:

October 13 2021

Suggested Professional Literary Review Sources:

School Library Journal

Horn Book

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

Library Journal

Book Links

Publisher's Weekly

Booklist

Kirkus Review

Wilson Library Catalog

English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)

The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)

Literature for Today's Young Adults

GRADE LEVEL(S): 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Reading Level of this Title (if applicable):

Suggested Professional Literacy Review Sources:

School Library Journal

Horn Book

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

Library Journal

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Publisher's Weekly

Booklist

Kirkus Review

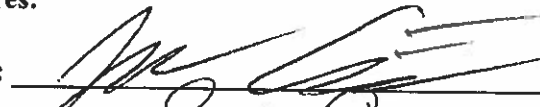
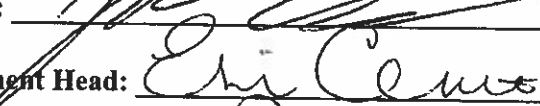
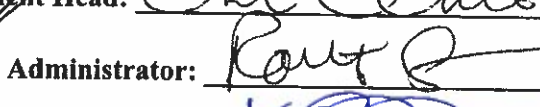

Wilson Library Catalog

English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)

The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)

Literature for Today's Young Adults

Signatures:

Teacher:		Date:	10/13/21
Department Head:		Date:	10/14/21
Building Administrator:		Date:	10/17/21
Curriculum Supervisor:		Date:	11/19/21