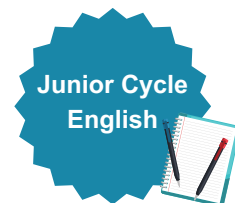




## Exploring Junior Cycle Texts

### *Passing* by Nella Larsen



*Passing* by Nella Larsen is a novel included as part of the Prescribed Material for the Junior Cycle English (For the student cohorts commencing Junior Cycle in 2025, 2026, and 2027 and presenting for examination in 2028, 2029, and 2030).

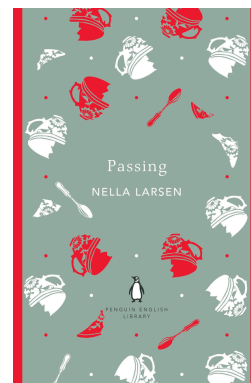


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#### Please note:

- The following tasks might be completed over a series of lessons.
- You may like to adapt and adjust the tasks to suit your context.
- *Passing* covers themes which could be considered sensitive or controversial. You may wish to consult with our READY Framework to support you in your study.

### Before You Read (Teacher Guidance)

#### 1. Context Research

Divide students into four small groups. Assign each group one research topic: The Harlem Renaissance, race laws in 1920s America, the idea of “passing”, the role of women and social class in the 1920s, each group presents 3 key facts and one question they’d like to explore while reading.

#### 2. Title Exploration

Write the title on the board and have pupils mind map the connotations and possible meanings of the word. Draw pupils attention to ideas related to identity or society. Once understanding is established, ask pupils whether any form of ‘passing’ still exists in our society today.

#### 3. Character Guesswork

Give pupils the statement: “Two women meet unexpectedly in a fancy Chicago hotel. Both are Black women, but one of them has been living as a white woman.” In groups, students discuss: how might each woman feel in this moment? What emotions might come up? What could each woman gain or lose from this encounter? Have groups create a short freeze frame showing the moment they imagine.



## Extract

**Background:** This extract is from chapter one of the novel which is set in Harlem, New York City during the Harlem Renaissance period of the 1920s. In this extract, Irene, a light-skinned black woman has received a letter she believes to be from her childhood acquaintance, Clare, a light-skinned black woman who passes for white.

*This, she reflected, was of a piece with all that she knew of Clare Kendry. Stepping always on the edge of danger. Always aware, but not drawing back or turning aside. Certainly not because of any alarms or feeling of outrage on the part of others.*

*And for a swift moment Irene Redfield seemed to see a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together, while her drunken father, a tall, powerfully built man, raged threateningly up and down the shabby room, bellowing curses and making spasmodic lunges at her which were not the less frightening because they were, for the most part, ineffectual. Sometimes he did manage to reach her. But only the fact that the child had edged herself and her poor sewing over to the farthest corner of the sofa suggested that she was in any way perturbed by this menace to herself and her work.*

*Clare had known well enough that it was unsafe to take a portion of the dollar that was her weekly wage for the doing of many errands for the dressmaker who lived on the top floor of the building of which Bob Kendry was janitor. But that knowledge had not deterred her. She wanted to go to her Sunday school's picnic, and she had made up her mind to wear a new dress. So, in spite of certain unpleasantness and possible danger, she had taken the money to buy the material for that pathetic little red frock.*

*There had been, even in those days, nothing sacrificial in Clare Kendry's idea of life, no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire. She was selfish, and cold, and hard. And yet she had, too, a strange capacity of transforming warmth and passion, verging sometimes almost on theatrical heroics.*

*Irene, who was a year or more older than Clare, remembered the day that Bob Kendry had been brought home dead, killed in a silly saloon-fight. Clare, who was at that time a scant fifteen years old, had just stood there with her lips pressed together, her thin arms folded across her narrow chest, staring down at the familiar pasty-white face of her parent with a sort of disdain in her slanting black eyes. For a very long time she had stood like that, silent and staring. Then, quite suddenly, she had given way to a torrent of weeping, swaying her thin body, tearing at her bright hair, and stamping her small feet. The outburst had ceased as suddenly as it had begun. She glanced quickly about the bare room, taking everyone in, even the two policemen, in a sharp look of flashing scorn. And, in the next instant, she had turned and vanished through the door.*

*Seen across the long stretch of years, the thing had more the appearance of an outpouring of pent-up fury than of an overflow of grief for her dead father; though she had been, Irene admitted, fond enough of him in her own rather catlike way.*

*Catlike. Certainly that was the word which best described Clare Kendry, if any single word could describe her. Sometimes she was hard and apparently without feeling at all; sometimes she was affectionate and rashly impulsive. And there was about her an amazing soft malice, hidden well away until provoked. Then she was capable of scratching, and very effectively too. Or, driven to anger, she would fight with a ferocity and impetuosity that disregarded or forgot any danger; superior strength, numbers, or other unfavorable circumstances. How savagely she had clawed those boys the day they had hooted her parent and sung a derisive rhyme, of their own composing, which pointed out certain eccentricities in his careening gait! And how deliberately she had—Irene brought her thoughts back to the present, to the letter from Clare Kendry that she still held unopened in her hand. With a little feeling of apprehension, she very slowly cut the envelope, drew out the folded sheets, spread them, and began to read.*



## Activities Based on Extract (Teacher Guidelines)

These prompts are designed to support close reading and personal response. They may be used orally or in writing, individually or in groups.

1. Give students an outline of a woman. Inside the image, they should write their impression of Clare. Outside of it, they should write down any quotes which support their ideas.

2. Remind students of the quotation: *"Catlike. Certainly that was the word which best described Clare Kendry..."* Then have pupils highlight or list all words or phrases linked to animals or behaviour ("catlike," "scratching," "clawed," "ferocity," "impetuousness").

As a class, discuss:

- What kind of cat does Clare seem like? A pet, a predator, or something in between?
- What does this comparison suggest about her and her power?

3. Give students the following prompt: Imagine Irene opens Clare's letter... what might it say? Have pupils write a short paragraph or diary entry from Irene's perspective before she reads it, describing what she fears or hopes it will contain.

## Reflect and Respond (Teacher Guidance)

These activities extend engagement with the extract and invite creative and personal responses. Use individually, in pairs, or in groups.

### 1. Parallel Characters

Students draft the opening of a story about another person hearing from an old friend. Encourage contrasting moods and mirroring of descriptive style.

### 2. Personal Response

Prompt students to remember a moment they experienced a feeling of apprehension like Irene opening the letter. Direct them to write a personal response describing themselves and the moment itself. Encourage them to consider if they learned anything from this moment.

### 3. Portrait of Clare

Ask students to draw or digitally design a portrait or symbolic collage of Clare Kendry based on this passage.

Guidance:

- Include colours, textures, or objects mentioned (e.g. "bright red cloth," "pale small girl," etc)
- Around the image, add key quotes that helped shape their visual impression.
- Optionally, choose a title for the artwork.

When finished, instruct students do a gallery walk or brief pair-share explaining one visual choice and one quotation they used.