Passing

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NELLA LARSEN

Nella Larsen was born in Chicago to immigrant parents Peter and Marie Walker, who were from the Danish West Indies and Denmark respectively. Nella's mother later remarried another Danish immigrant, Peter Larsen. Nella Larsen spent several years in Denmark as a child and young adult, but later returned to the United States. In the 1920s, Larsen moved to Harlem and began working as a librarian. She started her writing career when she published her first novel, *Quicksand*, in 1928. Larsen published a few more works, including *Passing*, but did not publish anything after 1930. She died in New York City in 1964.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the 1920s, African-Americans moved en masse from the rural South to urban spaces in the North and Midwest, populating cities like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit. This movement, called the Great Migration, is largely attributed to the brutal increase in hate crimes and racial violence in the South in the 1920s. During this period, the 1921 Tulsa Riot broke out in Oklahoma, in which a white mob destroyed black businesses and brutalized black Tulsa residents. Meanwhile, the Klu Klux Klan reemerged to terrorize black Americans through lynching and other acts of violence and terror. To flee danger, black Americans migrated north and settled in neighborhoods like Harlem, which would go on to be hubs of African-American community and culture.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Passing was written during the Harlem Renaissance, a period spanning the 1920s during which black literature, intellectual thought, music, and art flourished. During this effervescent decade, writers and thinkers like Nella Larsen, poet Langston Hughes, novelist Zora Neal Hurston, and activists Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Dubois mingled in Harlem, New York, creating art and engaging in social movements for the advancement of black people in the United States and abroad. Writer Alain Locke anthologized major works of the Harlem Renaissance in his landmark 1925 collection "The New Negro."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Passing
- **Where Written:** Harlem, New York City
- **When Published:** 1929
- **Literary Period:** Harlem Renaissance and American Modernism
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Chicago and Harlem, New York City
- **Climax:** Clare's death after falling or being pushed through a sixth-floor window. Larsen leaves it ambiguous whether the death was a murder or an accident.
- **Antagonist:** John Bellow
- **Point of View:** Third person limited narrative from Irene's perspective

EXTRA CREDIT

Plagiarism Accusations. Nella Larsen was accused of plagiarizing British author Sheila Kaye-Smith's short story "Mrs. Adis," whose plot resembled Larsen's short story "Sanctuary." This accusation is disputed, but although it was never proved, Larsen never published anything after "Sanctuary."

Guggenheim Fellowship. Nella Larsen won the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1930, which allowed her to travel in Europe while working on her writing. However, she did not succeed in publishing anything after 1930.

PLOT SUMMARY

Nella Larsen's *Passing* opens with the protagonist Irene reading the second letter she has ever received from her childhood acquaintance Clare, in which Clare asks Irene if they can see each other. The letter angers Irene, though the reason why is not yet clear.

The narrative then flashes back to two years before, when Irene is shopping for souvenirs for her sons in the sweltering heat. Irene, who lives in Harlem, is visiting her father in Chicago, where Irene grew up. Irene is about to faint when a friendly driver helps her into his car and offers to drive her to the Drayton, a white hotel, so that she can buy an iced tea. Though Irene is black and lives in a black community, she is light-skinned enough that she can pass for white when she is alone. Irene accepts, and the man drops her off at the hotel.

Irene is at the hotel drinking iced tea when a couple comes into the bar and sits down. Irene watches the pair, gazing at the beautiful and seemingly white woman. The man leaves, but the woman stays at her seat at a table near Irene's and Irene realizes that the woman is staring at her. Irene worries that the woman realizes that she is black. However, after a few moments, the woman comes over to Irene, and Irene realizes

that she is Clare Kendry, a childhood acquaintance who left their Chicago neighborhood after her father's death. During Irene's adolescence, Clare was the subject of many rumors that she had passed into white society and was living as a white woman entirely. Irene and Clare chat, and Irene tells Clare about her life. Irene finds out that Clare is married to a white man, and that her husband does not know she is black. Irene gets up to leave and Clare insists that Irene visit her before Irene returns to New York.

The next Tuesday, Irene, albeit hesitantly, goes to Clare's house for tea. At Clare's, Irene finds that she is not the only guest—Clare and Irene's childhood acquaintance Gertrude is also present. Like Clare, Gertrude married a white man, but unlike Clare's husband, Gertrude's husband is aware of her racial background. The women insensitively discuss race and skin-color, leaving Irene, who is married to a black man and lives in a black community, angry and hurt. Eventually, Clare's husband John returns home. John, who does not know any of the women are black, including his own wife, immediately begins spewing racial slurs and making racist statements. Irene is irate, but she laughs uncontrollably at the irony of the situation. As soon as Irene can politely leave, she does so. Afterward, Clare sends Irene a letter thanking her for her visit, and Irene, furious does not respond.

The narrative flashes forward again to the moment in the opening scene when Irene is reading the second letter Clare has sent her, two years later. In the time since Irene last saw Clare, her own marriage with Brian, who is bitter that Irene will not move with him to South America, has become strained and distant. Irene resolves not to answer the letter, not wanting to see Clare after their last encounter. However, Clare shows up at Irene's house in New York and asks why Irene did not answer her letter. Irene tells Clare that she and Brian have decided that they cannot associate with Clare because if John were to find out it would put them all in danger. Clare cries and begs to be invited to the Negro Welfare League dance that Irene is helping to host. She talks about how hard it is facing John's daily racism. Finally, Irene concedes to let Clare come. Irene has mixed feelings of annoyance, jealousy, and admiration towards Clare, who she thinks is selfish but beautiful.

At the dance, Irene talks with her friend Hugh Wentworth about passing, race, and beauty. Clare wins over Irene's social circle with her charm and good looks. Even Brian, who did not want Irene to associate with Clare, warms up to her. Following the dance, Clare becomes Irene's friend and a fixture in the Redfield household. Despite this newfound friendship, Irene continues to harbor muddled feelings of attraction, jealousy, and resentment towards Clare. Meanwhile, Irene's marriage with Brian becomes more and more tense. They fight over how to best raise their two boys, Ted and Junior, and Brian's feelings of restlessness. Irene becomes anxious and depressed. Clare, Irene, and Brian frequently attend social events together, and sometimes, when Irene is sick, Clare and Brian go alone.

One day, Irene is hosting a tea party for Hugh. She is napping before the party when Brian comes to wake her up and tell her it is time to get ready. Brian informs Irene that Clare is already downstairs. Irene is confused, because she did not invite Clare. Brian finally sheepishly admits that he invited her. Irene suddenly feels suspicious that Brian and Clare are having an affair. Through the tea party and the next several weeks, Irene's suspicion mounts until finally Irene is convinced that Brian is cheating on her. Still, Irene is determined to preserve her marriage. Irene fantasizes about ways she could rid herself of Clare, imagining what might happen if Clare's daughter Margery died or John found out about her black ancestry. Irene decides that Clare and John cannot get divorced, because otherwise Clare will be free to pursue Brian. Whenever Clare expresses the desire to be free of John and return to the black community permanently, Irene tries to remind her of her obligations to her daughter.

One day, during an afternoon out with her friend Felise, Irene runs into John on the street. John recognizes Irene from their meeting in Chicago and says hello, but when he sees Felise, John realizes that they are both black. Irene, realizing how dangerous this could be for Clare, pretends not to know John. Afterward, Irene understands that, because John now knows she is black, John might become suspicious of Clare. Irene thinks she should warn Clare or tell Brian about the encounter, but instead she says nothing.

Irene, Clare, and Brian go to a party at Felise and Dave Freeland's sixth floor apartment. At the party, Irene is melancholy and sullen. She opens a **window** to let in fresh air. There is a knock on the door and when Felise opens it, John bursts into the room, demanding to know where Clare is. Clare backs away from him towards the window. John yells racial slurs, and the room is tense. Irene, in a panic, moves toward Clare and touches her on the arm. Irene is unclear what happens next, but the next thing she knows Clare has fallen out the open window. Everyone rushes downstairs to see what has happened, but Irene is dazed and stays upstairs for a few extra minutes. Finally she goes downstairs and learns that Clare is dead. She starts to cry and then faints. It is never made clear if Irene pushed Clare through the window, Clare committed suicide, or she fell by accident.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Clare Kendry / Bellew – Clare Kendry is Irene's childhood acquaintance and John Bellew's wife. She is a beautiful, charming, wealthy woman who, although born to a black father in a black community, lives in public as a white woman. Clare has light skin, blond hair, and dark eyes. Clare describes herself

as someone who will do anything to get what she wants. After her father's death during her adolescence, Clare moved away from her mostly-black neighborhood in Chicago to live with her white aunts. Later, she eloped with John Bellew, a white man to whom she never revealed her black ancestry. Together they have one daughter, Margery, and travel frequently for John's work. Despite the fact that Clare's passing affords her many of the privileges afforded to white Americans, she is unhappy in her situation, and longs to return to the black community. To this end, Clare attempts to befriend Irene. This leads eventually to Irene's suspicion that Clare is having an affair with Brian. Ultimately, Clare dies after either falling or being pushed out of a sixth story **window**—the narrative leaves Clare's death ambiguous, and the reader unsure of whether Irene jealously pushed her, she jumped, or she simply lost her balance.

Irene Redfield – Irene Redfield is Clare's childhood acquaintance, Brian's wife, and the protagonist of *Passing*. The book's narrative is told in third person from Irene's perspective. Irene is an uptight, intelligent, well-to-do woman from Chicago who lives in Harlem with her husband Brian and sons Ted and Junior. Irene cares deeply about her family life and values security above all else. Irene's light skin allows her to pass as white when she is alone. Irene is committed to advancing black equality and takes part in activism to that end. Irene first meets Clare (as an adult) during a trip to Chicago, when she also meets Clare's violently racist husband John. Not wanting to deal with John, and angry with Clare for subjecting her to John's hate, Irene resolves to have nothing to do with Clare. She goes back on this resolution two years later, when Clare contacts her in New York and the two women strike up a friendship. Irene, however, harbors antipathy toward Clare for ambiguous and complex reasons. She eventually convinces herself that Clare and Brian are having an affair, but also may have repressed feelings for Clare herself. Irene, overcome by her jealousy and anxiety, is standing next to Clare when Clare falls through the **window**. The narrator is unclear whether Clare's death was an accident or Irene pushed her.

Brian Redfield – Brian is a doctor in New York City and Irene's husband. Brian is a reserved man who longs to move to Brazil from the United States to escape the country's dangerous racism. Brian does not enjoy his work as a doctor. His restlessness and desire to move away causes marital issues between him and Irene, who insists that they stay in New York. Unlike his wife, Brian's skin is dark and he cannot pass as white. Brian, though initially wary of Clare, grows to like her. When Brian invites Clare to a party out of the blue, Irene begins to suspect they are having an affair. The narrative is never clear about whether or not Irene's suspicions are correct.

John/Jack Bellew – John or Jack Bellew is Clare's husband. John, like Clare, is charming and sociable. He is also a white man and a virulent, violent racist. John does not know that Clare has black ancestry, and he frequently uses racial slurs around her and even to address her. When John meets Gertrude and Irene the first time at a tea party with Clare, he does not realize they are black. John travels often for business, and so does not realize that Clare is spending time in Harlem with Irene and other members of the black community. After John runs into Irene on the street with Felise and realizes that Irene is black, he becomes suspicious of Clare. In the final scene of the book, John bursts into the party at the Freeland's apartment to confront Clare about her deception, and she falls or is pushed out of the sixth-story **window** to her death not long after.

Bob Kendry – Bob Kendry is Clare's deceased father. Bob is referenced throughout the book, though he never appears in the flesh, having died before the plot takes place. Bob was an alcoholic and a janitor in Irene and Clare's neighborhood in Chicago. Bob went to college with many of the men in the area, but some unknown disgrace caused him to take a job below his education status. When Bob died, leaving Clare an orphan, she went to go live with Bob's white aunts.

Hugh Wentworth – Hugh Wentworth is Irene's friend and Bianca's husband. Hugh is a white man and a well-known author who takes part in Irene's social circle and attends the Negro Welfare League dance. Hugh is perceptive and enjoys talking with Irene about race relations. At one point, Irene thinks that Hugh believes Clare and Brian are having an affair, though Irene has not told him her suspicions.

Gertrude Martin – Gertrude Martin is a childhood acquaintance of Clare and Irene, the wife of Fred Martin, and the daughter of a butcher. Gertrude was beautiful when she was young, but has apparently not aged well. Irene encounters her when she goes to Clare's for tea. Gertrude can pass as white, and is married to a white man (a butcher like her father) who knows that she is black. During tea, Gertrude expresses her aversion to dark-skinned children to Clare and Irene, making Irene angry.

Margery – Margery is Clare and John Bellew's daughter. She is a light-skinned young girl who attends school in Switzerland. Larsen never introduces Margery to the reader, but the other characters discuss her frequently. Margery seems to not be a very big part of Clare's life, but she is referenced often as one of the reasons that Clare cannot leave John.

Claude Jones – Claude Jones is a man who grew up with Clare, Gertrude, and Irene on the South Side of Chicago. Though Claude Jones does not appear in person in the book, Clare, Gertrude, and Irene discuss him during their tea together in Chicago. Gertrude says laughingly that Claude, a black man, has converted to Judaism. Clare laughs as well, while Irene defends Claude's choice.

Felise Freeland – Felise Freeland is a friend of Irene's and the wife of Dave Freeland. Felise attends Irene's tea party, and it is at the Freelands' apartment that Clare falls or is pushed out the

window in the book's dramatic final scene. Irene describes Felise as a perfect combination of beauty and brains.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Brian Junior (Junior) – Brian Junior, often referred to as "Junior," is one of Irene and Brian's sons. Irene worries that Junior is picking up bad ideas about sex at school, but Brian is not concerned. According to Irene, Junior resembles herself in temperament, but looks more like Brian.

Theodore (Ted) – Ted is one of Irene and Brian's sons. According to Irene, Ted's temperament is similar to Brian's. At one point, Ted asks his father why people hate black people, sparking a fight between Irene and Brian.

Liza – The housekeeper at Irene's father's house in Chicago. Liza answers the phones and helps around the house.

Zulena and Sadie – Zulena and Sadie are Irene's servants/housekeepers at her home in New York City. They answer the door and phones and help Irene with cooking, party preparation, and cleaning.

Fred Martin – Fred Martin is Gertrude's white husband and a butcher in Chicago. Larsen never introduces Fred Martin in person in the book, but Irene thinks of him when she sees Gertrude at Clare's house.

Ralph Hazelton – Ralph is a friend in Irene's social circle. During a conversation with Irene, Hugh points Ralph out as having especially dark skin. Irene describes Ralph as an excellent conversationalist.

Bianca Wentworth – Bianca Wentworth is Hugh Wentworth's wife. She is a white woman. Bianca offers to take Clare home after the Negro Welfare League dance.

Dave Freeland – Dave Freeland is a novelist and Felise Freeland's husband. It is at the Freelands' apartment that Clare falls or is pushed out the **window** to her death in the book's dramatic final scene.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PASSING, BLACK IDENTITY, AND RACE

In *Passing*, Nella Larsen presents black characters who "pass" as white to varying degrees, moving back and forth between different outward identities as it suits them. Some of Larsen's characters pass only occasionally, when it is convenient and beneficial to them, but live in black communities and embrace their black identity, while others live their lives as white people, keeping their black heritage secret.

Irene is an example of a character who passes as white only when it suits her. For example, she passes at the beginning of the book so she can drink an iced tea in the white hotel Drayton's. While at Drayton's, Irene notes that she only passes when she is alone, associating the concept of passing with isolation from the black community. In general, Irene embraces her black identity, and is proud of her black community in Harlem, where she lives with Brian, who cannot pass, and her children. To Irene, passing is a convenience that allows her to move through the white world without ridicule or exclusion, but not a lifestyle. Irene also takes care while passing at Drayton's to remind herself that she is passing for convenience, not because she rejects anything about her black identity.

Irene's commitment to her black identity distinguishes her from other characters who pass not for occasional convenience, but because they prefer life in white communities. Take, for instance, Irene's childhood acquaintance Gertrude, who has married a white man, and who says she prefers to have light-skinned children. Gertrude seems to be willing to reject blackness, or at least dark-skinned children, in order to become a part of the white community.

Other characters, such as Clare, have passed completely, totally rejecting and hiding their black identities. Clare has forgone her black identity to live among white people as a white person. Clare lies to her husband, John, who believes she is completely white, and who is openly racist around her. At the beginning of the book, Clare seems to think that her lifestyle, in which her black identity is totally erased, is better than Irene's. During a conversation with Irene, Clare professes not to understand why more light-skinned black women do not also cross over into white society and leave their black identities behind. In doing so, Clare clearly implies that she thinks her lifestyle is superior.

Certainly, living as a white woman has afforded Clare many privileges, from her massive wealth to her safety from discrimination, exclusion, and racial violence. However, as the book goes on, Larsen shows how passing takes a massive toll on Clare psychologically and does not insulate her from everything she thought it would. During the painful scene of Irene's first meeting with Clare's husband, John expresses vitriolic racism and calls his wife the racial slur "nig." The slur is a "joke" about Clare's supposedly darkening skin color, as John does not realize that Clare (or Irene, or Gertrude) is black, or comes from a black community. Still, the moment reveals the unknowing abuse that Clare must suffer daily, and suggests Clare would likely suffer violence should she ever renounce her white identity and embrace (or even reveal) her black one.

As the book progresses, Clare expresses a desire to leave John and rejoin the black community, and she recruits Irene to help

her do so. Irene, however, feels massive resentment towards Clare for a myriad of reasons. Irene certainly is jealous of Clare, but her anger may also stem from the fact that Clare has said many negative things about blackness and has benefited from passing for so long. Irene's resentment calls into question her own passing, although she passes only occasionally. It forces the reader to ask: if Irene sees Clare as an outsider to the black community, at what point does passing make you one?

Moreover, the way that Larsen portrays passing troubles the idea of race as inherent or genetic. The word "passing" has a kind of double meaning, as it could be read as "being taken for" or, more literally, as passing the **threshold** from one identity to another. The second meaning shows just how binary racial identities were in the imagination of 1920s America, since the idea implies that black identity and white identity are two distinct categories.

But contrary to this way of thinking about race, the characters in *Passing* constantly transgress, muddle, and trouble the idea of race as binary as they move back and forth between different identities. In Drayton, Irene mockingly thinks how white people believe they can always "tell" a black person from a white person, but then they are constantly fooled, because black heritage does not always correspond to the stereotypical images they hold. Essentially, the racial ambiguity and fluidity of characters like Clare and Irene call into question ideas of race as inherent and distinct genetic categories, because they show how race, although it has very real implications for people's lives, is constructed and performed. This idea is important, because it constitutes a radical threat to racism, which depends on the idea of race as innate. At the same time, however, it also could threaten black identity, or at least visions of black identity that are based in genetics rather than shared experience.

Ultimately, Larsen seems to feel ambiguously about the idea of passing, and what it means for black identity and race. The reader might take one of Irene's comments on passing as the book's thesis on the subject: "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."

MOTHERHOOD, SECURITY, AND FREEDOM

Passing offers the reader two different models of motherhood in the characters of Irene and Clare, who each experience parenthood very differently. For Irene, parenting is a kind of security, and an important aspect of her identity. Parenthood offers her a purpose and a way to structure her life. Irene tells Clare that she takes "being a mother rather seriously," and that she is "wrapped up in [her] boys and the running of her house." In this respect, Irene shows the reader a more traditional model of motherhood, in which children are a mother's primary focus, and motherhood is an important aspect of female identity.

Irene associates motherhood with the idea of security. Motherhood provides Irene with (a presumed) insurance that Brian will not leave her, and she frequently falls back on that sense of security when she and Brian fight. Moreover, Irene thinks it is her duty as a parent to provide security to her children, and to insulate them from the racism of the outside world. Brian, meanwhile, disagrees with Irene's impulse to protect their children from racism, thinking he should prepare his children for life in a country where they will undoubtedly suffer at the hands of racist individuals and systems. Irene's disagreement with Brian highlights that Irene thinks of her motherhood as security—both in that she feels she should provide security to her children, and that it gives her security as well. Irene seems to see the family as a space that racism should not be allowed to penetrate, even if it means keeping the harsh realities of the world from her children.

Clare, on the other hand, offers a radically different model of motherhood than Irene's. For Clare, motherhood is not an important aspect of her identity, and rather than using it to structure her life, she tries to find ways to build her life in spite of it. During the same conversation where Irene says that she takes being a mother seriously, Clare asserts that "children aren't everything," suggesting that she does not see motherhood as her main purpose. Larsen emphasizes the fact that Clare sees motherhood as a minor part of her life by never actually introducing the reader to Clare's daughter Margery, keeping her on the sidelines of Clare's presence in the novel. The lack of importance that Clare places on motherhood shows how she departs from the traditional domestic, maternal female role.

Moreover, Clare often resents her role as a mother, as Margery keeps her from leaving John and returning to her life in the black community. Rather than using motherhood to create a family space insulated from racism, Clare's motherhood keeps her in a marriage that forces her to suffer racism every day. After Irene reminds Clare that she cannot leave her husband because of what it would mean for her daughter, Clare declares that she thinks motherhood is "the cruelest thing in the world." What Irene sees as security and responsibility, Clare views as restraint and lack of freedom. Although Irene expresses disapproval for Clare's version of motherhood, and believes that it is selfish, she also begins to imitate certain aspects of Clare's version of motherhood. For example, Margery goes to boarding school in Switzerland, and Irene thinks about proposing to Brian that one of their children should go to school in Europe as well.

As with the other aspects of the novel, Larsen does not condemn or valorize either Irene or Clare's way of being a mother, leaving out moralistic prescription. However, Larsen does seem to be critical of Irene's sense that her own form of

motherhood is more selfless and altruistic than Clare's, since Irene uses her motherhood as a way to gain control over her life, including her relationship with Brian. This suggests that being a mother, even a devoted mother like Irene, does not necessarily mean being selfless. In fact, Irene's self-righteous sense of her motherhood as selfless is part of what blinds her to her own manipulations.

BEAUTY AND RACE

Beauty is very important to the characters in *Passing*, whom Larsen portrays as constantly evaluating other people's physical appearances, attending to their own, and worrying about how they look comparatively. Larsen shows, for example, Irene's preoccupation with beauty early in the book during Irene's trip to Chicago. Irene, after seeing a man either faint or die of heatstroke, and after nearly fainting from heatstroke herself, tries to "repair" her appearance as soon as she is out of the heat. This shows, somewhat ironically, how high a priority looking good is for Irene—she worries about her looks, not the fate of the man she saw faint—and thinks of how when she is not at her peak appearance, she feels "broken."

As characters in *Passing* comment on what they think makes someone physically beautiful, they often link their standards of beauty to racialized physical traits. Because characters connect beauty with race so often, evaluations of physical attractiveness are deeply socially and politically charged. Certain characters explicitly profess (at least at the beginning of the book) to favor traits that they see as "white": light skin, hair, and eyes. Take, for example, the conversation between Gertrude, Clare, and Irene over tea, when Gertrude and Clare state that they both are happy that their children have light skin. Gertrude even goes as far as to say that "nobody wants a dark child." Though this preference is certainly linked to the privilege that black people can access when they pass as white, it also clearly uses aesthetics to devalue blackness.

Irene responds to Clare and Gertrude by saying that she prefers dark skin, and mentions that her husband and one of her own children are dark. Later, as Irene discusses Brian's handsomeness, she thinks that he would not be nearly as handsome if not for the beauty of his dark complexion. In doing so, Irene makes it clear that she sees dark skin as aesthetically beautiful. The reader might imagine that Irene, who cares deeply about justice for black Americans and racial loyalty, also sees this preference as political.

Moreover, though Irene does not explicitly articulate it, she expresses thoughts that suggest a critique of the very idea of racialized physical traits. Irene says at the book's beginning that white people often think they can tell race based on physicality, but then mistake the same traits for other forms of "whiteness": Italian, Spanish, or Greek heritage. This suggests that racialized physical traits might be "fictional"—that "blackness" and "whiteness," two qualities that society views as based in legible physical difference, cannot be neatly separated out.

However, despite Irene's professed preference for "black" traits, she glorifies Clare's "whiter" beauty. Irene returns again and again to Clare's beauty, admiring her light skin and blond hair. Larsen shows Irene's obsession with Clare's beauty not just through her active comments about her attractiveness, but also in how the narration describes her. Because the narration is told in a very close third person from Irene's perspective, the narrator's mentions of Clare's "ivory" skin and blond hair are part of Irene's inner monologue. Irene also focuses on Clare's dark eyes, which she thinks of as "negro eyes." Irene often remarks on the effect of Clare's dark eyes with her light skin, saying that the juxtaposition is the crux of Clare's beauty. For example, as Irene and Clare talk in the Drayton, she says of her eyes, paired with the rest of her light coloring, that, "there was about them something exotic."

The idea of beauty as exoticism recurs later in the book, as Irene talks with Hugh Wentworth at the Negro Welfare League dance. Irene and Hugh have just been talking about Clare's beauty when Hugh changes the subject to dark-skinned black men, asking Irene whether she thinks they are especially attractive. The reader might suspect that Irene still has Clare on her mind when she says that she thinks what women feel around dark-skinned black men is "emotional excitement… in the presence of something strange…something so different it's really at the opposite end of the pole from all your accustomed beauty." This kind of exoticism is somewhat problematic, as it objectifies and tokenizes difference from normative standards. Still, the idea that standards of beauty, one of the many norms used to uphold systemic racism, might be totally inverted presents a challenge to that system.

Like she does with most of the other themes that *Passing* takes up, Larsen leaves the reader without a conclusive moralistic message about how to think about beauty and race, instead exploring the complex dynamics of a system in which beauty has been racialized and politicized.

SEX, SEXUALITY, AND JEALOUSY

Sex and jealousy feature prominently in *Passing*—obviously, since one of the book's major plot threads is Irene's speculation that Clare and her husband Brian are having an affair. Although the themes of sex and jealousy crystallize around Irene's speculation about the unconfirmed affair, sex, sexuality, and jealousy are thematic undercurrents throughout the book.

Irene seems to be someone who is uncomfortable with sexuality. For example, when Irene finds out that one of her children is learning sex jokes from his friends, she wants to send him abroad to school, and fights with Brian about it. Her over-the-top reaction seems to indicate that Irene harbors some

sexual discomfort or anxiety. Moreover, Irene's marriage to Brian appears to be fairly chaste, as she notes that they sleep in separate beds.

Clare, on the other hand—or at least the Clare that Larsen gives the reader through Irene's perspective—appears to have embraced her sexuality in a way that Irene finds transgressive. In the Drayton, Irene watches Clare part with a man that Irene assumes is her husband. Later, when Irene meets John Bellew, she assumes the man, who was not John, must have been a lover and that Clare is an adulteress. Additionally, before Irene even realizes who Clare is, she observes Clare talking with the waiter, and thinks she is being too "provocative." Irene constantly describes Clare as someone who plays up her sexuality, calling her "feline" (and so evoking the trope of cats used to represent feminine sexuality) and someone driven by desire.

It is unclear whether Irene is projecting this sexuality onto Clare or whether she actually exhibits these traits, because the narrative is so closely tied to Irene's point of view. Likewise, Larsen never clarifies whether the affair that Irene obsesses over between Clare and Brian actually takes place, or whether it is a fantasy constructed from Irene's many other jealousies surrounding Clare. However, while Irene consciously attributes this jealousy to her protectiveness over Brian, plenty of evidence suggests that Irene may be jealous because of her desire for *Clare* rather than her love for Brian. Throughout the book, Larsen portrays Irene's thoughts about Clare's beauty and attractiveness as not just appreciative, but obsessive. Irene catalogues Clare's beauty compulsively, and her descriptions are often heavy with language that contains sexual connotations. Irene calls Clare's mouth "tempting," her face "caressing," etc. Irene's view of Clare as sexually transgressive, then, might not be the result of Clare's behavior, but rather Irene projecting her own repressed desires onto Clare.

Irene's desire for Clare bubbles up at one point in the novel, when Clare walks into her room and kisses her head. Irene feels an "inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling" in response, grasps Clare's hands, and cries out that Clare is lovely. The moment's excited nature and the intensity of Irene's reaction suggest that Irene harbors underlying feelings towards Clare that are more sexual than she can consciously admit.

Irene's resulting anger at Clare, then, might be less due to her jealousy over Brian, and more due to her inability to process her own homoerotic desire, which, in 1920s America, would have been considered taboo. Irene's statement to Hugh that beauty is "emotional excitement… in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you," could describe Irene's feelings of attraction to Clare, which are mixed with internalized homophobia that make her own desire "repugnant" to her. Perhaps it is this repugnance, mixed with the many other complex, conflicting feelings that Irene has for Clare, that drives her to fantasize about Clare's death (though whether Irene actually pushes Clare through the **window** is left ambiguous).

The complexity of sex, sexuality, and jealousy in *Passing* overall highlights the unreliability of Irene's perspective, and charges the novel with an underlying tension that persists even to the final scene.

HUMOR

Jokes and laughter pervade the pages of *Passing*, from Clare's first giggles to the moment when Irene registers that Clare has fallen out the **window**, and that she will never hear her laugh again. Through her use of laughter and jokes, Larsen opens up questions about how humor works and what it can do.

For Irene, jokes, rather than being enjoyable, often have a hostile quality. Irene, or the narrator from Irene's perspective, often uses the word "mocking" to describe Clare's laughter. Despite this, very little other evidence suggests that Clare is making fun of Irene. In these instances, Irene shows that she has intense anxiety surrounding jokes and laughter, and constantly feels like she is on the outside of them.

Missing each other's humor, moreover, goes both ways for Irene and Clare. In another instance, Irene laughs after Clare talks about her upbringing by her racist aunts. Clare, however, does not, telling her "it was more than a joke, I assure you," suggesting that she has a lot of pain associated with that part of her life. Rather than creating connection between people, or lightening the mood, the humor in *Passing* alienates characters from one another and exposes the gaps in understanding between them. The reader can see this in Brian and Irene's disagreement about whether their son should be making jokes about sex, which sparks a fight between them.

Though jokes in *Passing* vary in degree and situation, they consistently miss their mark, and in doing so, they expose a lack of awareness between the characters. The reader can see this in a range a scenes, from Irene's quiet assumptions that Clare is mocking her to the brutally painful scene at Clare's tea party. In the tea scene, John Bellew tells Gertrude and Irene (who he does not know are black) about a racist joke he has with Clare (who he also does not know is black). As he does so, he calls Clare racist slurs and expresses vitriolic, belligerent racism, using the word "nigger" repeatedly. What John intends as a joke is deeply unfunny, uncomfortable, and downright scary because of the latent violence in his speech. It deeply upsets the women, especially Irene. Despite this, Gertrude, Clare, and Irene laugh, though for different reasons. While Gertrude and Clare laugh for fear of otherwise exposing their own blackness, Irene laughs because of the moment's dramatic irony. Everyone except John knows that he as he spews his hate, he is surrounded by black women— and, in fact, is married to one. There is a joke in the scene—it's just the one that Larsen is

making, not John. After the incident, Irene describes the situation as a joke on all of them, not just John, suggesting how humor is a moving target, and who and what gets mocked is not always easy to control.

In short, Larsen presents the uncontrollability of humor of a source of anxiety for the book's characters, especially Irene. Instead of being sources of pleasure, and laughter, jokes are volatile and highlight the characters' lack of control within their narratives.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MASKS

At several points throughout the novel, Larsen describes Clare's face as an "ivory" mask. Larsen uses this description particularly when Irene feels that Clare is using her social grace to obscure her true feelings, or thinks that Clare is secretly mocking her while maintaining a façade of congeniality. The idea of masking complements the overall themes of passing throughout the book, as both masks and passing suggest alternative identities and hidden realities. Moreover, masking is racialized in the book: Clare's face is described as an "ivory" mask, suggesting that Clare's whiteness is a sort of costume. Larsen uses the idea of masking to suggest the performative nature of race—by describing Clare's whiteness as theatrical, Larsen calls into question biological or genetic conceptions of racial difference.

DOORWAYS, WINDOWS, THRESHOLDS

Throughout *Passing*, Larsen's characters stand in doorways or linger around thresholds. These doorways and thresholds serve to physically represent the story's attention to liminality (the idea of being in between two distinct spaces). The theme of passing, itself a form of liminality, echoes the fact that characters often find themselves at the border between rooms, just as they are often on the brink of different identities. Likewise, the window through which Clare ultimately falls/is pushed represents the potential violence of the act of passing or crossing racial boundaries, as Clare falls to her death.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor Books edition of *Passing* published in 2001.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

"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.

Related Characters: Irene Redfield, Clare Kendry / Bellew

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in the first few pages of the first chapter of the text. Irene has just received her second letter from Clare, which she recognizes because the type of paper and ink are exactly the same as the letter she received two years before. Irene's thoughts on the letter help to establish for the reader the relationship between the two women—it's clearly one of mixed feelings, and Irene's ambivalence toward Clare will continue throughout the book.

Irene's descriptions of Clare as "on the edge of danger" foreshadow Clare's deadly fall from the window at the book's end. Moreover, the idea that Clare is in danger because she is perched on a threshold between two spaces is a consistent theme throughout the book, since Larsen uses Clare to explore the liminal space of "passing" and being part of both black and white communities. As the book goes on, it becomes clear that the in-between-space Clare occupies, although beneficial in many ways, also takes an enormous toll on her emotionally.

"You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of....It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases.

Related Characters: Clare Kendry / Bellew (speaker), Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

Clare writes this quote in her second letter to Irene, describing the pain she feels at her alienation from the black

community. Clare has received many privileges through passing, including insulation from racial violence, financial security, and the ability to spend time in all-white spaces. However, despite these benefits, Clare is still clearly extremely unhappy and feels tremendously lonely. When Clare describes her life as "pale," she plays on the idea of paleness as both a complexion and a lack of vibrancy. Through Clare, Larsen conveys the psychological toll that passing can take on black people.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means: fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a Gypsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. No, the woman sitting there staring at her couldn't possibly know.

Related Characters: Clare Kendry / Bellew, Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

A kind stranger has dropped Irene off at the Drayton (an all white hotel in Chicago) after Irene nearly fainted from heatstroke while souvenir shopping. Here, Irene is sitting at the Drayton sipping tea and reflecting on the fact that nobody there can tell that she is black.

Irene expresses her belief that the idea of being able to definitively determine someone's race through a series of physical clues is stupid. Irene associates this folly with white people, whom she describes as being obsessed with decoding race through specific physical features or body parts. Irene takes pleasure it the fact that no white person ever succeeds in guessing her race when she is alone, and she revels in being the example that disproves the idea that, by scrutinizing physical features, someone can definitively determine another person's race.

Irene's resistance to the idea that race can always be read through physical clues is radical because race, at least in the imagination of 1920s America, was understood to be a series of discreet categories rooted in physical and genetic difference. Passing as white challenges the very idea of race because it suggests that race is uncontainable in strict physical categories.

❝ Her lips, painted a brilliant geranium red, were sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate. A tempting mouth. The face across the forehead and cheeks was a trifle too wide, but the ivory skin had a peculiar soft luster. And the eyes were magnificent! Dark, sometimes absolutely black, always luminous, and set in long, black lashes. Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them. Ah! Surely! They were Negro eyes! Mysterious and concealing. And set in that ivory face under that bright hair, there was about them something exotic. Yes, Clare Kendry's loveliness was absolute, beyond challenge, thanks to those eyes which her grandmother and later her mother and father had given her.

Related Characters: Clare Kendry / Bellew, Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190-191

Explanation and Analysis

As Irene and Clare drink iced tea together and catch up at the Drayton after their chance meeting, Irene takes in Clare's beauty, describing each part of her face in detail. This quote demonstrates one of the many instances in which Irene expounds upon Clare's beauty, trying to make sense of her striking combination of features. Irene's obsession with Clare's beauty becomes quite noticeable as the book goes on, so much so that it transcends platonic aesthetic appreciation and approaches erotic desire.

Irene's sexual attraction to Clare is even apparent in this quote. For example, Irene describes Clare's mouth as "tempting," suggesting that Irene is imagining kissing Clare. Meanwhile, Clare's eyes "mesmerize" her, as they seem to contain something "withdrawn and secret" about them. By evoking language about enclosure and secrecy, Irene's thoughts seem illicit, forbidden—like the possibility of Irene's desire for Clare.

Moreover, although Irene has previously dismissed the idea of determining race through physical features, she entertains it here by referring to Clare's "negro eyes." Irene attributes Clare's beauty to the interplay between her light hair and skin and her dark eyes, suggesting that Irene is attracted to the fact that Clare has an "exotic" look—Clare does not correspond to traditional beauty standards.

Part 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

Later, when she examined her feeling of annoyance, Irene admitted, a shade reluctantly, that it arose from a feeling of being outnumbered, a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of her life as well.

Related Characters: Gertrude Martin, Clare Kendry / Bellew, Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

Irene has reluctantly gone to have tea with Clare, and when she arrives, Clare brings her into a room where Irene finds one of their mutual childhood acquaintances, Gertrude. Here, the narrator is expressing Irene's frustration with Gertrude and Clare, who both married white men and seem to think that their choice was superior to Irene's choice to marry a black man.

Interestingly, Irene being the only one in the room to have married a black man makes her feel "a sense of aloneness." Later, when Clare begins to spend more time with Irene, Clare expresses how deeply lonely she feels in her marriage to John, a white man. Irene feels judged and, in this instance, lonely for not having a part in white society, while Clare feels lonely for having lost her place in the black community. It's notable that both Irene and Clare's senses of alienation come because of their choices in marriage.

It's awful the way it skips generations and then pops out. Why, he actually said he didn't care what color it turned out, if I would only stop worrying about it. But, of course, nobody wants a dark child.

Related Characters: Gertrude Martin (speaker), Clare Kendry / Bellew, Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

Gertrude says this as she, Irene, and Clare discuss their marriages and children over tea in Chicago. Both Gertrude and Clare are married to white men and have light-skinned children, while Irene is married to a black man and has one son who has light skin and one who is dark. Gertrude and Clare both admit to their anxiety during pregnancy about the possibility of having dark-skinned children.

Gertrude's husband, unlike Clare's husband, knows that she is black, and so Gertrude does not need her children to be light skinned in order to keep her own race a secret. Moreover, Gertrude clearly states that her husband did not care what their children looked like. Still, Gertrude clearly expresses a preference for light-skinned children, and she even actively disparages dark children, calling the way skin pigmentation can skip generations "awful" and saying harshly "nobody wants a dark child."

Although it's possible that Gertrude simply wants light-skinned children so that they may experience more privileges by passing as white, Gertrude's negative language suggests that her preference comes from deeply internalized racism. The racist beauty standards of American society have so influenced Gertrude's thinking that she thinks of blackness as aesthetically unappealing.

He roared with laughter. Clare's ringing bell-like laugh joined his. Gertrude, after another uneasy shift in her seat, added her shrill one. Irene, who had been sitting with lips tightly compressed, cried out: "That's good!" and gave way to gales of laughter. She laughed and laughed and laughed. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her sides ached. Her throat hurt. She laughed on and on and on, long after the others had subsided.

Related Characters: Clare Kendry / Bellew, Gertrude Martin, John/Jack Bellew, Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

This scene takes place after John has come home and, not knowing that Irene, Gertrude, and his own wife are all black, he called Clare a racist slur in front of them. John then explains that it is an inside joke between them. John laughs at his own joke, and the rest of the women begin to laugh, as well, for a variety of different reasons. Clare and Gertrude seem to be laughing to keep John from finding their silence or disapproval suspicious. Irene, meanwhile, bursts out with genuine laughter, but not because she thinks that John's joke was funny. Rather, Irene laughs because of the irony of the moment—John, who hates black people, has no idea that he is drinking tea with black women, and, in fact, has

married one.

The irony of the moment could certainly be perceived as funny, but it is also extremely dark. This scene shows how humor, rather than creating commonalities between people, can be disturbing and divisive and can expose gaps in empathy and understanding. At the same time, though, the humor is necessary—both practically, so the women do not reveal Clare's secret, and emotionally, because there are few other options for dealing with the bleak situation.

❝ Oh no Nig…nothing like that with me. I know you're no nigger, so it's all right. You can get as black as you please as far as I'm concerned, since I know you're no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be.

Related Characters: John/Jack Bellew (speaker), Clare Kendry / Bellew

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

John Bellew speaks this quote just after the uncomfortable laughing incident, as Irene, Gertrude, and Clare struggle to deal with John's racism. Clare has just asked John if, after all their years of marriage, it would matter to him if it turned out that she had even a little black ancestry.

John insists that it would matter, repeating variations of the slur "nigger" four times as he does so. He insists that he will have "no niggers in [his family]." Of course, this is incredibly ironic because John is unwittingly married to a black woman, and the father to a child who is part black. At the same time, John makes it very clear that he would not tolerate finding out the truth about Clare, which reveals the danger of Clare's situation. Interestingly, John separates skin color from race (he tells Clare he doesn't care what her skin color is, as long as she's not a "nigger"), and in doing so he undermines the very idea of race being based in a difference in skin-color. While John's racism is clearly dangerous, it is also highly mockable and almost amusingly hypocritical, reflecting Larsen's sense that even the darkest, most dire subjects can be jokes.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ 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.

Related Characters: John/Jack Bellew, Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator describes Irene's thoughts as she worries about her marriage to Brian. Irene thinks about the "old, queer, unhappy" restlessness that makes Brian want to move to South America, which has been a problem since the beginning of their marriage.

Curiously, the way that Irene thinks about Brian's longing for South America is extremely intimate, as if Irene understands this "craving." This seems odd, since Irene and Brian struggle with a distinct lack of communication in their marriage. In fact, the reader might wonder if Irene is using her own experience with a "queer, unhappy restlessness" to attempt to describe what she thinks it must be like for Brian.

The use of the word "queer," paired with Irene's consistent obsession with Clare's beauty, makes the reader wonder whether Irene is also describing here her own attraction to women. Irene uses language that suggests closeted queerness, calling Brian's desire (but perhaps her own as well) a "craving" for the "strange and different," and something that Irene has had to actively repress. As usual, the unreliability of Irene's perspective and Irene's own lack of self-awareness leaves the narrative open to speculation.

Part 2, Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Brian, she was thinking, was extremely good-looking. Not, of course, pretty or effeminate; the slight irregularity of his nose saved him from the prettiness, and the rather marked heaviness of his chin saved him from the effeminacy. But he was, in a pleasant masculine way, rather handsome. And yet, wouldn't he, perhaps, have been merely ordinarily good-looking but for the richness, the beauty of his skin, which was of an exquisitely fine texture and deep copper color?

Related Characters: Brian Redfield, Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Irene is watching Brian read a letter and evaluating his attractiveness. In comparison to Irene's many drawn-out, lush, and impassioned descriptions of Clare's beauty, this description of Brian's attractiveness (the only one in the novel) reads more like a catalogue of traits than a gushing, impulsive admiration. The contrast between Irene's descriptions of Clare's and Brian's beauty serves as more evidence of Irene's repressed queerness. Moreover, throughout this description, Irene takes note of exactly which features make Brian "not… pretty or effeminate," suggesting perhaps that Irene pays close attention to gender in evaluating beauty.

Irene also takes note of Brian's dark skin and suggests that his attractiveness is cemented by his dark coloring. Irene's appreciation is aesthetic, as she admires its "deep copper color." But, considering Irene's commitment to racial justice, Irene's appreciation might also be political. Irene wants to embrace blackness, which has been dismissed by traditional, racist beauty standards.

> 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 an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it.

Related Characters: Irene Redfield (speaker), Brian Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

Irene speaks this quote after she and Brian have moved from talking about Clare's second letter to discussing the nuances of the phenomenon of passing as white. This quote could almost be taken as the book's thesis on passing, and it is one of the few moments in the book that gives the reader clarity on the subject.

Irene's statement expresses the deep ambivalence that the black community feels toward passing. Irene describes the simultaneous feelings of contempt and admiration that passing elicits in black people, and this shows that passing is a fraught but established aspect of the black experience in the United States. Irene's description of ambivalence towards passing reflects the broader ambivalence that categorizes Irene's feelings about nearly everything throughout the book—passing, Clare, Brian, etc.

> Well, what of it? If sex isn't a joke, what is it? And what is a joke? …The sooner and the more he learns about sex, the better for him. And most certainly if he learns that it's a grand joke, the greatest in the world. It'll keep him from lots of disappointments later on.

Related Characters: Brian Redfield (speaker), Brian Junior (Junior), Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

Brian speaks this quote as he and Irene drive to the printshop so Irene can print tickets for the Negro Welfare League dance. Irene has just brought up her concern that Junior is learning dirty jokes about sex from the other boys at his school, and Brian, already angry at Irene because of his job frustrations, lashes out at her.

As Brian articulates his frustration with Irene's worries—asking what her problem is with jokes about sex—Larsen again calls into question the appropriate use of humor. Brian sees "serious" subjects like sex as being compatible with humor, while Irene would like to separate the two. Clearly, the implication of Brian's statement (that learning that sex is a joke will save Junior from "lots of disappointments later on") is that Brian's sex life with Irene is a disappointment. This hurtful comment displays how troubled their marriage is, and Brian's lack of fulfillment in it.

Part 2, Chapter 2 Quotes

> Clare had come softly into the room without knocking and, before Irene could greet her, had dropped a kiss on her dark curls… Redfield had a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling. Reaching out, she grasped Clare's two hands in her own and cried with something like awe in her voice: "Dear God! But aren't you lovely Clare!"

Related Characters: Irene Redfield (speaker), Clare Kendry / Bellew

Related Themes:

Page Number: 224-225

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Irene is upstairs in her room when Clare drops by. Clare enters the room and, as described in this quote, kisses Irene on the head. Irene reacts to Clare's kiss with "a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling," then holds Clare's face and tells Clare that she is "lovely."

Irene's reaction to Clare's physical touch is extremely emotional, especially considering that nothing similar ever occurs in the book between Irene and Brian (in fact, they never kiss, while Clare kisses Irene several times). Irene feels an "onrush of [affection]" and has "awe" in her voice as she compliments Clare, despite the fact that Irene professes to dislike Clare. This intimate moment serves as more evidence of the possibility that Irene harbors erotic and romantic feelings for Clare.

Irene…had the same thought that she had had two years ago on the roof of the Drayton, that Clare Kendry was just a shade too good-looking. Her tone was on the edge of irony as she said: "You mean because so many other white people go?"

Related Characters: Irene Redfield (speaker), Clare Kendry / Bellew

Related Themes:

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Clare is asking Irene about the Negro Welfare League dance, which Irene is helping to organize. Clare has just remarked with surprise that white people attend the Negro Welfare League dance, and she has asked if she can go, too. Irene clearly feels threatened by and jealous of Clare's beauty, and in an attempt to slight her, Irene asks if Clare wants to go "because so many other white people go."

Although Irene knows that Clare has black ancestry and grew up in a black community, Irene is essentially implying that Clare is a white person. This question, clearly intended to be hurtful, shows the precariousness of racial identity for someone like Clare who is white-passing. Clare is not "black enough" according to Irene, and this could be for a multitude of reasons: the fact that Clare is so light-skinned, that she pretends she has no black ancestry in public, or that she benefits from white privilege. Meanwhile, to Clare's racist husband, any black ancestry would make Clare wholly black in his eyes and would cause him to reject her. This scene between Irene and Clare showcases the difficulty of navigating society as someone who is straddling two racial identities, and who, as a result, is not totally welcome among either black or white people.

You didn't tell him you were colored, so he's got no way of knowing about this hankering of yours after Negroes, or that it galls you to fury to hear them called niggers and black devils. As far as I can see, you'll just have to endure some things and give up others. As we've said before, everything must be paid for.

Related Characters: Irene Redfield (speaker), John/Jack Bellew, Clare Kendry / Bellew

Related Themes:

Page Number: 231

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Irene and Clare are talking about Clare's marriage to John Bellew. Clare has just expressed her martial frustration and despair, saying that she would like to kill John. Irene dryly responds that capital punishment is still the penalty for murder, and then lectures Clare about her own culpability in her situation.

Irene's condescending response puts the blame for Clare's situation on Clare, as Irene reminds Clare that she has subjected herself to John's racism since she never told him about her race. Irene's belief that "everything must be paid for" reflects Irene's sense that by living as a white person and benefitting from white privilege, Clare must sacrifice her black identity and community—to Irene, it's ridiculous for Clare to expect to hold onto both. Larsen shows the reader how passing can be both beneficial and damaging to the individuals that choose to pass as white, helping them financially and socially but damaging them psychologically.

Part 2, Chapter 3 Quotes

She…let her gaze wander over the bright crowd below. Young men, old men, white men, black men; youthful women, older women, pink women, golden women; fat men, thin men, tall men, short men; stout women, slim women, stately women, small women moved by.

Related Characters: Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 234-235

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, which Irene remembers in retrospect, Irene sits next to Hugh Wentworth and observes the crowd at the Negro Welfare League dance. Irene takes in the scene, noting how different all the members of the crowd are from one another. In Irene's observation about diversity, she takes in not only the mix of races and the spectrum of skin colors, but also the crowd's breadth of ages and sizes. This shows how many factors can categorize a person, which suggests how arbitrary it is that, in the 1920s, segregation is based purely on race and skin-color. Moreover, when describing the skin colors of members of the crowd, Irene not only uses terms like "black" and "white," but also "pink" and "golden." This suggests that the terms usually used to describe skin-color ("black" and "white") create a false racial dichotomy, and don't represent the breadth of human diversity.

> I think what they feel is—well, a kind of emotional excitement. 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.

Related Characters: Irene Redfield (speaker), Clare Kendry / Bellew, Hugh Wentworth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

Irene says this to Hugh as they discuss the connection between race and beauty. Hugh remarked that he thinks that white women prefer to dance with dark-skinned black men instead of with white men. Irene counters Hugh's thesis with this thought, reframing what Hugh described as attraction as "emotional excitement."

Irene's view of the social phenomenon that Hugh describes suggests that white women are attracted to dark-skinned black men because of an attraction to what is "strange," forbidden, and even a little bit "repugnant" to them. Irene notes how beauty standards, rather than being purely aesthetic, are inflected through the societal view of race. White women's attraction to black men, Irene hypothesizes, comes from their sense that these men are the opposite of what they are "supposed" to want.

Since Irene and Hugh were just talking about Clare, the reader might imagine that Irene is still thinking of Clare as she describes this attraction. Irene could easily be describing her own queer attraction to Clare as she talks about feeling the object of her desire is the opposite of what she should be expected to want. Moreover, if Irene is using her own attraction to Clare to analyze this phenomenon, her sense of attraction paired with "repugnance" could be due to her own internalized homophobia.

Part 2, Chapter 4 Quotes

> "Children aren't everything…There are other things in the world, though I admit some people don't seem to suspect it." And she laughed, more, it seemed, at some secret joke of her own that at her words.

Related Characters: Clare Kendry / Bellew (speaker), Margery, Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

Clare says this to Irene as she and Irene discuss the fact that Clare is leaving New York in March. Clare laments her impending departure and wonders if she can find a way to stay. Irene, not wanting Clare to stick around, reminds Clare that she will finally be able to see her daughter Margery, who has been at school in Switzerland for a long time. Clare, however, who has very different views of motherhood than Irene does, waves off this notion, telling Irene "children aren't everything" and then laughing. Irene bristles after hearing this, believing that Clare is making fun of her.

This scene highlights the two women's extremely different experience of parenting—Clare does not especially enjoy motherhood, and thinks of her identity as separate from her role as a parent. For Irene, on the other hand, her children are her entire world. Clare's laughter and Irene's woundedness at Clare's mocking tone show how differently the two women view parenthood. While Clare feels that she can joke about it, Irene thinks parenting is serious, and therefore cannot be made humorous.

Part 3, Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Brian. What did it mean? How would it affect her and the boys? The boys! She had a surge of relief. It ebbed, vanished. A feeling of absolute unimportance followed. Actually, she didn't count. She was, to him, only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing. Worse. An obstacle.

Related Characters: Brian Junior (Junior), Theodore (Ted), Brian Redfield, Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Irene contemplates the potential consequences of Brian and Clare's alleged affair. She wonders what the affair would mean for her and her children. Upon remembering that she is tied to Brian through their shared offspring, Irene first feels a strong sense of relief. Then, however, this relief dissipates, replaced by a feeling of unimportance. Irene thinks that, to Brian, she is nothing more than the mother of his sons. This passage suggests that, through fulfilling the traditional feminine role of an extremely careful and devoted mother, Irene has lost something of her selfhood, at least in the context of her marriage to Brian. Rather than being connected because of who they each are as people, Irene feels connected to Brian only because of Junior and Ted. This suggests one drawback of motherhood for women: it can potentially eclipse other aspects of life, leaving them hollow.

❝ Did you notice that cup…It was the ugliest thing that your ancestors, the charming Confederates, ever owned…What I'm coming to is the fact that I've never figured out a way of getting rid of it until about five minutes ago. I had an inspiration. I had only to break it, and I was rid of it forever. So simple!

Related Characters: Irene Redfield (speaker), Clare Kendry / Bellew, Brian Redfield, Hugh Wentworth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

Irene says this to Hugh Wentworth during the tea party at her house. Irene has just begun to suspect that Brian and Clare are having an affair, and as she watches them talk, she becomes so upset that she drops her teacup, which smashes on the floor. When Hugh takes the blame for the cup breaking, Irene assumes—in a somewhat convoluted way—that he does so because he knows that Irene suspects Brian's infidelity. To try to regain her dignity, Irene makes up the story above.

Irene uses race to cover up her suspicions, saying that the cup was Confederate and implying that that is part of the reason that she thinks that it's ugly. In this moment Irene, as she often does, is displacing her own emotional reactions by using charged concepts (like race and motherhood) to distract from them or explain them. Although Irene does care a lot about race, as with motherhood, she is clearly willing to use it for her own means, in order to shape how others see her.

Moreover, the cup's fall, and Irene's comment that "I had only to break it, and I was rid of it forever," foreshadow Clare's fall to death later in the book, and Irene's possible culpability in it. If there is a parallel between the two, then Larsen may be suggesting that, as with the cup, Irene uses race and motherhood as larger excuses to obscure her personal dislike of Clare. In this moment, the reader sees Irene explicitly narrating her own life in a way that is unreliable, emphasizing the unreliability of the narrative according to Irene's perspective in general.

Part 3, Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her…Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well.

Related Characters: Irene Redfield, Clare Kendry / Bellew

Related Themes:

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Irene is contemplating her complex, conflicting feelings towards Clare, who she believes is having an affair with Brian. Irene feels conflicted because she is ideologically and emotionally committed to solidarity among black people, and so she feels that she cannot expose Clare's lie about her race. While Irene has often found purpose and community in this solidarity, she now feels that

her obligation to protect other black people is "suffocating," which makes Irene wish for the first time that she weren't black and therefore didn't have a responsibility to her race. Larsen draws attention to the frustration that black people might feel in being caught between a commitment to advancing and supporting other black people and a commitment to their own desires.

Irene also brings up her suffering as a woman, which she rarely emphasizes during the rest of the book. It is unclear whether Irene is simply bringing up womanhood as a way to make her self-pitying more convincing, since Irene often uses larger social roles or issues to obscure her individual emotions and responsibilities. It's also possible that the aspects of womanhood that Irene has up until this point narrated without complaint are, in fact, oppressive to her. For example, while Irene consistently asserts that she loves motherhood, she also clearly feels an intense pressure to be a perfect mother (think of how she risks heatstroke to find the right coloring book for Ted). When Clare describes mothering as "the cruelest thing," Irene actually agrees with her, suggesting that, despite her insistence that she loves mothering, Irene might also find motherhood constraining.

Additionally, Irene's obsession with security, and consequential need to maintain her marriage, imply the fact that, for women in the 1920s, being unmarried could be dangerous or at the very least extremely difficult. Irene lacks income of her own, she finds herself tied to Brian without any romance because, without him, Irene would find herself completely financially insecure.

Part 3, Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Above everything else she had wanted, had striven, to keep undisturbed the pleasant routine of her life. And now Clare Kendry had come into it, and with her the menace of impermanence.

Related Characters: Clare Kendry / Bellew, Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 262

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Irene thinks about the potential consequences that Clare and Brian's alleged affair could have on her carefully curated life and routine. Irene clearly blames this supposed affair on Clare, rather than splitting the blame between Clare and Brian (or even on herself for her lack of communication and care for her husband). Moreover, Irene is not upset about the idea that Brian's infidelity might mean that he doesn't love her, or that it might indicate the hollowness of their marriage. Rather, Irene is worried about maintaining the structure of her life, even if the content of it is a sham. It's also worth noting that Clare's potential threat to Irene's relationship is not only because of the alleged affair; Clare has also upended Irene's world because of Irene's attraction to her.

To Irene, Clare is a "menace of impermanence," and she represents a disruption to the architecture of Irene's world. In the novel, Clare generally is a figure who disturbs preexisting notions of the limits and conditions of reality (including as they pertain to sex and race). As Clare undermines black-and-white views of race and sex, she challenges not only Irene's marriage, but also the very structure of society.

Part 3, Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ "I want their childhood to be happy and as free from the knowledge of such things as it possibly can be"....

"You know as well as I do, Irene, that it can't. What was the use of our trying to keep them from learning the word 'nigger' and its connotation? They found out, didn't they? And how? Because somebody called Junior a dirty nigger."

Related Characters: Brian Redfield, Irene Redfield (speaker), Theodore (Ted), Brian Junior (Junior)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

This dialogue takes place as Irene and Brian fight over how best to address racism with their children. Ted has just asked Brian why black people are being lynched and why white people hate black people. This discussion is timely—racist violence and hate crimes were on the rise throughout the country in the 1920s. Irene, however, does not want to address the problem with Ted and Junior, while Brian insists that they must.

Irene wants Ted and Junior's childhoods to be happy and insulated from the racism that they, being black boys, will inevitably face. Irene consistently values security and the illusion of control over the truth throughout the book, and this is particularly apparent in how Irene parents and in how she screens her own emotions and desires from view as she

narrates the story. Brian, on the other hand, insists that they have to address racism with their children, since it will inevitably be a part of their lives. He cites one occasion when they tried to prevent their children from learning the significance of the word "nigger," and then someone called Junior a "nigger" anyway. This poignant example shows how painful it is to navigate racism when parenting black children in a world that is so hostile to black people. It also shows the pitfalls of Irene's tendency towards denial.

❝ Drearily she rose from her chair and went upstairs to set about the business of dressing to go out when she would far rather have remained at home. During the process she wondered, for the hundredth time, why she hadn't told Brian about herself and Felise running into Bellew the day before, and for the hundredth time she turned away from acknowledging to herself the real reason for keeping back the information.

Related Characters: Brian Redfield, Clare Kendry / Bellew, Felise Freeland, Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 265

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes how Irene's mind wanders after her fight with Brian over their parenting choices. Irene's thoughts stray into ruminating, again, about running into John Bellew with Felise. Irene's mental state is clearly deteriorating by this point in the book. Whereas before Irene loved to socialize, she now dreads getting dressed and leaving the house.

This description of Irene's thought process also highlights how deeply unreliable Irene's perspective is; here, Irene admits to the reader her own tendency to omit thoughts that make her uncomfortable. While the narrator notes that Irene "turned away from acknowledging to herself the real reason" that she didn't tell Brian about her run-in with John, the book—like Irene—never specifies what those reasons are. However, the reader can probably guess what those reasons might be (complex feelings of contempt and jealousy for Clare, and possibly attraction as well), Irene cannot face her own emotions. This quote reveals Irene to be someone who is deeply repressive of her own impulses and desires.

❝ Security. Was it just a word? If not, then was it only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained? And did too much striving, too much faith in safety and permanence, unfit one for these other things? Irene didn't know, couldn't decide, though for a long time she sat questioning and trying to understand. Yet all the while, in spite of her searchings and feeling of frustration, she was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life.

Related Characters: Irene Redfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, as Irene thinks over the possibility (which Irene has now decided is a certainty) that Brian and Clare are having an affair, Irene meditates on her desire for security above all else in her life. Irene wonders if, in order to obtain security, she has to sacrifice other aspects of her life, including love and "ecstasy." This tradeoff highlights how devoid Irene's marriage to Brian is of affection and intimacy.

The word "ecstasy" connotes sexual pleasure, suggesting that, if Irene were to give up her marriage to Brian and the security it affords, she could potentially find not only love but also physical intimacy. Clare, for whom Irene harbors confusing feelings of affection and attraction, represents everything that security is not. This suggests that, while Irene professes to worry about Clare stealing Brian from her, it is possible that Irene is, in fact, subconsciously worried about giving in to her desire for Clare.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1

Passing opens with Irene Redfield finding a letter in her mail stack written in purple ink on Italian paper, just like one she received two years earlier. The letter is postmarked from New York City. Irene, knowing it is from a woman named Clare Kendry, thinks the letter is just like Clare — "always on the edge of danger."

By highlighting the idea that Clare is "on the edge of danger," Larsen foreshadows Clare's later fall from the window and gives the sense that, because she is white-passing, Clare is caught precariously between two worlds.

As Irene looks at the letter, she imagines Clare as she knew her when she was a child, calmly and defiantly sewing a dress while her violently drunk father, Bob Kendry, threatened her. Irene remembers that Clare took her wages from her dressmaking job and, instead of giving them to her father as she was supposed to, kept the money to buy fabric for her dress.

Irene's flashback to Clare's childhood reveals Irene and Clare's relationship and details of Clare's character. Moreover, Bob Kendry offers an example of tremendously bad parenting, which helps to contextualize Irene and Clare's parenting choices.

Irene then remembers the day Bob died in a saloon fight, when Clare was fifteen years old. She thinks of Clare standing and looking with "disdain" at his body before crying and running out the door. Irene thinks that, in retrospect, the weeping seemed more the result of "pent-up fury" towards her father than grief. Irene thinks of Clare as "cat-like," due to her mood shifts and her temper.

Clare's seeming lack of grief at the loss of her father shows their parent-child relationship is devoid of love. This section is narrated in a way that is intended to make Clare seem cold and selfish. However, since the narration is in Irene's perspective, Irene may just be overly harsh.

Irene, returning her attention to the letter, opens the envelope and begins to read. The letter expresses Clare's desire to see Irene again and to join Irene's community—requests that Irene immediately wants to reject. The letter ends by mentioning "that time in Chicago" when Irene and Clare last saw each other. This line makes Irene flash back to the memory of that day, causing her embarrassment and pain.

Irene and Clare clearly have a fraught relationship, as is evident from the book's very first pages. Clare's request to spend time with Irene and the black community feels intrusive and presumptuous to Irene. Though passing has not yet been brought up, the reader can already see the tension it causes.

PART 1, CHAPTER 2

In Irene's flashback to "that time in Chicago," she remembers the day being very hot. Irene is shopping for souvenirs for her two boys, Brian Junior (referred to throughout the book as Junior) and Theodore (Ted). Irene buys Junior a mechanical plane, but has trouble finding the drawing book that Ted had asked for. Outside of the sixth shop she tries, Irene witnesses a man either pass out or die from heatstroke.

In this section, Larsen shows that Irene is such a devoted mother that she will risk heatstroke in order to bring her boys the right presents. Irene's commitment to her children is profound, but it seems foolhardy here, since she is putting herself in danger just for the sake of souvenirs.

As a crowd gathers around the man, Irene withdraws from the mass of people. She fans herself, then realizes that she is about to faint. Irene gestures to a man in a parked car nearby. The man jumps out and helps Irene into his passenger seat. The man suggests that he take her to the Drayton, where she can get a glass of iced tea. As they drive to the Drayton, Irene tries to "repair the damage that the heat and crowd had done to her appearance." When they arrive at the hotel, Irene thanks the man and walks inside.

In this section, it becomes clear that Irene cares deeply about her appearance. After seeing a man potentially die of heatstroke, Irene's thoughts do not return to him. Instead, she worries about how the heat may have affected her own looks. The juxtaposition of the man fainting and Irene's superficial concerns highlight Irene's vanity.

Irene sits at a table near the **window**. When her iced tea arrives, Irene enjoys it while observing the rest of the room. She orders another tea and wonders what she will do about the fact that she wasn't able to get a coloring book for Ted. Irene notices a couple being seated at the table next to her. Their presence annoys her, because she was enjoying the peace and quiet, and thinks their conversation will disrupt her.

Again, Irene shows how important motherhood is to her, but her concern about the coloring book seems slightly misplaced. This materialism seems misguided, an obsession with appearing to be the perfect mother.

However, contrary to Irene's expectations, only the woman sits down, and the man says goodbye to her and leaves. As Irene observes the woman, she notices that she is very beautiful, with dark eyes, light skin, and good taste in clothes. As Irene watches the woman order, she notices that she seems to be flirting with the waiter.

Irene's evaluation of the woman's looks again shows her preoccupation with appearances. Moreover, Irene seems especially interested in female beauty— she does not meditate on the attractiveness of the man in the couple, only the woman.

The waiter returns with the woman's order, and Irene watches the woman prepare to eat the melon she asked for. Irene realizes that she is staring. She returns to her own thoughts, thinking about parties and Ted's coloring book. Irene then feels someone staring at *her*. She turns around, meeting the eyes of the woman at the next table. The woman does not avert her eyes when they make eye contact, and instead continues to stare. Irene, surprised by the attention, wonders if her makeup is messy, or something is wrong with her dress. She finds nothing amiss, but still the woman stares at her. Irene decides to ignore her, but when she steals a glance at the woman, the woman's dark eyes are still focused on her.

Here the reader again sees Irene as someone who focuses intently on her outward appearance. Irene immediately wonders if something is wrong with her dress or makeup when the woman stares at her. While this is certainly a natural reaction, it does draw attention to Irene's consistent superficiality throughout the book. Later, Larsen shows how this superficiality intersects with the complicated racial beauty standards of the time.

Suddenly, Irene worries that the woman has realized that Irene is a black woman sipping tea in the Drayton, which is only for white customers. Irene dismisses the idea, thinking that white people always imagine they can clearly distinguish race, but then constantly mistake her for Italian, Spanish, or Mexican. Irene remembers that she always "passes" for white successfully whenever she is out alone, and assures herself that there is no way the woman could know her true identity. Irene then notes to herself that she is not ashamed of being black, but that she would not want to be thrown out of the Drayton.

Irene's anxiety about being recognized as black and her thoughts about passing highlight how, although race is inherently linked to outward appearance, race cannot be separated neatly into visual categories. Irene mocks how white people think that sight will allow them to distinguish race, emphasizing that race in the 1920s is a false binary. Irene also shows here her ideological commitment to black identity.

Irene returns the woman's gaze again, thinking this time that it does not seem hostile. Suddenly, the woman walks over to Irene and says, "I think I know you." Irene, comforted by the friendliness in her voice, says the woman must be mistaken. Then the woman identifies her as Irene. Irene is surprised, and tries to recall how she would know a white woman, running through the few scenarios in which she interacts with white people. She confirms that she is Irene.

Irene's surprise that the seemingly white woman recognizes her highlights just how racially segregated 1920s America was. This racial segregation is less pronounced in Harlem (as the reader will later see), but even Irene, who leads a cosmopolitan, progressive lifestyle, only has limited interactions with white people.

Irene continues to search her brain for the woman's identity, and notices that her failure to do so seems to please the other woman. Irene continues to struggle, and then the woman laughs. Immediately, Irene identifies the woman as Clare Kendry. Irene is shocked. Clare orders two teas and cigarettes as Irene calculates that it has been twelve years since the two women last saw each other.

Irene first thinks that Clare, a childhood acquaintance, is white, and so she does not recognize her. Irene's mistake highlights how, although Irene knows that physical features cannot always convey race, she cannot help but jump to racial conclusions based on outward appearance.

Irene then remembers that, after her father died, Clare went to live with family in a different part of Chicago. Clare used to visit their old neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago occasionally. She looked more and more distressed with every visit, so much so that Irene's mother commented on it. Then Clare started to visit less and less frequently, until at last she stopped coming. Eventually Irene's father, who had been a friend of Clare's father, went to visit Clare, and was told that she had run away.

The descriptions of Clare's childhood after the death of her father show that his death was extremely disruptive to her, even though he was not the best father. Clare's childhood serves as a point of comparison to the childhoods of Clare and Irene's children, which are described later in the book.

Though her father did not tell Irene much, Irene suspects that there was more to the story. She later heard many rumors about Clare's whereabouts. Among the stories was the tale that Clare had been seen dining in a fancy hotel with white people. Another described Clare in a limousine with a white man. Irene remembers reacting to these stories with "eager shining eyes" and "lurking undertones of regret or disbelief." She and the neighborhood girls would debate whether the stories were true. Someone always argued they must be true, since Clare had "a way with her."

The reaction of Irene and her childhood friends to rumors of Clare consorting with white people shows how taboo passing and racial integration were in 1920s America. While the girls gossip about passing, Irene's memory of their "eager shining eyes" suggests that they also envy Clare. This memory shows how passing is both condemned and admired among the black community.

Irene expresses her surprise at seeing Clare, who says she is not, in fact, surprised to see Irene. Clare says that she has thought of Irene over the course of the past twelve years, and speculates that Irene, on the other hand, has not given her a single thought. Irene thinks, but does not say, that this is true. Irene recalls the mysterious circumstances surrounding Bob Kendry, who went to college with some of the men in the neighborhood, but ended up as a janitor for some reason that Irene's father would not tell her.

Once again, Irene thinks immediately of Clare's father, highlighting the importance of the parental role for young people. Clare's childhood is shrouded in disgrace because of her father, and Clare, used to feeling judged by the black community in Chicago, goes on to lead a life that her childhood community would not approve of.

Irene defends herself for having not thought of Clare, telling Clare that, like everyone, she is very busy with her present life. Clare says that that is natural, and asks what everyone in their old neighborhood used to say about her. Irene, embarrassed, says she cannot remember. Clare laughs, saying that she knows that Irene remembers, but it doesn't matter because she already knows the kinds of things that were said about her. Clare recalls running into their former neighbors and receiving cold reactions in the past.

Throughout the book, Passing *shows many characters, especially Irene, who struggle to conform to what is societally acceptable. Clare, however, ignores all the cultural stigma surrounding passing. She laughs when Irene hesitates to tell her what was said about her, showing that she is happy to defy social expectations.*

Clare tells Irene that it was these rejections that made her decide not to go back to the South Side and say goodbye to Irene's family before running away. Clare remembers how kind Irene's family was to her, and she implies that, if she had received the same kind of cruel response from them as she did from the other neighbors, she would have been heartbroken. Clare's eyes fill with tears.

However, Larsen also shows the reader that living outside of socially acceptable behavior is damaging to Claire. Although Claire laughs when Irene declines to answer her question, the rejection by her community because of rumors of her passing has clearly caused Clare immense pain.

Clare then asks Irene to tell her about her life, and if she is married. They talk for an hour over their iced teas about Irene's move to New York with her husband Brian and her two sons. Irene also updates Clare on the status of their old neighbors. Clare listens attentively.

Once again, Larsen shows Irene's focus on motherhood and her family as she describes her life to Clare. Clare, on the other hand, is much less forthcoming about her personal life, letting Irene talk.

When the clock strikes the hour, Irene jumps up and says she must go. Irene remembers that she has not asked Clare anything about herself, but realizes she does not really want to know. Irene debates whether or not she should ask, since the rumors of Clare's life are so scandalous, but she is curious. Finally, Irene decides not to ask, and repeats that she has to leave.

As Irene debates whether she should ask about Clare's life, she shows that she has a similar attitude towards passing as she did as a child— one of ambivalence, a mixture of interest and disgust, curiosity and fear.

Clare begs Irene not to go, and asks to see her again, saying she will be in Chicago for a month. Clare asks if Irene will come to dinner with Clare and her husband John that night. Irene declines, saying her schedule is full. Clare then invites her to tea, where Irene could meet both her husband and her daughter, Margery. Irene declines again, saying she is busy.

Irene's ambivalence towards Clare's lifestyle translates into reluctance to associate herself with Clare. Also, Clare mentions here for the first time that she, too, is a mother.

Irene then impulsively invites Clare to go to Idlewild (a lake resort that, unlike most 1920s resorts, allows black visitors) with her that weekend, where there will be lots of people from their old neighborhood. She immediately regrets the invitation, imagining all the attention it will bring. Irene's worry is premature, however, because Clare declines. She says that, while she would theoretically love to go, "it wouldn't do" for her to join them. Clare tells Irene that she is grateful to have been asked, though, since she knows "just what it would mean for you if I went."

Although Irene seems reluctant to spend time with Clare, she impulsively invites Clare to her summer resort. Irene imagines the attention Clare will draw, because Idlewild is a primarily black resort and Clare looks like a white woman. Clearly, navigating racialized spaces, even black spaces, means a constant interrogation of identity for anyone who is racially ambiguous.

Irene has the feeling that Clare is mocking her, but is not sure why. But she admits to herself that she is glad Clare did not accept the invitation, as it will be much easier for her socially. Still, the idea that Clare read Irene's thoughts disturbs her. The waiter brings Clare the change from the bill she paid.

Irene's feeling that Clare is mocking her highlights Irene's own cowardice and discomfort at the idea of facing social backlash from bringing a woman who looks white to a primarily black space.

Still, Irene does not leave. She is curious about Clare's life, and her choice to pass in white society, but unsure how to ask about it. Clare solves this problem by telling Irene that she wonders why more of the women they grew up with did not pass like she did, since it is, according to her, "frightfully easy." Irene suggests that it must be hard to enter white society without inquiries about one's family and background—but Clare tells Irene that it has not been a problem for her.

Irene is curious about Clare's life, but she feels that asking about it might seem inappropriate. This shows Irene's ambivalent attitude towards passing and towards Clare in general. Clare's assertion that passing is "easy" suggests that the racial barriers of 1920s society, although seemingly rigid and certainly dangerous, are not as solid as one might think.

Irene is shocked that Clare has not had to explain her background, and Clare seems amused by her surprise. Clare says she did not even have to make up a past, since she lived with her aunts. Irene suggests that they were also white passing, and Clare corrects Irene, telling her they were in fact white. Irene remembers that Bob Kendry's father was white, and figures that the aunts must be his father's sisters.

That Clare has not had to reconcile passing with her origins in the black community shocks Irene, perhaps because Irene herself is so attached to the black community. Irene's assumption that Clare's aunts were white-passing rather than white shows again how race is not neatly distinguishable in 1920s America.

Clare goes on to describe her aunts, who were poor and religious, and felt morally obligated to take Clare in when her father died. Clare did the housework to earn her keep with her aunts, who believed that black people should do hard work, and harbored racist ideas about black people that they justified with Bible stories. Clare tells Irene that it was hard for her, but that they provided for her materially and gave her a religious education. Irene comments that religion is used to justify a lot of cruelty. Clare responds by saying that her experience made her who she is.

The racism that Clare experienced in her aunts' household shows how pervasive racism is, even among people who are close with or related to black people. Racist ideology poisons even familial relationships. Clare's own ambivalence towards her aunts, compared with Irene's condemnation of them, shows that Clare is accustomed to experiencing racism.

Clare describes her determination to get away from her aunts. Clare then tells Irene that when she went back to visit their neighborhood, she was jealous of everyone who had "all the things [she] wanted and never had had." She goes on to describe how her aunts were clearly ashamed that their brother had a black child, and thus a black granddaughter, and would not let her talk about her race.

Clare's aunts' refusal to let Clare talk about race explains why Clare has had an easy time rejecting her black identity and passing as white. After being shunned by her community, Clare is not allowed to develop positive associations with blackness at her aunts' house.

Clare then talks about meeting her rich white husband, John, and how her aunt's shame about her lineage helped her keep her race secret from him. Clare stopped going to their old neighborhood on the South Side in order to spend time with John, and then eloped with and married him. Irene asks why Clare's aunts did not tell Irene's father that she was married, mentioning that he went to ask about Clare after she stopped showing up on the South Side.

Interestingly, it is the aunts' racist shame about Clare's origins that allows her to slip so easily into white society and marry her white husband. This suggests that racist ideology can be used against itself. In silencing racial discourse, the racist system allows people like Clare to quietly move across racial boundaries.

Clare gets teary at the idea of Irene's father asking about her, and explains that she didn't tell her aunts why she had disappeared so that they could never tell John about her black heritage. Clare says that they probably assumed she was "living in sin," and that that's probably what they told Irene's father. Irene says her father never mentioned that.

Clare's assumption that everyone thought she was "living in sin" highlights how, in Irene and Clare's childhood community, Clare became a symbol of sexual transgression. Irene continues to see Clare in this way, dwelling pruriently on Clare's sexuality.

Clare returns to the subject of passing, asking Irene if she ever thought about trying to join white society. Irene says no in a somewhat aggressive manner, and when Clare seems offended, Irene quickly explains that she has everything she wants in life except extra money. Clare laughs and says that everyone wants that, and tells her that she thinks the money is worth the "price." Irene instinctively disagrees with Clare, but she just shrugs. Irene thinks she will be late to dinner if she does not leave. Still, Irene lingers.

Irene's response to Clare's question highlights the tension underlying perceptions of passing. To Irene, Clare's idea that Irene should pass implies that Irene's life as a black person is not as good as Clare's life as a white person, and thus it suggests Clare's internalized racism. Clare, in turn, thinks Irene's resistance implies that Irene is judging Clare's life.

As Irene observes Clare, fascinated by her choices, she thinks that Clare has always had a somewhat arrogant manner, even before she was rich and passing as white. Irene then admires Clare's beauty, evaluating her features and contrasting her light skin and hair with her dark eyes. Irene thinks Clare's eyes are "negro" eyes, and that they are what make Clare so strikingly gorgeous.

Irene's interest in Clare's beauty becomes a reoccurring focus of the text. Irene's belief that Clare has "negro eyes" contradicts Irene's earlier criticism of the idea that one can determine race by looking at physical features. This also shows how Irene's idea of beauty is racialized.


Clare asks if Irene can see her on Monday or Tuesday, and Irene tells Clare that she is busy those days, and will be going back to New York on Wednesday. She suggests, though, that she may be able to change something and come on Tuesday, and Clare implores her to try, saying she may never see her again otherwise. Irene asks if she should call Clare, or if Clare will call her. Clare tells Irene she will call Irene. Irene says she will do her best to be free on Tuesday, and the two women say goodbye and part ways.

As Clare and Irene negotiate meeting up, it becomes clear that Clare does not have many social engagements in Chicago. She appears to be completely isolated from the black community that she and Irene grew up in (the community Irene still sees when she returns home). Irene entertains the idea of making room for Clare in her busy schedule, implying that, despite her mixed feelings, Irene wants to see Clare.

After Irene is away from the Drayton and on her way back to her father's house, she thinks over her encounter with Clare, harboring mixed feelings of irritation and pleasure. Irene is annoyed that she promised to make time to see Clare on Tuesday when Clare leads such a separate life from her now.

Back in her black neighborhood and away from the white hotel where she met Clare, Irene continues to struggle with her mixed feelings towards Clare and her mixed feelings toward passing in general.

Irene climbs the steps to her father's house, thinking about what her father's reaction will be when she tells him about seeing Clare. Irene then realizes that Clare did not tell Irene her married name, and that Clare has Irene's contact information, but Irene has none of Clare's. Irene wonders if this was intentional, and if Clare thinks that Irene is not trustworthy, and might tell her husband about Clare's past. As she enters the house, Irene decides not to tell her father anything about meeting Clare after all, because she is so annoyed that Clare does not trust her. Irene resolves not to see Clare on Tuesday.

Clare seems to be trying to keep Irene from having access to her contact information, which annoys Irene. Irene thinks Clare keeps it from her because Clare believes Irene is not trustworthy. Irene is proud of her blackness, and the idea that Clare is trying to hide her own blackness from her husband offends Irene so much that she resolves not to see Clare again.

PART 1, CHAPTER 3

Tuesday comes around, and the weather is cloudy and foggy, which Irene sees as another reason why she should not go see Clare. Clare rings Irene's telephone incessantly all morning. Each time, Irene tells her father's housekeeper Liza to take a message, but each time Clare calls back again. Finally, at noon, Irene's resolve weakens and she takes the call.

Irene's annoyance that Clare intends to control their communication turns into a power struggle. Irene, trying to regain power over their interactions, refuses to answer the phone, and Clare, insistent that she will see Irene, calls and calls.

Irene tries to tell Clare she cannot see her, but Clare begs Irene to come have tea, reminding her that she promised. Clare convinces Irene, and then tells Irene her last name (Bellew) and the address where she can find her at four o'clock. Irene hangs up the phone, angry at herself for having given in.

Clare does, ultimately, give Irene her contact information, including her last name, which Irene specifically noted she did not tell her before. Irene, however, is still mad, suggesting that it is not only Clare's lack of trust that is upsetting Irene.

When Irene arrives at Clare's place, Clare greets her with a kiss, and smilingly tells her how glad she is that Irene has come. Clare's warmth melts away Irene's frustrations. Clare leads her into a sitting room where Irene sees a woman lounging on the sofa. At first Irene does not recognize her, but then she identifies her, and asks, "how are you, Gertrude?"

Irene's resentment, however, does not last. Again, Irene's ambivalence toward Clare is profound. The reason for this ambivalence is unclear and complex, and it potentially includes mixed feelings about passing, general jealousy, and possibly attraction.

Gertrude, a mutual childhood acquaintance, greets Irene. Irene thinks about how Gertrude, like Clare, married a white man. Unlike Clare, however, Gertrude's husband knows that she is black. Irene asks Gertrude how her husband is, and Gertrude responds that he's doing fine. There is a silence, and then Clare says they will have tea right away. Clare mentions she is sorry that Irene won't be able to meet her daughter, because Margery is staying with friends, but says that her husband John will be back soon.

Gertrude is married to a white man who knows that Gertrude is black. She represents a different lifestyle than either Clare, who passes entirely and constantly pretends to be white, or Irene, who passes only occasionally and lives in the black community. The three women, all from the same origins, show different ways of navigating the racist, segregated society of the 1920s.

Irene observes Gertrude, thinking she seems uncomfortable, and feels annoyed. The narrator notes that later, when Irene thinks back on the tea party, she will admit to herself that she felt outnumbered. Both Gertrude and Clare have married white men, while Irene married a black man, and thus stayed in the black community. Clare talks with the women about the experience of returning to Chicago, their common childhood home. She says she returned because her husband, who travels often for business, had a business trip there. Clare insisted on coming along so she could "find out what had happened to everybody." Clare talks about how lucky it was to run into Irene at Drayton's.

Irene's feeling of being outnumbered shows how choosing whether to stay in the black community or leave it is a decision fraught with social judgment. Irene judges the women for leaving and feels judged for having stayed. The women represent of different ways of coping with racism: becoming a part of white society (and thus benefitting from the individual privileges that choice allows), or embracing the black community and suffering the racism that entails while also fighting for racial equality for black people as a whole.

Irene agrees, and asks how Clare found Gertrude. Clare says she looked up the contact information for Gertrude's father's store—a butcher shop. Irene says "oh, yes," and begins to describe where the shop is before Gertrude cuts her off, telling her it has moved and now belongs to her husband. Irene then thinks that Gertrude looks like the wife of a butcher, noting that she is no longer pretty like she was when they were young, and is badly dressed.

Although Irene thinks of herself as deeply involved in her Chicago community, Irene not knowing the location of Gertrude's father's store shows that she is not as in touch with home as she thought. Irene, rather than taking this correction in stride, goes on to mentally mock Gertrude's appearance, again revealing Irene's pettiness and obsession with looks.

Clare tells Irene that Gertrude told her before Irene arrived about her two twin boys, and the tone in Clare's voice makes Irene feel like Clare was reading her thoughts. Irene tells them she has two boys herself, and comments that Clare is "rather behind." But Gertrude says that Clare is lucky to have a girl, and they continue discussing children while Clare serves tea.

Irene's comment that Clare is "rather behind" displays how Irene competes with Clare in many areas, including motherhood. It also shows how, although Irene thinks very highly of motherhood, she is willing to use it self-servingly to make Clare feel inferior.

Clare tells them she will not have any more children because she was so terrified during her pregnancy that Margery would have dark skin. Irene is silent. Gertrude empathizes with Clare. She says that, while her husband would have been fine with a dark child, Gertrude worried incessantly. Gertrude agrees that she will also not have any more children, and remarks that white people do not understand how dark skin can sometimes skip a generation. She then says, "nobody wants a dark child."

Gertrude's comment that "nobody wants a dark child" shows that, despite her own racial background, Gertrude harbors intense anti-black sentiment and internalized racism. It is an aesthetic judgment as well as a practical one, since lighter skin would afford children with privileges available only to white people and black people who pass.

Irene promptly replies that one of her boys is dark, and Gertrude is shocked and embarrassed. She asks if Irene's husband is dark as well. Irene, though internally furious, responds coolly, telling them her husband Brian cannot "pass."

Irene's reply disrupts Gertrude and Clare's assumption that, being light skinned themselves, they all prefer light skin. Irene does not agree with this preference.

Clare tries to smooth things over, saying that black people think too much about skin pigment, and saying it's not so important for Irene, or even for Gertrude. Clare says that only "deserters" like her have to be afraid of "freaks of nature." She then changes the subject and asks about Claude Jones, a man they used to know from the neighborhood.

Clare tries to reframe the discussion of dark children to make it seem like she was concerned about Margery having light skin for her safety. Still, Clare refers to dark skinned children born to light skinned parents derogatorily as "freaks of nature."

Gertrude tells Clare that Claude Jones converted to Judaism, and says she would "die laughing" if she saw him. Clare laughs amiably, but says she thinks it's his business. Irene, who is still hurt about the comments about dark children, says in a snippy tone that she guessed it didn't occur to them that his conversion might have been sincere.

Gertrude's amusement at Claude Jones's religious conversion seems to stem from the idea that she sees it as "un-black." Irene, meanwhile, clearly thinks that Gertrude and Clare's views of race are regressive.

Clare is embarrassed, and backpedals, but then says she is surprised Irene would have expected them to think of that. The conversation gets tense. Meanwhile, Gertrude is confused and surprised. Clare then steers the conversation away from race and religion to lighter subjects. Irene notices that Clare is extremely socially adept in navigating conversation. They continue with polite chatter about Clare's travels until Gertrude and Irene begin to get bored.

Irene's resistance to Gertrude and Clare mocking Claude Jones makes the conversation uncomfortable. Clare seems to understand why her laughter was cruel, but Gertrude, who appears to be less thoughtful about race, is simply confused. Clearly, Gertrude, Clare, and Irene's views of race differ greatly.

Irene is about to leave when Clare's husband John arrives. Irene observes his appearance as he walks in, noticing he is not the same man that Clare was with at the Drayton. John greets Clare by saying "Hello, Nig," shocking both Gertrude and Irene. Irene is confused, and thinks that maybe John knows that Clare comes from a black family. Still, she thinks his use of a racial slur is shockingly rude.

That John is not the same man Clare was with at the Drayton suggests the possibility of Clare's sexual impropriety. Whether Clare actually had a romantic relationship with the man at the hotel is unclear; since the narrative is in Irene's perspective, it could be clouded by Irene's preexisting view of Clare as promiscuous.

Clare introduces John to Gertrude and Irene, and then asks if Irene and Gertrude heard her husband's nickname for her. John laughingly explains that he calls Clare "nig" because he thinks that her skin has gotten darker over the course of their marriage, and says "if she don't look out she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger." John laughs at his punch line. Clare and Gertrude laugh as well. Irene, meanwhile, cannot stop laughing, and laughs for too long, until Clare catches her eye and Irene calms herself.

John explains that his use of the slur "nig" to address Clare is a joke between them. However, as this scene highlights, the "joke" does not work as intended. Instead, the "joke" is that John does not realize that all the women in the room with him are black. Clare and Gertrude laugh to make things seem normal, while Irene laughs because of the dark irony of the moment.

Clare pours tea for John and asks him if it would matter to him, after their long marriage, if she turned out to have the slightest bit of black ancestry. John insists that it would, saying he will have "no niggers in [his] family." Irene fights the urge to laugh, grabs a cigarette, and makes eye contact with Clare. The look in Clare's eyes makes Irene feel ever so slightly that she is in danger. Irene dismisses this feeling and allows John to light her cigarette.

Clearly, John is extremely racist. This is evident from the moment he walks into the room and addresses Clare as "nig." The vast extent of his violent racism, however, becomes clearer as they talk more about race. Irene senses they are in danger, showing how, though John's racism is ironic, it also carries the threat of very real danger.

Irene asks John if he dislikes black people, and John responds that he and Clare both hate them, so much so that Clare will not even allow them to have a black maid. Irene no longer finds the irony of John's racism amusing. She asks if John has ever met a black person. John responds that "thankfully" he has not, but he reads about them committing crimes in the newspaper.

As Irene asks John about his experience with black people, she exposes that much of his racism comes from the media. This emphasizes how the media has consistently contributed to racism through its stereotyped overrepresentation of black people as criminals.

Gertrude makes a noise, and Irene cannot tell whether it is a giggle or a snort. The room is silent and Irene's anger mounts, but she does not say anything because she knows it would be dangerous for Clare. Clare gently tries to steer John away from the subject, saying it will bore them, and John apologizes and asks about Irene's life in New York.

The ambiguousness of the sound Gertrude makes—it signals either amusement or anger— highlights the uncertainty of the scene as a whole. The women in room alternate between amusement and fury as humor proves to be unstable.

Irene is still furious, but out of allegiance to Clare, she tries to collect herself, and they calmly discuss Irene's life in New York, and Irene's husband's work as a doctor. John jokingly comments that it must be hard for Irene, since her husband must have so many female patients. Irene responds that her husband, Brian, is more attracted to South America than his female patients.

Irene feels that she has an allegiance to Clare, and she does not reveal her own race because she is concerned it will put Clare in danger. Irene frames her loyalty to Clare as racial loyalty, a commitment to protecting and helping her because of their shared race.

John begins to comment nastily on the fact that there are lots of black people in South America before Clare cuts him off. John backs off and asks Gertrude about her life in Chicago. As they discuss Chicago and New York, Irene is astonished by the fact that she, Clare, and Gertrude are sitting with John and pretending to have a pleasant conversation while they are all furious. Irene then amends this thought, thinking that Gertrude might not be upset.

When Irene considers the fact that she, Clare, and Gertrude are sitting civilly with a vitriolic racist, her frustration highlights the maddening impossibility of navigating racism as a black person. Irene feels that she cannot speak up because of the potential for violence, but her silence makes her feel powerless.

Clare offers Irene more tea, but Irene refuses and says she must go. Everyone stands up, and John asks Irene how she likes the Drayton, believing that she is staying in the hotel. Irene plays along, saying she likes it. They all say goodbye, and Gertrude and Irene get in the elevator together silently.

John's last question to Irene, in which he inquires about how she likes the Drayton, adds insult to injury. The Drayton is a white hotel, as segregation was still the law of the land in 1920s America.

On the street, Gertrude exclaims that Clare must be crazy to be living in that situation, and Irene agrees that it seems risky. Gertrude says she would never have married her own white husband without him knowing she is black. They discuss how angry the interaction made them, and Gertrude expresses her frustration that Clare did not warn them of John's vitriolic racism. Irene points out that not telling them is something Clare would do, commenting that it was a joke on everyone. Irene says that Clare seems satisfied with her life, but Gertrude insists Clare will discover that she is not.

Gertrude's shock at Clare's lifestyle is somewhat surprising, since Gertrude is not exactly a champion of racial justice, and she suffers from significant internalized racism herself. Her surprise indicates how extremely unusual Clare's secrecy about her race is, even among black people who pass. Irene's comment that John's racism is a joke on everyone emphasizes how humor, rather than being light-hearted, can be damaging and uncontrollable.


Irene and Gertrude part ways. Now alone, Irene processes the tea party, and her own contemptuous anger. She tries to decode the look on Clare's face as she said goodbye, which seemed ambiguously threatening. Later than night, Irene continues to think it over, but cannot come to any conclusions about what the look might have meant. At last, Irene dismisses the questions from her mind, and thinks she should never have gone to meet up with Clare.

That Irene finds Clare's facial expression threatening seems strange, since Clare should possess no power over Irene. On the contrary, Irene has the ability to reveal Clare's identity and ruin her marriage. Irene's feeling of being threatened by Clare might stem from her mixed feelings of jealousy and attraction to Clare.


PART 1, CHAPTER 4

The next morning, the day Irene is to leave from Chicago for New York, she receives a letter from Clare. She tells herself she will not read it, as she is busy and does not want to be reminded of their infuriating meeting and the racism to which Clare subjected her.

Irene's determination not to read the letter from Clare speaks to how intense Irene's emotions surrounding Clare are, and attests to how deeply John's racism upset her.

Irene, however, cannot quell her curiosity and so reads the letter on the train home from Chicago. The letter thanks Irene for her visit, and acknowledges that Irene must be thinking that Clare should never have asked her to come. Clare says, though, that the visit made her extremely happy, that she hopes Irene can forgive her, and that she sends her love. In the letter's postscript, Clare says it "may be" that Irene's lifestyle is wiser and better than her own.

Clare's suggestion that Irene's lifestyle "may be" better than her own shows that Clare is pondering one of the central questions of the text: is it better to pass and benefit from white privilege, or to live in the black community despite the systemic racism and violence black people face? Larsen continues to develop this question over the course of the book.

The letter does not assuage Irene's anger or embarrassment about the meeting and John's racism. Irene tears the letter into little pieces and then drops the pieces over the train's railing onto the tracks.

Irene's destruction of the letter clearly shows how deeply her encounter with Clare and John's racism upset her.

Afterward, Irene thinks she will never see Clare again, and that if she does, she will ignore her. Irene turns her thoughts back to her life in New York and her family. She worries about her husband Brian, who she feels is restless, and wants to move elsewhere. Irene has tried since the beginning of their marriage to suppress this impulse, but it occasionally springs back up.

Irene's suppression of Brian's efforts to move to South America shows that, as a wife, she is very controlling. Brian's desire to move to South America is often compared to a sexual desire, which makes Irene's suppression of Brian's desire sexual repression.

PART 2, CHAPTER 1

The narrator returns to Irene at present, in her home in New York, holding the second letter she has received from Clare, several years after their meeting in Chicago. In this letter, Clare expresses her desire to see Irene again. Irene lays the letter aside and contemplates her intense feelings of fear and anger about the incident two years before. Knowing Clare, Irene is not surprised that she has written to her again.

That Irene, two years later, is still upset about the incident with John Bellew and Clare shows how profoundly affecting subjection to such vitriolic racism can be, and how long its emotional toll can persist.

Irene vows not to repeat the day in Chicago, which was so humiliating and hurtful to her. Irene thinks that, if Clare had wanted to retain her connections to the black community, she should have thought of that before marrying John. Irene also finds the style of the letter too "lavish."

Irene sees Clare's passing as a permanent choice, and one that should preclude her from returning to the black community. To Irene, it seems Clare is trying to have it both ways: enjoying both white privilege and black community.

Irene wonders why, during their tea in Chicago, she did not reveal to John that *she* is black and stand up for herself in the face of John's racism. However, Irene knows that she did not want to betray Clare, and feels a loyalty to her as member of her race. Irene acknowledges that Clare does not seem to care especially about their race, but still, Irene thinks, she belongs to it.

Irene continues to feel conflicted about how she should have acted at the tea party, unsure of whether it would have been better to stand up for herself as a black woman or to protect Clare's secret. Irene's racial loyalty extends to Clare, even though Clare passes as white, and even though Irene sometimes thinks of her as white.

As she pulls on her stockings, Irene swears to herself not to indulge Clare. Irene's husband Brian walks into the room, jokingly says that he has caught her swearing, and asks why. Irene hands Brian the letter. She feels bad because she is running late and holding Brian up, and blames the letter for distracting her.

Irene blames the letter for making her late, which hints (as many other moments do) at the unreliability of Irene's perspective. Even in these early interactions, Irene blames Clare for her marital problems.

Irene finishes getting ready while Brian reads the letter. She fixes her hair in the mirror and dresses. When Irene finishes preparing herself, she looks at Brian as he reads, thinking he is extremely handsome. She thinks he is not attractive in a feminine way, but in a masculine way. Irene also thinks that Brian's attractiveness is due in a large part to the beauty of his dark skin.

Irene's belief that Brian is extremely handsome in a "masculine" way suggests that Irene pays particular attention to gender and gendered beauty. Irene's clinical evaluation of Brian's "masculine" beauty contrasts with her sensual observation of Clare's "feminine" beauty.

Brian looks up from the letter and asks if Clare is the same girl that Irene saw in Chicago last time she was there (clearly, Irene has told him about the tea party). Irene affirms this guess. She tells Brian she is ready for breakfast. As they descend the stairs, Brian asks pointedly if Irene is going to see Clare. Irene gets a little defensive, saying she would not be so stupid as to put herself in the same room as John Bellew so that he can call her a "nigger" again.

Irene's defensiveness at Brian's question displays that their marriage has underlying tension, since Irene understands Brian's inquiry as a criticism. Irene's response, meanwhile, clearly shows again how hurt Irene was by the scene at the tea party, and how profoundly John's use of slurs affected her.

They go into the dining room, where their housekeeper Zulena has laid out breakfast. As they eat, Brian tells Irene that she misunderstood his question as an aggressive one, and explains that he just wanted to make sure that Irene would not let Clare bother her. He reminds Irene that John did not exactly call Irene a "nigger," but rather said it *around* her, and says that that makes a difference. Irene admits that he didn't call her a "nigger" but argues that there isn't very much of a difference, since John Bellew would have done so if he had known that she is black.

Brian and Irene's discussion about the distinction between Irene being called a "nigger" and having the word said in Irene's presence shows how their views of racism differ. Irene professes to be just as affected by the word without it being directed at her. Their discussion reinforces Larsen's portrayal of Irene as deeply committed to racial justice in general, not just to escaping racism herself.

Brian argues that the story has a humorous side, since they all knew what was going on and John didn't, but Irene says she "can't see it." She tells Brian she will write to Clare that day and put an end to the matter.

While Irene previously thought that the situation was humorous (she laughed in the moment), clearly Irene's reaction has changed over time.

Irene then expresses surprise that Clare wants to spend time with her at all, given John's terrifying racism. Brian cuts her off, saying that he has seen people pass before, and they always return to the black community. They discuss the potential reasons for this. Finally, returning to the original topic, Irene says that she has no interest in helping Clare connect with her black identity and the black community. Brian agrees with her choice.

Larsen continues to explore the nuances of passing and how it is viewed in the black community. Brian's comment that people who pass always return to the black community suggests that passing is ultimately unsatisfying. These people who return to the black community are clearly not always welcomed with open arms.

Zulena brings them toast, and Irene comments on the ambiguous attitude that the black community has toward "passing." She suggests that it is simultaneously condemned and admired. Brian attributes it to biological survival impulses. Irene scoffs at the idea, but does not try to argue with him, knowing he is a good arguer.

Brian's belief that passing is a biological survival impulse attributes a complex social phenomenon to a simple biological rule. This is problematic considering how, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, science (and particularly Darwin's ideas of adaptation and survival) was often used to endorse racist ideas.

Irene changes the subject, asking Brian if he would do her a favor and take her to print some tickets for the Negro Welfare League dance, which she is helping to organize. Brian agrees. Irene says that organizing the dance is difficult, and Brian comments that his work as a doctor is as well, and that he hates it. Irene begins to get defensive, since she has encouraged him to remain in medicine, but Brian cuts the conversation off and asks if she is ready to go.

The fact that Irene is organizing the Negro Welfare Dance shows Irene's commitment to advancing black people and to racial equality, as she devotes her free time to fundraising and organizing for the cause. This section also clearly shows that Irene and Brian's marriage is fraught with tension.

As Brian puts his hat on in the hall, Irene thinks that Brian's moodiness about his job is unfair, because he seems to be blaming her for not letting them move out of New York. Irene wonders angrily and fearfully if he will ever give up his idea of moving to Brazil. She tells Brian she is going upstairs to get her things. She thinks uneasily about the fact that Brian had not voiced his discontent in a long time, but she had known it was still there.

Irene repeatedly tries to attribute the tension in her marriage to Brian's desire to go to South America (which is described almost as a romantic competitor to Irene). However, it appears that Irene and Brian's marriage has more issues with control, communication, etc. than with South America specifically.

Irene worries briefly that she actually does not know Brian very well, but then backtracks, assuring herself that she does. Irene tells herself not to worry, as Brian's desire for something different will die out eventually. Irene puts on her coat and hat. She decides to make some kind of plan to soothe Brian's desire to get out of New York, to assuage his restlessness. Irene puts on her gloves and takes her purse and walks out to the car where Brian is waiting.

Irene describes waiting out Brian's desire to go to South America in a way that clearly shows her lack of respect for Brian's aspirations and desires. She views his ambition to go to South America as a threat to their love. Again, clearly Irene and Brian have communication issues.

In the car, as Brian drives, Irene tells Brian she has been wanting to talk to him about something. Brian prompts Irene to tell him what it is, and Irene says that she is worried about their son Junior, who she thinks is "going too fast" in school. Brian tells Irene that he wishes she worried less about the children. Irene concedes that she is sure Brian wouldn't make a mistake with his son, but says that she worries Junior is picking up some bad ideas from the older boys.

The narrator, taking up Irene's perspective, frames Irene's plan as a thoughtful way to give Brian the chance to travel while keeping him from wanting to go to Brazil. However, it quickly becomes clear that Irene is not really thinking of Brian, but of her own parental anxieties.

Brian asks Irene if she means ideas about sex, and Irene tells him yes, that Junior has picked up "dreadful jokes." Brian is silent, and then asks, "if sex isn't a joke, what is it?" Brian then goes on to tell Irene that she is trying to coddle Junior, and that if she is trying to imply that Junior should change schools, Brian is totally against it. Brian says that it's good that Junior is learning about sex, especially as a joke, to save him from later disappointments.

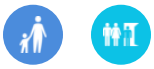
Clearly, sex makes Irene feel uncomfortable, and she does not like the idea of her son talking about it with his friends. Brian, meanwhile, sees it as totally normal. Irene wishes to insulate her children from the adult world, including sex, while Brian wants to teach them how to confront it.

Irene does not respond, and when they reach the print shop, she gets out and slams the door behind her. In the print shop, she is extremely angry. Irene then composes herself and, once she's done printing and back outside, tells Brian she will not go back to the house with him. Instead she will take the bus downtown to go shopping. Brian puts on his hat and Irene bitterly says goodbye to him.

Rather than discussing their conflict, Irene and Brian part ways without resolving any of their frustration. Throughout these scenes of Brian and Irene, Larsen shows that what keeps Irene and Brian's marriage together is not sex or intellectual compatibility, but Irene's determination to keep her routine with Brian.

Irene, alone, ponders how she will pin Brian down. Her plan had been to suggest sending Junior to a European school and let Brian take him there so he could travel and have a break from the New York City monotony. She is mad at herself for not succeeding in her plan, but she eventually calms down and decides to bring it up again later. For now, Irene assures herself that Brian will not leave her because he loves her, and because of their children. The narrator notes that she does want him to be happy, as long as it's according to plans of her own design.

Although Irene clearly cares deeply about her children and wants what is best for them, she also uses her parenting concerns as ways to pacify and control Brian. When Irene assures herself that Brian will not leave her because of the children, it is obvious to the reader that their marriage is not very fulfilling for the couple.



PART 2, CHAPTER 2

Five days after Irene has received Clare's second letter, she still has not replied. Irene notices that Clare has asked for Irene's response to be sent to the post office rather than her house, which angers Irene because she thinks it implies that she is not trustworthy. Irene tears the letter in two and tosses it in the trash, so appalled is she by Clare's lack of confidence in her good judgment and discretion.

Once again, Irene is uncomfortable with the idea of Clare having all the control over communication between the two of them. In this respect, it is the exact opposite of Irene's relationship with Brian, over whom Irene has enormous amounts of control.

Irene later decides that it is better anyway to not answer Clare's letter, thinking that Clare will get the message that way. Irene imagines Clare might write again, but she could just throw that letter away as well. Anyway, it is unlikely that she and Clare will ever see each other again. To Irene, they are practically strangers, especially in terms of engagement with each other and their racial consciousnesses.

Irene tries to assert control over her relationship with Clare by not responding to her at all. Irene's rationale for this is that they do not know each other very well anymore (although whenever Clare does something Irene doesn't like, Irene thinks it is "just like Clare") and that their conceptions of race are too different.

The narrative fast-forwards to the middle of October. It is cold, and Irene is burning a fire in her room. Her boys, Junior and Ted, play upstairs. Irene thinks about the two boys, saying that Junior is similar to Brian in looks, but to herself in temperament. Ted's personality, on other hand, is more like Brian's. Irene's thoughts migrate to Brian. She is still worried about Brian's restlessness and she feels helpless.

As Irene thinks about her children upstairs, Larsen shows how Irene uses her children to feel close to Brian. Irene compares and contrasts the children with herself and Brian without really considering the children as individuals who might be different from their parents.

Since her first attempt to pacify Brian with the botched boarding school trip offer, Irene has become depressed. She worries that Brian will suddenly decide it is not worth it to stay with her in New York, and wonders what would happen to herself and her family if he left them. The boys upstairs become noisier, and Irene is about to go tell them to be quieter when the doorbell downstairs rings.

Irene and Brian's deteriorating marriage is affecting Irene more profoundly than before, causing her mental state to worsen. Irene worries about Brian leaving not because of how she would miss him, but because she cannot picture what she would do otherwise.

Irene stops and listens to Zulena answering the door, walking up the steps, and then knocking on her bedroom door. Zulena stands in the doorway and tells Irene that Clare is there to see her. Irene hesitates, and then tells Zulena to bring Clare upstairs. Irene powders her nose and resolves to tell Clare immediately that she cannot associate with her.

As Clare arrives, Irene puts on makeup, highlighting her vanity and concern about her appearance. Clare makes Irene especially aware of her appearance, since Irene pays so much attention to Clare's beauty.

Clare enters the room without knocking and kisses Irene on the head. Irene feels a sudden rush of affection for her, reaches out to touch Clare's face, and tells her she is lovely. Clare ignores this comment, seats herself in a chair, and asks Irene, "didn't you mean to answer my letter?" Irene averts her eyes, uncomfortable. Clare describes how she waited expectantly for a response, and asks Irene to tell her why she did not respond. Irene is silent while Clare lights a cigarette, trying to collect her thoughts.

Irene's feelings of affection for Clare when Clare touches her in combination with Irene's constant obsession over Clare's beauty cast a sexual valence over Irene's view of Clare. Irene's reaction to Clare's touch is far more erotically charged than any scene between Irene and Brian, including when Irene clinically assesses Brian's attractiveness.

Irene tells Clare that she did not respond because she does not think Clare should risk being caught associating with black people because of John. Clare laughs, and tells Irene she hasn't changed. Irene insists that it is too dangerous. As Irene talks with Clare, she has the surprising feeling that, although Clare is selfish, she is also deeper and more emotionally complex than Irene.

Irene lies to Clare about the reason that she didn't respond to her letter, twisting it to seem like concern. Irene's insistence that their friendship is too dangerous and Clare's laughter at this idea shows how, like at the tea party, there is a thin line between humor and danger.

Clare becomes irritated, and tells Irene emphatically that she does not care about being safe. Irene sits down and tells Clare that she and Brian discussed it, and that they do not think associating with Clare is a good or safe idea for either of them. Clare tells Irene that she should have known that John was the reason that Irene is angry with her. Clare tells Irene that she doesn't blame Irene for being mad, but that she thought that Irene would "understand." Clare explains that John's racism causes her to feel deeply lonely, prompting her to reach out again.

In contrast to Irene, who values security and routine above all, Clare is willing to risk her safety for emotional fulfillment. Meanwhile, Clare's belief that Irene would "understand" Clare's feelings of alienation due to passing in white society and the pain of the racism she endures at the hands of her husband suggests that Clare sees an emotional intimacy between the women.

Irene puts out her cigarette, feeling resentful, but her voice sounds pitying as she expresses sympathy for Clare, saying she did not realize that was how she felt. Clare begins to cry, and despondently acknowledges that there is no way Irene could have known, because she is happy, free, and safe. Clare's words make Irene tear up, but she does not cry because, unlike Clare, she is an ugly crier.

Although Irene insists in her own thoughts (evident through the close third person narrative) that she does not like or care for Clare, she clearly does. Irene tears up when she sees Clare's pain. Perhaps Irene harbors feelings for Clare that are too difficult to admit, and so she represses them.

Irene tells Clare that no one is completely safe, happy, or free, and Clare points out that that's all the more reason to take risks. Irene, however, tells Clare to think of her daughter Margery. This surprises Clare, who then says that she thinks motherhood is "the cruelest thing in the world." Irene agrees softly, and then goes on to say that it is also the most responsible thing in the world. Irene proceeds to talk about the terrible things that could happen to Margery if John ever found out that Clare was black.

Irene, who finds purpose in her own motherhood, tells Clare to think of Margery as a reason that she should not risk John finding out about her race. Clare, however, clearly views motherhood as more of a burden than a bounty, evident when she calls motherhood "the cruelest thing in the world." Irene agrees with her, but it's not clear if this is genuine.


Zulena appears in the doorway and tells Irene that the telephone is for her, and that Hugh Wentworth is on the other end. Irene apologizes to Clare and picks up the phone in her room. Irene talks to Hugh for a few minutes and then hangs up. She explains to Clare that she was talking to Hugh about the Negro Welfare League dance, because she is on the ticket committee. Clare asks if that was "*the* Hugh Wentworth" and Irene responds affirmatively. The two women discuss Hugh's books. Clare asks if Hugh is coming to the dance, saying it is strange that "a man like that" is going to a dance for black people. Irene informs Clare that in New York, plenty of well-to-do white people spend time in Harlem.

Clare's comment that it seems strange that someone like Hugh would attend the Negro Welfare League dance speaks to how racially segregated most places in the country were in the 1920s. Irene's response, meanwhile, speaks to how Harlem was a hub for progressive thinking and cultural exchange. Larsen, herself a writer in the Harlem renaissance scene, paints a picture of Harlem in the 1920s as a vibrant center of black culture as well as a racially diverse place.

Clare asks why they come, and Irene says that some come for the reason Clare is there (to "see Negros") while others just socialize, enjoy themselves, and make money or connections. Clare says she will come to the dance too. Irene thinks to herself that Clare is a little too attractive, and she responds to her with a slight, asking if it is because "other" white people go. Clare blushes and says that she means that she would not be noticed in a crowd that big.

When Irene asks Clare if she wants to go to the Negro Welfare League because "other" white people go, Irene implies that Clare is white rather than black. Irene's question, although intended as a slight, shows how ambiguous and amorphous racial identity can be for someone like Clare.

Irene suggests that a friend of John's might be there, and Clare laughs in response, saying they needn't worry about that. Irene continues to resist Clare's begging, telling her that, as woman alone, she might be mistaken for a prostitute at the dance. Clare laughs and keeps imploring Irene, telling her that, if Irene does not invite her, she will buy a ticket and go anyway. Irene, rising from her chair and walking to the **window**, insists that she is concerned for Clare's safety and her own.

When Clare laughs at the idea that one of John's friends would be at the dance, it is clear that John is completely segregated from black people—so much so that even the friends of John's friends would not consort with anyone who is black. Larsen highlights how, outside of the progressive community of Harlem, racial segregation is still rampant and extreme.

Clare becomes upset and curses John, saying that she expects she will kill him one day. Irene dryly says that there's still capital punishment, and reminds Clare that she is mostly to blame for her situation, since she did not tell John that she is black. Irene then reminds Clare that "everything must be paid for." Clare, however, insists that Irene does not understand how desperately she wants to be a part of the black community. Irene at last gives in, and tells Clare she can come to the dance.

Clare's comment about killing John foreshadows Clare's death at the book's ending, which may or may not have been murder. Irene's comment that "everything must be paid for" reflects her sense that, since Clare benefits from white privilege when she passes, Clare must pay for those benefits by not being a part of the black community.

Irene then invites Clare to meet her sons, and together they go upstairs. Clare stands in the **doorway** and asks the boys if she can come in. Ted says yes, while Junior is quiet. Irene chastises Junior for being rude, and introduces Clare to the boys, saying she is an old friend from childhood.

In this scene, the reader might notice that, while Irene's children are present throughout the book, Larsen has never introduced Margery in person. This highlights that Margery plays a very small role in Clare's life.

Clare leaves, and Brian calls Irene to tell her he will be home late. Irene is angry that she gave into Clare's begging and invited her to the dance, especially after Brian specifically asked her not to. Moreover, she worries about the social consequences of bringing Clare. Irene thinks that Clare continues to always get what she wants. She thinks that despite her hardship, Clare seems unburdened by "uncertainty or suffering," instead remaining exactly as she is.

Brian coming home late is another indication of Irene and Brian's marital troubles. Irene refocuses this stress on Clare, thinking that Brian will be mad at her for inviting Clare. Irene continues to worry about appearances (this time social ones) as she thinks about what the social response to Clare might be.

PART 2, CHAPTER 3

The narrator opens this section by saying that Irene's memories of the dance afterward seem unimportant to her. From this frame of retrospect, the narrator lists events that Irene remembers, starting with when Irene tells Brian about the fact that Clare is coming to the Negro Welfare League dance. Brian smiles contemptuously to **mask** his annoyance.

When the narrator uses Irene's "unimportant" memories to recount the Negro Welfare League dance retrospectively, Irene's perspective becomes even more unreliable. Because of the narrative's unreliability, it is unclear if Brian is actually annoyed at Clare's presence.

The next memory is Irene coming downstairs just before the dance to find Clare standing in the living room with Brian. Clare wears a black taffeta dress and looks extremely beautiful. Irene feels plain in comparison. She then regrets that she did not tell Clare to wear something inconspicuous, in order to avoid attention that could cause her to be recognized. Irene wonders what Brian will think of Clare's showy outfit, but he does not seem concerned. Clare explains that they have introduced themselves to each other while Irene was upstairs.

Irene compares her plainness to Clare's beauty, feeling bad about her own looks. Irene obsesses over Clare's beauty, feeling both threatened and enthralled by it. Brian, on the other hand does not seem to really notice Clare's outfit. This suggests that Irene's attraction to Clare—rather than Clare's objective beauty—that makes Irene so attentive to Clare's looks.

In the car, Clare expresses her excitement, which annoys Irene. Once they are at the dance, Irene watches Clare dance with both white and black men, including with Brian. Later in the night, Irene talks with Hugh Wentworth. Together, they are watching the diverse crowd, a mix of ages, races, sizes, etc., from a box above.

Larsen's description of the crowd at the Negro Welfare League dance highlights the crowd's diversity—not just of race and skin color, but also of age, size, etc. In doing so, Larsen draws attention to how skin color is an arbitrary trait by which to segregate people.

Irene turns to Hugh and recites a nursery rhyme that speaks to the diversity of the crowd. Hugh says that it seems like "everybody" is there. He then states that he is trying to figure out the "name, status, and race" of a certain beautiful blond woman, meaning Clare. Irene explains that they are childhood friends, and that Clare had mentioned wanting to meet Hugh.

As Hugh describes trying to figure out Clare's identity including her race, the reader might wonder why, in such a diverse crowd of such progressive people, Hugh continues to see race as divided into binary and discreet categories.

Hugh remarks that Clare is dancing with more black men than white. Meanwhile, he says, all the white women in the room, including his own wife, Bianca, are dancing with black men. Irene counters that it must be because black men are better dancers than white men. Hugh disagrees, saying he thinks it's some other kind of attraction, especially to black men with very dark skin. Hugh points out one such man, Ralph Hazelton, and asks Irene if she finds him especially attractive.

Hugh's hypothesis that white women are attracted to dark-skinned black men explores the question of race and physical beauty, which Larsen has already brought up many times throughout the book. Hugh's question, and his inquiry into it, shows how deeply linked aesthetics are to the social understanding of race.

Irene says that she does not find Ralph especially handsome, and argues that she thinks the others do not either. Instead, she proposes that they feel "emotional excitement" because very dark skin is "at the opposite end of the pole from all…accustomed notions of beauty." She says that the same thing happens with black women and white men. Hugh tells Irene that he thinks her hypothesis is interesting, and says they will have to talk about it more sometime in the future. Hugh says Clare is the perfect example of Irene's theory.

Irene's suggestion that white women's attraction to dark-skinned black men is due to their deviation from tradition beauty standards offers one theory of how race and beauty affect one another. Irene acknowledges that traditional standards of beauty are not objective, but rather are affected by societal power structures. Moreover, these beauty standards can be totally inverted.

Then Hugh lights a cigarette and asks if it's true that Clare is a perfect example, implying that she might not be as white as she appears. Irene laughs and tells Hugh that he is clever, and asks what he thinks. Hugh says he cannot tell, and says that he sometimes thinks he can tell and other times he is stumped. Irene assures him that no one can just tell someone's race for certain just by looking at them.

The reader might notice that Irene's description of the emotional excitement of non-normative attraction could be read not just along racial lines, but also along gender lines— Irene's attraction to Clare might fall in this category.

Irene tells Hugh about a woman, Dorothy Thompkins, that she met several times before realizing she was white. Irene tells Hugh she can't pinpoint exactly what tipped her off. Hugh says that he understands, and that "lots of people pass all the time." Irene resists this, saying that lots of black people pass as white, but it is harder for white people to pass as black. Hugh admits he'd never thought of that.

Irene and Hugh discuss the nuances of passing. When Irene comments that it would be easier for black people to pass as white than for white people to pass as black, it is perhaps because of the strength of black community— earlier, Irene is surprised that no white people asked Clare about her family history.

At the end of the dance, Brian offers to drop Irene off first and then take Clare home. Irene tells him he does not have to do so, because Irene asked Bianca Wentworth to take her. Brian worries that Irene has told the Wentworths that Clare is black, but Irene says that she told them nothing, and that it is better for Clare to be taken home by white people anyway. Brian shrugs. The narrator ends the section by noting that, besides these select memories, the dance blurs together in Irene's mind.

Considering that this section ends with Brian's offer to drive Clare home, the reader might think that Irene is looking back on the dance after she has already begun to suspect that Brian and Clare are having an affair. This would explain why the narration ends with this memory, which could seem suspicious in retrospect.

PART 2, CHAPTER 4

Though the dance does not stand out in many respects in Irene's mind, it does mark the beginning of her friendship with Clare. After the dance, Clare often visits the Redfield household. Despite this new friendship, Irene remains ambivalent about Clare. Clare is an easy-going guest, and easily occupies herself by playing with Irene's children or talking with Irene's servants when Irene is busy. Irene thinks that Clare does not play with Margery nearly as much as with Irene's children. Irene resents Clare's presence, but cannot identify why.

Irene's sense that Clare does not spend as much time with Margery as Clare does with Ted and Junior is yet another instance in which Irene judges Clare's mothering. Irene continues to show her mixed feelings toward Clare, spending lots of time with her and admiring her beauty but also quietly resenting Clare's presence and expressing contempt and jealousy towards her.

Still, Irene does not request that Clare stop coming. Brian seems to tolerate Clare with amusement, and has stopped worrying about the potential danger Clare's presence might bring. Irene asks Brian at one point if he thinks that Clare is "extraordinarily beautiful," and Brian responds negatively, saying he prefers women with darker skin.

Irene continues to obsess over Clare's beauty, even going so far as to ask Brian what he thinks of Clare's looks. While it's possible that Brian is lying when he says he prefers darker skin, it's also possible that Irene is the one sexually attracted to Clare, not Brian.


Clare sometimes attends social events with Irene and Brian, and occasionally goes with Brian alone if Irene is busy. Clare dines at their house, but, besides her good looks, is not an especially interesting dinner guest (at least according to Irene). Clare is accepted and liked in the Redfields' social circles. Her visits are sporadic because they depend on John being absent on business. Irene, though, has stopped worrying so much about Clare being discovered.

Irene admires Clare's aesthetic value at dinner parties before disparaging her general presence at dinner. That Clare is a bad dinner guest is hard to believe, considering Irene's earlier descriptions of Clare's charm and conversational grace. Irene's narrative, clouded by jealousy, is becoming less and less reliable.

Margery, meanwhile, is already back in Switzerland for school, and Clare and John plan on returning there in the spring. The idea of going back upsets Clare, but she feels there is no way out. Irene tries to pacify Clare, reminding her that she will be happy to see Margery after so much time apart. Clare, however, responds by saying that children aren't everything, though there are plenty of people who can't see that. Then she laughs. Irene says that Clare is trying to tease her, and tells Clare that she takes being a mother very seriously. Irene insists that her devotion to her children is not something to laugh at.

In this scene, Larsen clearly shows Clare and Irene's starkly contrasting views of motherhood. Clare laughingly says that children are not "everything," which Irene takes as a personal slight. Irene's own motherhood encompasses so much of her identity that Clare's comment stings. The reader also sees the women struggle over control of humor in the scene, with Clare mocking Irene and Irene insisting that the joke is not funny.

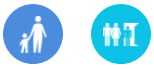
Clare changes her tone and agrees with Irene, apologizing for poking fun at her. Clare reaches out and squeezes Irene's hand, and tells her that she will never forget how good Irene has been to her. Irene tries to brush this off, but Clare insists that Irene is better than her, and explains that, unlike Irene, Clare would do anything and hurt anyone to get what she wants. Irene feels uncomfortable, and says she does not believe Clare, but cannot articulate why. Clare begins to cry.

Clare concedes to Irene and, in her apology, Clare insists that Irene is morally superior. Irene, even if she does not realize it, exemplifies the same ruthlessness that Clare identifies herself with. The scene perhaps reflects the fact that, as black women, both Irene and Clare have to struggle and sacrifice disproportionately in order to achieve their goals.

PART 3, CHAPTER 1

The narrator begins this section by describing the unseasonably warm December weather. Irene is on her way home, wishing that the season were colder, so that it would feel more like Christmas. However, Irene admits to herself that she isn't in the Christmas spirit anyway. Lately she has been suffering from a deep melancholy. Irene mounts the steps of her house and goes into the kitchen.

In this section, Larsen makes it clear that Irene's mental state has been deteriorating since the beginning of the book. It is unclear exactly what the reason for this is, but it could be any number of factors: her attraction to Clare, her worries about Ted and Junior, her marriage to Brian.



Irene asks Zulena and Sadie if there is anything to be done before guests arrive for tea, and they tell her it is all prepared. Irene is happy about this. She wishes that she weren't about to entertain company. Irene goes upstairs and gets into bed. She worries about Brian, who is moody and reserved. Irene cannot read his discontent, and thinks it has to do with his desire to move to South America. Brian's behavior confuses her, because Irene thinks that, although he seems unhappy, he acts as if he is harboring a secret pleasure. Irene thinks that Brian seems like he is waiting for something, but she cannot pinpoint what. Irene is surprised and anxious that she cannot decipher why Brian is acting so strangely.

Irene's marriage to Brian is becoming more and more strained—in fact, it's clearly toxic. Irene manipulates Brian into doing what she wants and Brian then sulks. Irene's sense that Brian is harboring a secret pleasure heavily suggests some kind of sexual transgression. Interestingly enough, Irene never thinks of her romantic or sex life in the limited third person narrative, and their relationship seems fairly chaste. Clearly, Irene harbors intense sexual anxiety.

Irene naps, exhausted from many sleepless nights of worrying. She wakes up to Brian standing next to her bed and looking at her. Brian tells Irene that it is almost four, meaning that Irene will, as usual, be late. Irene thanks him for waking her. Brian informs Irene that Clare is already downstairs, and Irene responds with annoyance, saying that she did not invite her. Irene explains that the tea party is for Hugh, and Hugh does not especially like Clare. Brian suggests that Hugh might not like Clare just because Clare has never flirted with him.

This section makes it clear that Brian also sees Clare as someone who is charged with sexual energy, and that it is not only Irene who thinks that. When Brian says Hugh does not like Clare because of her lack of sexual interest in him, the reader could imagine that Irene subconsciously dislikes Clare for the same reason— Clare has not shown sexual interest in her either.

Irene objects to and is surprised by Brian's comment. Brian says that Hugh has a godly opinion of himself, and Irene dryly corrects him, saying that Hugh thinks of himself much more highly than that.

Brian and Irene quip back and forth, using humor only somewhat effectively to dilute the tension of the conversation.

Irene lays out the clothes she is going to wear and then sits at her dressing table. Brian says nothing and stares at Irene without seeming to really see her. Irene tells Brian that Hugh prefers intelligent women, and Brian asks if Irene thinks Clare is stupid.

Larsen gives the reader another scene in which Irene is putting on makeup and picking out clothing, highlighting her vanity.

Irene says no, but that she's intelligent enough "in a purely feminine way." Brian sees this comment as somewhat catty, but Irene objects, saying that no one admires Clare's brand of intelligence, as well as her "decorative qualities," more than she does. Irene then goes on to compare Clare to Felise Freeland, who is beautiful and smart. She then says that Clare would "bore a man like Hugh to suicide," and turns the conversation back to Clare having shown up uninvited to the party.

Irene's comment that Clare is intelligent in a "purely feminine way" seems to have an underlying sexual meaning, implying that Clare uses her sex appeal cunningly to her advantage. Moreover, Irene's discussion of Clare shows how much Irene focuses on Clare's beauty and aesthetic value, which, again, could be read as profound sexual attraction.

After a moment of silence, Brian admits to having invited Clare to the party. Irene is furious, and as she speaks, her voice has a strange edge to it. She notices that Brian has tensed up. Suddenly, she suspects that Brian's strange behavior is due to the fact that Clare and Brian are having an affair.

Irene's assumption that Brian and Clare are having an affair might strike the reader as unfounded, as she has no concrete evidence of infidelity. It is possible that they are having an affair, but completely uncertain.

Irene completely changes her tune and tells Brian she is glad that Clare is coming. Brian returns downstairs. Irene tells him she will be right down, and Brian asks if she is sure it is all right that he has invited Clare. Irene waves him off, but he continues standing in the room, saying nothing, before finally leaving. Irene, although outwardly collected, is very upset about the idea that Clare and Brian could be having an affair. She looks in the mirror and tries not to cry, but finally lays her head down and weeps. When she is done crying, Irene splashes water on her face and looks at herself in the mirror. She powders her face and thinks to herself that she has been a fool.

Though Irene's suspicion is not grounded in anything specific, Irene is profoundly upset by the idea of Brian and Clare sleeping together. Irene's sadness, however, is not focused specifically on Brian's infidelity, and so the reader could read an ambiguity into the scene: is Irene distraught because Brian betrayed her or because Clare did? Finally, the reader observes Irene, always concerned with her looks, putting powder back on her face before the party.

Irene heads downstairs, where she happily busies herself with entertaining the tea guests so she does not have to think about the possibility that Brian is cheating on her with Clare. The guests make small talk, and Irene responds to questions about a decoration that Brian bought on a trip to Haiti. Irene feels profoundly exhausted. Still, she pours tea and chitchats, taking in the sounds of sociability, laughter, and teaspoons clinking against cups. The party is going successfully.

Although Irene is completely devastated by her theory about Brian and Clare, she continues with the party, keeping up appearances. The mention of the decoration that Brian brought from Haiti clues the reader in to the fact that Brian has been travelling, and thus the Redfield's martial problems may not be due to Brian's wanderlust, but to other issues.

Irene thinks this is like so many other parties she has hosted, but also so unlike them. Irene tells herself she has plenty of time later to think over her revelation that Brian might be cheating on her. Irene has an impulse to lash out and make a scene, but she does not.

Irene masks her inner turmoil at the party, as she does in many other earlier instances, by fighting with Brian, spending time with Clare, etc. Clearly Irene spends a lot of time hiding her emotions and putting on a happy face.

Instead, Irene makes small talk with Felise Freeland. Felise notes that Irene looks strained, and asks what is wrong. Irene says she is under the weather, and Felise tells her to go shopping, then asks about Irene's sons. Irene thinks that, for once, she has forgotten about them, and tells Felise they are fine. Felise tells Irene she is going to go talk with Clare, who is sitting by herself, and who she wants to invite to a party.

That Irene has forgotten about her sons "for once" speaks to how big a part of her life Ted and Junior are. It also shows the reader how distracted Irene is by her worries about Clare and Brian having an affair. Irene cannot maintain the appearance of normality, and others notice.

Felise, before leaving her, comments that Clare looks stunning. Irene agrees, and takes in Clare's fine clothes. Irene spots Hugh across the room near the bookshelves, and hopes he is not bored. Irene sees that Hugh is looking scornfully at Clare. Clare is talking with Brian, and as Irene watches them, they remind her again of her suspicion of infidelity. Irene thinks that Clare's white face looks like a **mask**, hiding her true self, while Brian, smiling, seems to be an open book. Irene looks away, but then looks back again.

Felise's kind words about Clare's looks draw Irene's attention back to Clare. Yet again, Irene obsesses over Clare's beauty, gushing about her gorgeous clothing and face. Again, this could be read as sexual attraction. When Irene describes Clare's face as a mask, Larsen suggests that passing as a white person is a kind of costuming.

Irene makes social plans with the party guests, but feels apathetic and tired. She eavesdrops on Clare talking to Dave Freeland, and hears Clare's charming compliments to Dave. Irene notes that Clare bewitches Dave, despite the fact Irene thinks Clare is stupid, and Dave is a successful novelist married to Felise.

As usual, it is hard to tell whether Irene gives an accurate portrayal of Clare. Is Clare really seducing Dave? Or is it Irene's obsession with Clare's sexuality that makes her view a polite conversation as a flirtation?

Irene thinks again about the possibility that Brian and Clare are sleeping together, and wonders what will happen to her and the boys if that is the case. Irene feels that she means nothing to Brian beyond being the mother of his children.

Irene's concern that she is nothing more than a mother to Brian shows how the notion that motherhood is the ideal role for women can be limiting and anxiety producing.

Irene, enraged at this thought, drops her teacup (whether intentionally or unintentionally it is unclear). It shatters and spills tea everywhere. Everyone in the room stops talking and looks at her. Zulena hurries to clean it up. Hugh, who is suddenly at her side, apologizes, says he must have pushed her, and asks if the cup was valuable. Irene, recovering from her emotional pain, is pridefully unhappy that Hugh has covered for her. She thinks he realizes that Irene is jealous of Clare and suspects infidelity. Irene wants to dissuade him from this suspicion, so Irene steels herself, and then turns to Hugh and tells him that he did not push her.

Irene's inner strife has boiled over: she drops her teacup, which shows her rapidly deteriorating mental health. Irene believes that Hugh, who helps her by blaming himself for the teacup breaking, suspects also that Clare and Brian are having an affair. As usual, it is difficult to tell whether or not Hugh's understanding of the situation is a figment of Irene's paranoia. Irene, always concerned with appearances, tries to throw Hugh off.

Irene says that, instead, she broke the cup on purpose because she thinks it is ugly. Irene tells Hugh it was a Confederate cup owned by Brian's great-great-granduncle. Hugh nods, and Irene wonders if she has convinced him. Irene, forcing herself to laugh, tells Hugh that she will let him take the blame and say he pushed her so Brian won't be mad.

Irene says that that she broke the cup because it is a Confederate cup, effectively suggesting that she dislikes it as an object that is aesthetically ugly and represents racism. Irene uses her commitment to racial equality as a smokescreen to mask her emotional state.

Irene makes small talk with Clare, which the narrator tells using only conversation fragments spoken by Irene. The clock chimes, and Irene is surprised that only an hour has passed. Irene bids everyone goodbye. She is in tremendous amounts of emotional pain, but decides that it does not matter as long as no one suspects as she does that Brian and Clare are having an affair.

Irene's conviction that it does not matter if Brian and Clare are having an affair as long as no one knows speaks to Irene's obsession with correct appearances. It's clear that this superficiality causes Irene anxiety and makes Irene repress any thoughts that she deems unsavory or abnormal.

PART 3, CHAPTER 2

Although in the previous section Irene thinks that she can live with Brian and Clare's (unsubstantiated) affair, and it does not matter, the narrator states in this section that it does in fact matter. Irene mulls over Brian's impulse to move to a different country and sees his supposed affair with Clare as the result of his restlessness. Irene tries to forget about the idea that they are sleeping together, but she cannot.

Clearly, Irene's efforts to repress her feelings about the alleged affair do not work. In this section, Irene links Brian's desire to move away from the United State to sexual desire for Clare. Irene feels she cannot satisfy Brian's libido, and obsesses over the idea of him and Clare together.

Still, Irene remembers, she has no real evidence of this alleged affair, only suspicion. Irene tries to dispel the suspicion from her mind, thinking of the fact that Brian has never cheated on her before, so she should not assume he is doing so now. Irene wonders why Brian inviting Clare has caused her to be so jealous and suspicious. Anyway, Irene thinks, if they are having an affair, Brian would not leave her because of their children and John Bellew. Yet despite her reassurances to herself, Irene continues to worry.

Irene tries to remember that the affair is not actually proven, reminding the reader of her own unreliability in the process. Irene's obsession with the idea of their affair could be understood as an inappropriate manifestation of her own desire for Clare, as she imagines and reimagines Brian and Clare together sexually.

Christmas comes and goes, and Irene is happy that it was so busy, because it kept her from thinking too much about Brian and Clare. Irene is also happy that Clare has not been around much because John was home for the holiday. Brian, meanwhile, is withdrawn and sullen. Though his habits have not changed and he continues to sleep in the room next to Irene's every night, he is very distant from her.

Here, the narrator clues the reader into the celibacy of Irene and Brian's marriage when she notes that Irene and Brian sleep in separate rooms. Again, Larsen never portrays Brian and Irene doing anything remotely sexual— the only kisses in the novel are when Clare kisses Irene.

Irene tells herself that Brian's behavior is not necessarily because of Clare, but she wishes it were Spring already, when Clare will be on her way back to Europe. Irene looks forward to having Clare gone from her life, and hopes something will make that day come sooner—even, she thinks, if it involves Margery getting sick or dying, or John discovering Clare's black ancestry.

Irene fantasizes that Clare could be removed from Irene's life for dark reasons, which reflects Irene's progressively worsening mental state. Though Irene often condescendingly reminds Clare of her duty to Margery, Irene doesn't hesitate to wish for Margery's death in order to remove Clare.

Irene entertains the idea of telling John that Clare is black in order to get Clare out of her life. However, Irene feels that, out of loyalty to Clare as a fellow black woman, she cannot tell John. Irene is caught between loyalty to her race and loyalty to herself. She begins to wish, for the first time in her life, that she were not black. Irene thinks that she suffers enough as an individual and as a woman, let alone suffering as a black person. But despite her loyalty, Irene still wishes that John would find out somehow that Clare is spending time in Harlem. Irene thinks that this discovery would be enough to get Clare out of her life forever.

Irene professes that her refusal to tell John about Clare's black ancestry is due to racial loyalty. Clearly, Irene cares greatly about advancing black people as a group. Irene feels torn between her own desires and protecting Clare as a fellow black woman. It's possible, also, that this racial loyalty is layered with loyalty to Clare because of Irene's feelings of love or lust toward her, which are less palatable to Irene than racial solidarity.


PART 3, CHAPTER 3

The next day, coincidentally, Irene runs into John on the street. It is a cold day and Irene is with Felise Freeland downtown. As they turn a corner, they collide with John. John recognizes Irene, smiles, and holds out his hand to shake. However, his smile fades when he sees that Irene is with Felise, who he recognizes as black. Irene does not take John's hand, and instead looks at him as if she does not know him. Then she walks past John, pulling Felise along.

In this moment, the potential danger of passing comes to fruition as Irene, walking with Felise, runs into John Bellew, and John realizes she is not white. That John realizes Irene is black because of Felise emphasizes how profoundly perceptions of race are shaped through environment and relationships to other people.

Felise dryly asks Irene if she has been passing, and says that her presence revealed Irene's secret. Irene solemnly agrees. Felise, recognizing that Irene did not take that as a joke, says that Irene seems to care a lot that she was recognized, and apologizes. Irene tells Felise that she has only ever passed before to get into restaurants and cinemas, never in social situations, except in front of John. Felise asks Irene to tell her the story behind it, but Irene insists she cannot.

Felise clearly means her teasing Irene about passing to be a joke, but Irene, fully understanding the danger of the situation for Clare, does not take it that way. Again, Larsen shows how asymmetry of knowledge can make jokes take on entirely different meanings and implications than intended.


Felise becomes distracted by a coat she admires. Meanwhile, Irene thinks about the fact that, if she had introduced John to Felise, John might realize that Clare has been spending time in Harlem and take her away. Irene thinks that it was her racial loyalty that kept her from betraying Clare. Irene wonders why she couldn't let go of this loyalty, and separate Clare from their race. Irene tells Felise she is going to go home, and Felise decides to continue shopping.

Irene continues to feel conflicted about her loyalty to Clare, questioning the meaning of racial solidarity. Irene sees racial loyalty as something that comes in conflict with individual fulfillment. The reader sees this tension in the act of passing—by passing, a person can attain personal privilege, neglecting other members of their race in the process.

Irene wonders if she should tell Clare that she has run into John, since, although Irene did not betray Clare, he still might be suspicious. However, Irene convinces herself that getting in touch with Clare would be too difficult, and that there is nothing they could do about it. Irene feels satisfied that she might be rid of Clare in the end anyway.

Irene, unable to actively betray Clare as a fellow black woman, but unwilling to actively help Clare by warning her of the run-in with John, chooses to do nothing. Irene, forever censoring her thoughts, convinces herself it would be too difficult to contact Clare.

Still, Irene plans to tell Brian about running into John. But that evening, each time she has the opportunity to say something to him, Irene hesitates and stays quiet. The whole evening passes without Irene telling Brian, and she wonders why she doesn't. Irene tries to read, but is too distracted. She wonders what might happen if John divorces Clare, and thinks that it "if Clare were free" it would be the worst outcome. Irene then begins to imagine what would happen if Clare were to die, though she knows it is a bad train of thought.

Irene imagines that, if Clare and John divorced, Clare would potentially ruin her marriage to Brian and thus disrupt her entire family and way of life. This shows how she values Brian more for the structure he provides in her life than for the love he gives her or she gives him. Again, Irene fantasizes about Clare's death, showing how mentally unwell Irene is by this point in the novel.

Irene hears the door open downstairs and knows Brian has gone out. She feels like she is going to cry but cannot. Irene lays in her bed, awake, thinking about her life with Brian and all their memories together. Irene realizes that, above all, she wants to keep her routine with him, and worries that Clare will ruin it. Irene prays that March, when Clare will leave, will come soon. She falls asleep.

Irene presumably takes Brian's leaving as a sign that he is going to meet up with Clare. That Irene is in her bed as she ponders Brian and Clare's potential affair highlights how Irene's anxiety surrounding her marriage and Clare might be due to her sexual anxieties.

PART 3, CHAPTER 4

The next day, Irene eats breakfast with Brian in near silence. Then she watches the snow falling out the window until Zulena tells Irene that Clare is on the phone and wants to speak with her. Irene asks Zulena to take a message, and continues to stare out the window. She wonders if John has confronted Clare about running into Irene on the street, and if Clare is calling to tell her about it. When Zulena comes back, she tells Irene that Clare called to tell her she will be going with Irene and Brian to the Freelands' house that night. Irene thanks Zulena for the information.

Irene and Brian's silence at breakfast shows how tense their marriage has become. Meanwhile, Irene's run-in with John is still on her mind, and when Clare calls, it is the first thing Irene thinks of. The phone call might invite the reader to ask themselves why Irene has not asked Brian about the alleged affair, and why Irene continues to consent to Clare's presence.

After a slow day, Brian, Irene, and their children eat dinner together. Brian tells Irene about a lynching he read about in the newspaper. Ted asks why only black people are lynched, and Brian says it is because the people lynching them hate black people. Irene exclaims "Brian!", imploring him to not say such things in front of the children.

This section reminds the reader that, although Harlem is a very progressive community where white and black people comingle amicably, most of 1920s America was a hotbed for racial violence against black Americans.

Brian ignores her, however, and when Ted asks why they hate black people, Brian explains that they are afraid of them. Irene tries to cut Brian off, and Brian tells Ted that he will tell him about it some other time, when Irene is not there. Ted says they can talk about it on the way to school, and Brian agrees. Irene says "Brian!" again, and Junior points out that that is the third time she has done so.

When Ted asks about the lynching he read about in the newspaper and wants to understand why some people hate black people, Brian clearly thinks that the best way to address this painful subject is to confront it head on. Irene, meanwhile, seems to disagree, wanting to protect Ted.

Once the boys have gone back upstairs, Irene tells Brian that she wishes he would not talk about lynching in front of Ted and Junior, at least not until they are older. Brian vehemently disagrees that they should wait to address such things. He says that since they have to live in the United States, the boys should know what kinds of dangers they will face as black men. Irene disagrees, wanting them to have happy childhoods free of racial prejudice.

Irene expresses her discontent with Brian's way of handling Ted's questions about racial violence; she seems to think that her sons are too young to talk about it. Brian, meanwhile, says that they need to understand the danger they face in the US, heavily implying that they should have moved to Brazil.

Brian, however, thinks this is impossible. He reminds Irene of how they tried to keep their children from learning the word "nigger," and then the children learned it anyway when someone called Junior "a dirty nigger." Irene continues to insist that they not discuss racism in the house, and Brian continues to insist that they must. Brian calls Irene's view "stupid."

Brian recounts trying to keep the racist slur "nigger" from his children, only to witness someone use the word to address his son. Larsen conveys the particular heartbreak that black parents face in preparing their children for the hate they will inevitably experience.

Irene asks rhetorically if it is stupid to want her children to be happy. Brian asserts that it is stupid if being happy will impede the children from preparing properly for the life ahead of them. He reminds Irene that they would not have the same future to prepare for if the family had moved to Brazil together like Brian had wanted to. Brian tells Irene "don't expect me to give up everything." Irene is silent, and Brian leaves the room.

Irene and Brian clearly have very different parenting styles. Irene wants to protect her children from the outside world and create a safe, loving environment, while Brian feels that keeping the outside world at bay is impossible, and it is better to teach their children how to handle living in a racist country.

Irene sits shivering alone in the dining room, wondering what Brian meant when he said "don't expect me to give up everything." She thinks he might have meant Clare. She tries to talk herself down from this idea. Irene remembers that Clare will soon be at the house, and that she must start getting ready. Irene rises from her chair and goes upstairs to dress. As she gets ready, she wonders again why she did not tell Brian about running into John, and the narrator notes that she will not admit to herself the real reason.

Irene immediately thinks that Brian is talking about Clare when he tells Irene not to expect him to give up everything. To the reader, however, it seems more likely that Brian is telling Irene not to expect him to give over all parenting choices to her. Irene chalks up all of their marital problems to the supposed affair between Clare and Brian, rather than their own incompatibility.

Clare arrives at the house, looking beautiful, while Irene is still getting dressed. Clare kisses Irene on the shoulder and Irene shrinks away from her touch. Clare tells Irene that John is unexpectedly in Philadelphia, which is why she ended up being able to come to the party at Felise's. Irene expresses concern that Philadelphia is not too far away. She thinks about telling Clare that she ran into John on the street but does not. Clare laughs and says Philadelphia is far enough for her.

Again, the reader sees Irene basking in Clare's beauty. Moreover, for the third time in the novel, Clare kisses Irene. When Irene shrinks away from Clare's touch, it could be because of Irene's anger at Clare for the affair she believes is going on. Alternatively, Irene could be struggling with her own repressed desire for Clare.

Irene, feeling guilty, covers her eyes with her hand so she does not have to look at herself in the mirror. She then asks Clare if she has thought about what it would mean for her if John ever found out the truth. Clare says "yes," and smiles. Clare's response fills Irene with dread, and she asks her to say more. Clare, slouched in her chair, responds that she would move to Harlem to live. Irene asks what she would do about Margery, and Clare responds that if it weren't for Margery, she would have left John already. Clare then asks Irene if John divorcing her "lets [her] out." Irene, still paranoid about the possibility that Clare is having an affair with Brian, reads Clare's words as a veiled threat.

Irene is concerned about what would happen if Clare and John divorced— would Clare pursue Brian, breaking up Irene's marriage? Or, if Irene is secretly attracted to Clare, how would she process this desire with Clare now unattached? Irene, who values security and routine above all, cannot picture the consequences for herself should Clare end her marriage. Irene begs Clare to think of Margery, but Clare seems to think of her daughter only as an obstacle to her return to the black community.

Irene is determined not to reveal her thoughts and worries to Clare. She tells Clare to go downstairs and talk to Brian. As Clare gets up and goes downstairs, Irene realizes that it is a good thing to send Clare downstairs, since she will not bother her. Anyway, Irene thinks, it does not make a difference if Clare and Brian spend more time together, considering everything that Irene is convinced has already happened between them.

The fact that Irene does not mind leaving Brian and Clare alone together, despite her conviction that they are having an affair, seems somewhat strange. Again, it seems as if Irene is distilling her other anxieties into the idea that Clare and Brian are sleeping together.

At this point, Irene acknowledges that she is completely certain that Clare and Brian are having an affair, and that she is beyond trying to convince herself otherwise. Irene realizes that now that she is totally convinced, she is no more upset than she was before. Irene wonders if it is because she has already endured so much fear and humiliation, but decides that is not it. Irene thinks about the word "security," and wonders if she can only obtain it by giving up love and happiness. Irene cannot answer these questions, but knows that, to her, security is the most important thing.

Irene describes her greatest desire as "security" and discusses the possibility that her commitment to achieving security has prevented her from experiencing real love and happiness. Irene's desire for security manifests itself in a profound need for control—over Brian, over how she raises her children, over every aspect of her life. Clare is the only person in the book that Irene truly has no control over, and it terrifies her.

Irene feels relieved to have realized this, and returns to plotting how she can achieve that security and ensure that Brian will stay with her and that they will not move to Brazil. Irene thinks both she and Brian belong in America, and that Brian's duty is to her and their sons. Irene wonders if Brian is anything more to her than the roles he fulfills in her life as her husband and the father of her children.

The reader can see how what Irene describes as "security" is, in fact, micro-managing when she proceeds to plot how to preserve her relationship with Brian. Irene thinks of their parenthood as the reason that they need to stay together, and she worries about her role in his life.

Regardless, though, Irene is resolved that she will make sure Brian stays with her, despite the fact that she now wholeheartedly believes Brian and Clare are having an affair. Irene thinks it is better to share him and close her eyes than lose him completely. Irene realizes that she has withheld the fact that she ran into John for fear that Clare would leave John and then "anything might happen." Irene pauses her dressing routine, thinking of the day when Clare told her she would stop at nothing to get what she wants, and thinks that Clare will give up anything (money, Margery) to get Brian. Irene decides she must not tell Clare or Brian about meeting John, and will do whatever it takes to keep John from discovering the truth about Clare.

Irene, in a moment of self-awareness, begins to see all of her choices as actions intended to preserve her routine and security. As Irene considers Clare, it becomes clear to the reader how different the two women are. Clare is willing to sacrifice almost anything (including her daughter) for intimacy (Irene thinks with Brian, but Clare certainly also wants to be close again with the black community). Meanwhile, Irene is determined to keep her life exactly as it is, even if it means staying in a loveless marriage.

After a page break, Brian, Clare, and Irene are arriving at the party at the Freelands'. Brian asks Clare if she has ever been up to the sixth floor of a building, and Clare says of course—she and John live on the seventeenth. Brian asks if she has ever walked up. Clare laughs and tells him to ask Irene, who knows that as a child Clare used to walk up the stairs to her apartment.

Brian and Clare clearly enjoy a friendly relationship, joking around with each other as Brian teases Clare about her wealth and the fact that she only uses the elevator. While their joking shows their amicable relationship, it also excludes Irene, who sullenly walks along with them.

Clare asks why Felise lives on the sixth floor, and Irene responds that Felise says it discourages visitors. They discuss Felise's choice and the apartment's garden as they walk through the grounds to the building. Irene believes she feels chemistry between Clare and Brian. Irene and Clare each hold onto one of Brian's arms. Irene points out the entrance, and Brian jokes that Clare should be careful not to get tired on the fourth floor, because no one will carry her up the last two flights. Irene snaps "don't be silly!"

As Irene, Brian, and Clare all walk to Felise's apartment, Irene's thoughts are dark. Both women hold onto each of Brian's arms, physically representing the competition that Irene sees between them. When Brian and Clare continue joking, Irene clearly does not think it is funny, and views the pair's humorous rapport as threatening.

The narrative resumes once the party is in full swing, describing how Dave and Felise are excellent hosts, Brian is witty (even biting, according to Irene), and Ralph Hazelton is an excellent conversationalist. Irene, however, is not happy. Someone asks Irene what the matter is, and jokingly inquires if she has taken a vow not to laugh. Irene responds that she is stunned by everyone else's excellent conversation. Dave Freeland offers her a drink, and Irene asks for a ginger ale and scotch.

At the party, as everyone else amuses themselves, Irene is gloomy. Larsen shows how humor, rather than doing away with—or at least masking—discontent, reveals how upset Irene is. The idea that Irene has taken a vow not to laugh, although exaggerated, feels somewhat true, since Irene's commitment to her hard-won security means leading a fairly joyless life.

Irene asks if she can open a **window**, because the room is hot. She does so. Outside the snow has stopped and night has fallen. Irene throws her cigarette out the window and watches it fall. Someone turns on music, and Irene thinks it is too noisy. Dave approaches Irene with her drink, and warns her not to stand by the window or she will catch a cold. He takes her arm and leads her across the room, where they take seats.

Irene opens the window through which Clare will later fall to her death. That Irene opened the window makes the possibility of Irene's role in Clare's death even more suspicious, as the reader wonders if, subconsciously, Irene is slowly putting the pieces in place for Clare's demise.

The doorbell rings, and Felise answers it. Irene then hears John Bellew's voice, and Felise responds that John's wife is not there. John yells that she *is* there, and that he knows she is with the Redfields. He tells Felise to stand out of the way. Brian says that he is Redfield, and asks what is wrong with John. John enters the room and walks toward Clare. Clare, meanwhile, backs away from him. John calls Clare a "nigger." At the sound of the slur, the men in the room jump up, and Felise warns John that he is the only white man in the room.

John's presence and all the terrifying racism that he represents, immediately change the tone of the party. The racism behind John's words throughout the book reaches its inevitable conclusion. All the violence that Irene suspected was underlying his speech is on full display: John makes explicit the violence that is implicit in the casual use of racist slurs and thoughts.

Clare stands by the **window**, surprisingly composed and smiling slightly. Her smile infuriates Irene, who runs across the room and touches Clare's arm. She desperately thinks that Clare cannot be free of John. John meanwhile, is speechless. The next thing Irene knows, Clare is gone, and, later, Irene does not allow herself to remember what happened. John gasps and calls out for Clare, calling her "Nig."

Irene, seeing this moment as one that will precipitate Clare and John's divorce, panics. It is unclear whether Irene pushed Clare out the window or whether Clare fell on her own. Meanwhile, John's use of the racial slur "nig" as his wife falls to her death is positively grotesque.

Everyone except Irene rushes downstairs. Irene sits down and processes the fact that Clare has fallen out the **window**. Irene is shocked, and wonders if the others think Clare has fallen, or committed suicide, or that Irene has pushed her. Irene does not even know whether she did push Clare or not. She mutters to herself that it was a terrible accident. People are coming back up the stairs, and Irene shuts herself in the bedroom.

Irene's own uncertainty about how exactly Clare fell reflects how extremely unreliable Irene is as a narrator. The fact that Clare died by falling through a window, moreover, is significant, and seems to represent the potential danger of passing from "inside" a group to "outside."

Irene wonders if she should have stayed so long upstairs, or if she should rejoin the others. She wonders what questions they will ask her. Irene feels cold. She listens to the voices outside. Irene then wonders if she should put on her coat. Irene gathers Brian's coat and opens the bedroom door. She finds the apartment empty and goes downstairs.

Irene expresses concern about whether her behavior after Clare fell indicates her guilty conscience or her utter shock. After recovering, Irene goes downstairs to face the loss of Clare, and all the things that means for her.

Irene wonders what she will say once she gets to the bottom, and worries she will look suspicious because she did not go downstairs with the rest of them. Irene panics when she thinks that it is possible that Clare might not be dead, and feels sick at the idea that her beautiful body might be permanently injured. Finally, Irene arrives at the bottom of the steps, where all the other partygoers are gathered in a circle. Irene braces herself emotionally.

That Irene is upset at the idea that Clare might not be dead, but rather permanently injured, shows Irene's continued interest in Clare's physical form. Specifically, Irene describes Clare's body as beautiful as she worries, displaying again the possibility that Irene's aesthetic obsession with Clare is a sexual one.

Dave announces that Irene is there, and says that they had all concluded that she had fainted. Felise leans on Dave, looking sick. Irene walks to Brian, who looks deeply upset. Irene asks if Clare is dead, not managing to completely get the words out, and Felise responds that Clare's death seems to have been instant. Irene starts to sob, feeling "thankfulness," and Brian tries to comfort her. Ralph Hazelton comments that Clare must have fainted. Brian repeats, "it's impossible!" Dave ask Irene what she saw, since she was right next to Clare when she fell.

As Irene sobs from "thankfulness," it is unclear exactly why. Certainly, Irene is relieved that Clare is dead. But is it because she is afraid Clare would have stolen Brian from her, disrupting her life? Is it because Clare forced her to confront her own lack of intimacy in her marriage, and with her gone, Irene can go back to blissful ignorance? Or is it because Irene could not handle her desire for Clare?

An official (perhaps a police man) asks Irene if she is sure Clare fell, or if it is possible that John pushed her. Irene notices that Bellew is absent from the scene. Irene insists that John did not push her and she is sure that Clare fell. Irene begins to moan, and then faints. When she comes to, she hears a man's voice saying that Clare died a "death of misadventure," and telling the group that they should go have a look at the **window**.

The disembodied voice commenting on Clare's death suggests that Clare died because of a "misadventure." Is this misadventure passing? Or adultery? Was Clare pushed? The ending leaves the reader with more questions than answers, rendering the narration unreliable to the very end.

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