

The following slides are by Cassandra Schiffman.

The background features abstract, organic shapes in yellow, blue, and red. A stylized blue figure with a yellow circular head is positioned at the top center.

Early Twentieth Century Fiction

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October 15, 2025. *Passing* (Part One).

Will we ever reach the lighthouse?

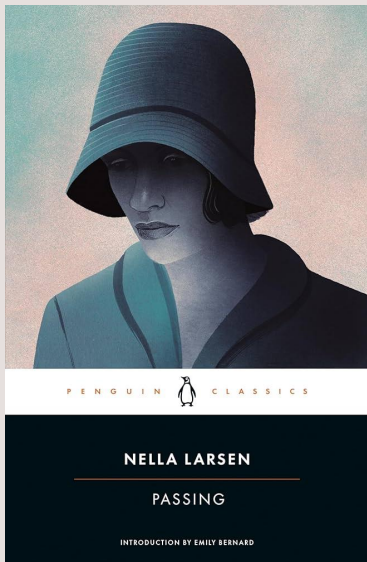
- **Women's authorship:** Woolf as “the only woman in England free to write what I like”; *To the Lighthouse* as a novel that ultimately centers Lily's artistic work over masculinist ideals; Mrs. Ramsay as the one who gets to say “life stand still here,” at least in theory
- **Revelations of [???]:** moments of epiphany in “The Lighthouse” that don't quite crystallize; abstraction as an artistic technique that shows us impressions and pieces rather than a whole; what does it mean to make Mrs. Ramsay abstract?
- **Adding The Lighthouse:** the titular lighthouse as “flair” rather than content in Lily's painting; a few words on how this novel ends...
 - Why does the lighthouse loom so large? Who gets to go to the lighthouse? Why?

The background is a light gray color. It is decorated with several abstract, colorful shapes. In the top left, there is a blue shape resembling a hand or a flower. In the top center, there is a red circular shape. In the top right, there is a blue circular shape. In the middle right, there is a yellow circular shape. In the bottom left, there is a blue shape. In the bottom center, there is a yellow shape. In the bottom right, there is a blue shape resembling a hand or a flower. There are also some thin, yellow, wavy lines scattered across the background.

**What kind of
“thing” is a title?**

A lighthouse by any other name...

- Recall Genette: “...but this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, **a title**, a preface, illustrations” (*Paratexts*, 1, emphasis added).
- As paratexts, titles help to “present” a text to its readers + shape how the text is received; in practice, titles serve as...
 - **Marketing devices** that tell us something about a text’s genre + expected audience (i.e. *Calculus for Dummies*, *A Child’s Garden of Poems*, “Love in a Penthouse”)
 - **Summarizing devices** that offer a snapshot of a text’s content (i.e. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, *The Bread Bible*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*)
 - **Artistic/stylistic devices** that have some thematic relationship to the content of a text that we must uncover (i.e. *The Awakening*, *Passing*, *Normal People*)
- **Why is the novel we just read called *To The Lighthouse*?**



Why is this novel called *Passing*?

The background is a light gray color with several abstract, colorful shapes scattered around. There are blue hand-like shapes, yellow circles, red circles, and blue and yellow irregular shapes. Some shapes are outlined in yellow, while others are solid colors.

Let's start here:
[https://www.libraries.
rutgers.edu/databases](https://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/databases)

Passing, per the *OED*...

IV.8. The fact of being accepted, or presenting oneself successfully, as a member of another ethnic or religious group, or (later also) as being of a gender which does not correspond to one's sex registered at birth. See [pass v. IX.43d](#).

1926–

1.a. Of time, or things bound or measured by time: that passes away or elapses; that is in the process of passing away; transient, fleeting; ephemeral.

1340–

1.1.a. Originally: dying, death. Subsequently also more widely: the action of ceasing to exist or coming to an end; an instance of this. Cf. [to pass away at pass v. Phrasal verbs PV.1](#).

c1350–

†**passing of death** (in quot. [c1350](#)): (perhaps) dissolution of death.

See *pass* v.IX.43d...

IX.43.d. *intransitive*. To be accepted as or believed to be, or to represent oneself successfully as, a member of an ethnic or religious group other than one's own, esp. one having higher social status; *spec.* (of a person of black ancestry in a racially segregated society) to be accepted as white. Later also: to be regarded, or to present oneself successfully, as being of a gender which does not correspond to one's sex registered at birth.

1929-

1929 'I see. They were "passing" too.' 'No. They weren't. They were white.'

N. Larsen, *Passing* ii. ii. 38 ...

Passing as [what]?

IV.8. The fact of being accepted, or presenting oneself successfully, as a member of another ethnic or religious group, or (later also) as being of a gender which does not correspond to one's sex registered at birth. See [pass v. IX.43d](#).

1926–

As if aware of her desire and her hesitation, Clare remarked thoughtfully: “You know, ‘Rene, I’ve often wondered why more coloured girls like you and Margaret Hammond and Esther Dawson and—oh, lots of others—never ‘passed’ over. It’s a frightfully easy thing to do. If one’s the type, all that’s needed is a little nerve.” (*Passing*, 16)

Passing as white:

- The 1920s mark a moment of increased visibility for African American art and cultural production against a backdrop of codified racial discrimination and violence
 - Southern Jim Crow laws and the doctrine of “separate but equal” enforce legal/de jure segregation in public spaces
 - Extralegal/de facto segregation exists throughout the country, even in Northern urban spaces like New York and Chicago (and persists to this day)
 - Anti-miscegenation laws forbidding interracial marriages are common and won’t be deemed unconstitutional until 1967
- Narratives of “passing” also reflect a pervasive cultural anxiety about what race *is* in the 20th C. United States
 - Legal standards generally adhere to the “one drop rule,” which classifies individuals with any Black or mixed-race heritage whatsoever as African American
 - Social standards are rarely so clear-cut, as race is often defined by characteristics inscribed on the body



Still from *Show Boat* (1936) depicting white actress Helen Morgan as Julie La Verne, a biracial performer ‘passing’ as white who loses her job when her ‘true’ racial identity and her violation of miscegenation laws are exposed

Race as (mis)recognition

Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?

Absurd! Impossible! 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, finger-nails, 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 gipsy. 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 (*Passing*, 8).

Putting a name to the face

Irene studied the lovely creature standing beside her for some clue to her identity. Who could she be? Where and when had they met? And through her perplexity there came the thought that the trick which her memory had played her was for some reason more gratifying than disappointing to her old acquaintance, that she didn't mind not being recognized (*Passing*, 9).

Passing as seduction?

IV.8. The fact of being accepted, or presenting oneself successfully, as a member of another ethnic or religious group, or (later also) as being of a gender which does not correspond to one's sex registered at birth. See [pass v. IX.43d](#).

1926-

She'd done it again. Allowed Clare Kendry to persuade her into promising to do something for which she had neither time nor any special desire. What was it about Clare's voice that was so appealing, so very seductive? Clare met her in the hall with a kiss...And under her potent smile a part of Irene's annoyance with herself fled. She was even a little glad that she had come (*Passing*, 22, emphasis added).

Discussion:

What are some ways we might characterize Irene's relationship with Clare in Part One of *Passing*? What sorts of things does Irene notice, judge, or remember about Clare (and vice versa)? Identify a passage that helps us to describe this interpersonal dynamic, paying particular attention to who focalizes the surrounding scene and what action/interaction takes place.

Where to look?

Clare, it gave Irene a little prick of satisfaction to recall, hadn't got that [self-assurance] by passing herself off as white. She herself had always had it. Just as she'd always had that pale gold hair...Her lips, painted a brilliant geranium-red, were sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate. A tempting mouth...And the eyes were magnificent! dark, sometimes absolutely black, always luminous, and set in long, black lashes...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 (*Passing*, 19-20).

Authorship + Race: Nella Larsen

- Born in Chicago, IL in 1891; died in New York, NY in 1964
- Trained as a nurse, although she works as a librarian at the New York Public Library for much of her writing career
- Author of a handful of short stories and two short novels (*Quicksand* and *Passing*) now associated with the Harlem Renaissance
- Retreats from literary life in the 1930s and works as a nurse in relative obscurity for the rest of her life
- Of mixed-race heritage herself, much like the protagonists of both of her published novels; married to Elmer Imes, one of the first African American students to receive a PhD in physics in the US



A novel of the city?

- Larsen is both socially and artistically affiliated with the Harlem Renaissance, a moment of intense cultural production in a wide range of artistic modes conventionally associated with the African American community in 1920s + 1930s Harlem (a neighborhood in Manhattan)
 - Happening alongside/informed by + informs many of the historical contexts we've already discussed (Modernism, WW1, the Great Depression, the rise of early feminist sentiment, post-war consumer culture, and more)
- In literary circles, the Harlem Renaissance is marked by formal experimentation that looks different from the experimental work done contemporaneously by Modernist writers like Joyce or Woolf (or does it?)
 - *Passing* crystallizes a push to trouble conventional understandings of temporality and focalization, which impact the structure of the narrative down to the most basic progression of events

Is time passing?

1.a. Of time, or things bound or measured by time: that passes away or elapses; that is in the process of passing away; transient, fleeting; ephemeral.

1340-

And how deliberately she had— Irene brought her thoughts back to the present, to the letter from Clare Kendry she still held unopened in her hand. With a little feeling of apprehension, she very slowly cut the envelope, drew out the folded sheets, spread them, and began to read (*Passing*, 3).

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Forms of time, space, and place

- Stylistically, Larsen's prose echoes (or potentially *absorbs*) the confusion, ambiguity, and obfuscation that characterize Irene's view of the world
 - Consequence of focalization? Or a representation of what life is "really like" à la Woolf?
- Pay attention to sensory details, visual textures, and figurative language throughout

It was while she was on her way to a sixth place that right before her smarting eyes a man toppled over and became an inert crumpled heap on the scorching cement. About the lifeless figure a little crowd gathered. Was the man dead, or only faint? someone asked her. But Irene didn't know and didn't try to discover. She edged her way out of the increasing crowd, feeling disagreeably damp and sticky and soiled from contact with so many sweating bodies (*Passing*, 4, emphasis added).

‘Forms’ of passing:

This is what Irene Redfield remembered.

Chicago. August. A brilliant day, hot, with a brutal staring sun pouring down rays that were like molten rain. A day on which the very outlines of the buildings shuddered as if in protest at the heat. Quivering lines sprang up from baked pavements and wriggled along the shining car-tracks. The automobiles parked at the kerbs were a dancing blaze, and the glass of the shop-windows threw out a blinding radiance. Sharp particles of dust rose from the burning sidewalks, stinging the seared or dripping skins of wilting pedestrians. What small breeze there was seemed like the breath of a flame fanned by slow bellows (*Passing*, 4).

Passing as [ending]?

I.1.a. Originally: dying, death. Subsequently also more widely: the action of ceasing to exist or coming to an end; an instance of this. Cf. *to pass away* at **pass v.** Phrasal verbs PV.1.

c1350–

†**passing of death** (in quot. c1350): (perhaps) dissolution of death.

As you finish the novel for next Monday's class, keep the title of *Passing* in mind in as many senses as possible! What is this text's relationship with time/temporality? What is the text's relationship with truth?

Also: please submit your papers by 10pm tomorrow (10/16) on Canvas, and get in touch sooner rather than later if difficulties arise!

