Research Seminar in English Literature:  
Nella Larsen’s 『Passing』  
Terms 1-2, 2020

Course description
Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* was highly praised when it was released in 1929, but later fell into obscurity and was long out of print. Scholars have since drawn attention to the novel as a key text of 1920s American literature, which deals with important themes around race, sexuality, class, and identity.

In Term 1 we will close read Larsen’s novel over six weeks, paying close attention to the language, characterization, and other aspects of the novel.

In Term 2 we will look at critical texts on the novel. The focus each week will be on one of the themes of the novel. Readings will include contemporary reviews, correspondence, scholarly essays, and other short critical works which address that week’s theme.

Learning objectives and outcomes
By the end of this course, students should be confident in their understanding of the novel and in their ability to engage in literary analysis of the novel’s major themes. Students will also have developed skills transferable to the study of other works of literature.

This course is intended to develop students’ ability to:
- Identify literary qualities such as characterisation, plot, and tone.
- Read literature in English with confidence and fluency.
- Think critically about different uses of written English.
- Empathise with cultures, nationalities, and identities different to their own.
- Place works of literature within a broader historical and cultural context.

Textbooks
There is one required book. To ensure our page numbers match in class discussions, please try to acquire the following edition:


Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reading due</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>24-Apr</td>
<td>Course introduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1-May</td>
<td>『Passing』 Part 1</td>
<td>• Chapters 1 and 2 (pages 1-32)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>8-May</td>
<td>『Passing』 Part 1</td>
<td>• Chapters 3 and 4 (pages 33-48)</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>15-May</td>
<td>『Passing』 Part 2</td>
<td>• Chapters 1 and 2 (pages 51-74)</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>22-May</td>
<td>『Passing』 Part 2</td>
<td>• Chapters 3 and 4 (pages 75-84)</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>29-May</td>
<td>『Passing』 Part 3</td>
<td>• Chapters 1 and 2 (pages 87-101)</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>5-Jun</td>
<td>『Passing』 Part 3</td>
<td>• Chapters 3 and 4 (pages 103-120)</td>
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• “Nella Larsen’s Harlem Aesthetic” (1989) by Thadious M. Davis |
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<th>Date</th>
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<th>Assignments</th>
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| 9  | 26-Jun| The veil of race and “double consciousness” | • Chapter 1, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by W.E.B. Du Bois  
• Review of *Passing* (1929) by Du Bois  
• Video, “The Double Consciousness of a Dark Body” (2018) on the website of *The Atlantic* |
| 10 | 3-Jul | Class and class conflict                   | • “Clare Kendry’s ‘True Colors’: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” (1992) by Jennifer DeVere Brody |
| 11 | 10-Jul| Sexuality                                  | • “Black Female Sexuality in *Passing*” (1986) by Deborah E. McDowell         |
| 12 | 17-Jul| Domesticity and tragedy                    | • “Race, Gender, and Space in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” (2015) by Margaret Gillespie |
• Selected contemporary newspaper articles on the Rhinelander/Jones case |
| 14 | 31-Jul| Critical reception and the novel’s legacy   | • “Nella Larsen’s *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation” (1980) by Claudia Tate  
• Selected contemporary reviews |

**Assignments and grading**

**Discussion forum (20%)**

I will assign discussion questions each week on our course Moodle. After watching the lecture video, you should post one response to any of these questions or post a response to one of your fellow students’ posts, in English.

Posts should be submitted on the discussion forum by the end of the day (11:59pm) on the day of class. Please aim for between 100 and 200 words for each post.

**Structured summary (20%)**

In term 1, each student will choose one secondary text from the schedule for term 2 about which to write a structured summary. Your structured summary will be due by the following class session (for example, if you choose to write a structured summary of a text we read in week 11, your structured summary will be due by the start of class in week 12).

Your structured summary should be **1-2 pages in length** (double spaced, 12-point Times New Roman, 11-point Arial, or 11-point Georgia font), and include the following sections:

- Author – briefly describe relevant aspects of the professional career of the secondary text’s author.
- Purpose/argument – summarize the thesis of the text, i.e. what the author is trying to find out or what they are trying to convey.
- Details – summarize how the author goes about making their argument/achieving the purpose of the text. This section should be the longest of the four.
- Conclusion – summarize the conclusion the author reaches. If you wish, you can include your own opinion here assessing how convincing you find this conclusion.
Final essay proposal (10%) – due by 11:59pm on 10-Jul
Submit a one-page (double spaced, 12-point Times New Roman, 11-point Arial, or 11-point Georgia font) proposal for your final essay. This is due half-way through term 2 to give me time to respond to your proposal and offer some feedback as you write the final essay. Be sure to include a description of your intended topic, and your research question (if you have this already).

You need not have fully planned your final essay by this stage: I am just looking for an idea of your current plans for the final essay. You are free to change your final essay topic after submitting the proposal.

Final essay (50%) – due by 11:59pm on 4-Aug

Your final essay should apply one of the themes looked at in term 2 to the novel, drawing on relevant critical literature. The essay should make extensive reference to the novel, including quotations, and accurately using a citation and formatting style of your choice (e.g. MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.). Be sure to include a list of references at the end of your essay, including a reference to the novel. Please use double spacing and 12-point Times New Roman, 11-point Georgia, or 11-point Arial font. Essays should be around 1000 words in length.

You are not required to draw on the specific secondary texts we discussed in class, but you must include references to at least four secondary texts. If you are having difficulty finding secondary texts for your essay, please get in touch by email and I can help.