

*Passing*, Nella Larsen  
STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

**Part One: Ch 1-2**

1. From whose perspective is this novel told? (Provide first and last name when you learn it)
2. Who does Irene receive a letter from?
3. What does the letter writer request? How does Irene feel about this request?
4. In Chapter 2, how does the time period compare to Chapter 1?
5. Why does Irene go to the Drayton Hotel?
6. While at the Drayton, when Irene thinks she is being watched by a stranger, what secret does she think the stranger has found out?
7. Who does this stranger turn out to be?
8. Why has it been so long since the two characters have seen each other? What have some rumors been in the meantime?
9. What does it mean “to pass”?
10. What does Irene promise to do at the end of Chapter 2, then regret and says she will not do?

**Part One: Ch 3-4**

1. What does Clare Kendry convince Irene Redfield to do? Why do you think Irene allows Clare to influence her so much?
2. Who else is at Clare’s for tea? What’s her story? What do Clare and this woman have in common?
3. What is Claude Jones’s situation? How do Clare and Irene view the situation differently?
4. What are Gertrude and Clare worried about with their children? Why does Irene not have this same concern?
5. Describe the (internal and external) conflict(s) that arises when John Bellew arrives.
6. Why do you think Irene chose to stay silent in Chapter 3?
7. In Chapter 4, Clare wrote a post script in her letter that says, “It may be, ‘Rene dear, it may just be, that, after all, your way may be the wiser and infinitely happier one. I’m not sure just now. At least not so sure as I have been.”
  - a. What “way” is Irene living?
  - b. Why might Clare think that is better?
  - c. What life did she previously think was better?

**Part Two: Ch 1**

1. After remembering “that time in Chicago”, Irene is still able to feel two different ranges of emotion very strongly (one expected, one surprising). What are they, and where does each one come from?

2. In Chapter 1 of Part One, Clare’s letter includes a line that says, “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 rid of.” Now, in Part Two, Irene finds herself unable to “sympathize with this new tenderness, this avowed yearning of Clare’s for ‘my own people.’”
  - a. What is it that Clare now wants?
  - b. Why do you think she wants this?
3. What is it in particular that Irene finds so attractive about her husband Brian Redfield? How does this characterize Irene and relate to theme?
4. Brian and Irene have the following conversation:
 

“They always come back. I’ve seen it happen time and time again.”

“But why?” Irene wanted to know. “Why?”

“If I knew that, I’d know what race is.”

(You will need to read beyond the above three lines to answer these.)

  - a. Who is this general “they” the couple is talking about?
  - b. What do they mean about coming back?
  - c. Why is Irene confused? What is Brian’s reasoning?
5. Describe Irene and Brian as a couple. What are their feelings on race? On Brian’s job? On living in New York City? On raising their children? (Be specific for these.)

### **Part Two: Ch 2-4**

1. When Clare arrives to talk to Irene about not answering her letter, what are the reasons Irene presents against Clare’s involvement with the black culture of New York City?
2. Do you believe Clare is as lonely as she says? Why or why not?
3. In Chapter 2, what’s the year of the setting in Harlem revealed to be? Why is this an important time in New York City for blacks?
4. Why are events like the Negro Welfare League dance so well attended by both white and blacks? According to Irene, what reasons do both whites and blacks have for being in attendance at these events?
5. Why does Clare want to attend the NWL dance? Why does Irene decide to invite her?
6. Discuss how Hugh Wentworth’s dialogue is depicted in Chapter 3. How is it different from Irene’s? What is the significance of this?
7. Irene tells Hugh, “You’re so clever, you usually know everything. Even how to tell the sheep from the goats. What do you think? Is she?”
  - a. What is Irene asking? What does Hugh really want to know?
  - b. What does Irene say about being able to tell if someone “is” or not?
8. How has Clare and Irene’s relationship changed from the beginning of Part Two to the end of Part Two? Give examples.
9. Clare tells Irene, “Can’t you realize that I’m not like you one bit? Why, to get the things I want badly enough, I’d do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away. Really, ‘Rene, I’m not safe.”
  - a. Do you agree that Clare would throw anything away to get what she wants? Even her daughter? What proof do you have to support this?

- b. When Clare says she is not safe, what does she mean? Not safe for herself or not safe for others? Explain your answer.

### Part Three: Ch 1-4

1. After the war, Brian sometimes goes into depressive states. What's different about the one Irene worries about in Chapter 1?
2. Why doesn't Irene invite Clare to tea? Why does Clare show up anyway?
3. After learning why Clare shows up to tea uninvited, Irene says, "Clare Kendry! So that was it! Impossible. It couldn't be...Clare! How sickening." What does Irene believe she has just figured out? (It may take readers a while after these lines to truly answer the question correctly.)
4. When looking in the mirror, Irene calls herself a "damned fool." Why does she think this?
5. Why does Irene end up breaking a glass? Why does she lie to Hugh about how/why it happened even though she knows he might know?
6. In Chapter 1, Irene cares more about whose well-being than her own?
7. At the end of Chapter 2, what does Irene decide must happen in order to deal with Clare?
8. Describe what Irene means when she talks about being "caught between two allegiances." What are the allegiances? Why is she caught? Why is there a struggle?
9. In Chapter 3, how does John Bellew figure out that Irene Redfield is a Negro?
10. Name another solution to the "Clare problem" that occurs to Irene but she quickly dismisses.
11. In Chapter 4, what topic does Brian bring up at the dinner table? What reasons does Irene have for not wanting her sons to hear? What reasons does Brian have to disagree?
12. Unknown at the time, Irene comes to the actual realization of why she doesn't tell anyone about her run in with John Bellew. What is it? What would it mean for Irene if Clare was "free"?
13. Who crashes a party at David and Felise Freeland's apartment?
14. Is the ending of this novel a suicide, an accident, or a murder? Give reasons all three might be true and then pick the option you think is the strongest.
15. Why would Nella Larsen choose to leave the end of her novel this ambiguous?

*A Separate Peace*, John Knowles  
STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

**Chapters 1 – 3**

1. What two sites did the narrator go back to see at Devon?
2. Who is Phineas?
3. What unusual thing did Phineas talk Gene into doing?
4. Why were the boys not punished for jumping out of the tree?
5. Identify Mr. Prud-homme and Mr. Patch-Withers.
6. What was the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session?
7. Gene said, "I didn't need to feel any tremendous rush of gratitude towards Phineas." Why not?
8. Why did Gene continue jumping out of the tree and going along with Phineas even though he didn't want to?
9. What was blitzball?
10. In what way does Gene describe his memories of the war years?
11. What does the swimming record incident show about Phineas?
12. "Exposing a sincere emotion like that at the Devon School was the next thing to suicide." What had Phineas just told Gene?

**Chapters 4 – 5**

1. What two realizations does Gene have about his relationship with Phineas?
2. Over what did Gene and Phineas argue?
3. What happened to Phineas?
4. Why didn't Gene tell Phineas the truth (that he bounced on the limb and caused the fall) at the infirmary?
5. What is Phineas' reaction when Gene does confess?

**Chapters 6 – 7**

1. "If you broke the rules, then they broke you." What did Gene mean?
2. Identify Cliff Quackenbush.
3. How did Gene lose his job of Assistant Crew Manager?
4. From whom was Gene's long-distance call?
5. Why did Gene feel a sense of freedom when Phineas said, "Listen, pal, if I can't play sports, you're going to play them for me"?
6. What idea does Brinker Hadley introduce?
7. Why did Gene leave the Butt Room without smoking a cigarette?
8. What "good deed" did the boys do?
9. What does Gene say about Brinker as he tries to spare Leper's feelings when the gang meets him after the railroad work is done?
10. Who decided to enlist?
11. Why did Gene not enlist?

## **Chapters 8 – 9**

1. Of what did Finny try to convince Gene about the war?
2. For what event did Finny want to train Gene? What was wrong with that plan?
3. Why did Phineas decide that Mr. Ludsbury didn't know the war was just propaganda from fat old men?
4. Who was the first of Gene's gang to actually enlist?
5. What effect did Leper's enlistment have on the boys at Devon?
6. What winter event did Phineas invent?
7. From whom was Gene's telegram, and what was the message?

## **Chapters 10 – 11**

1. What happened to Leper?
2. How did Gene react to Leper's description of what happened to him?
3. Why did Gene want to see only Phineas?
4. Brinker said, "What's the matter with our class anyway? It isn't even June yet and we've already got two men sidelined for the Duration." Who was he talking about? For the duration of what?
5. How did Leper's illness affect Phineas?
6. Contrast Brinker's view of Finny's disability with Gene's view.
7. Where did Brinker take Gene and Finny? Why?
8. Why did Finny rush out of the room?
9. What happened to Finny after he ran out of the room?

## **Chapters 12 – 13**

1. Why didn't Gene do anything to help with Phineas after his second accident?
2. Why did Gene sneak into the infirmary?
3. Gene told Phineas, "you wouldn't be any good in the war, even if nothing had happened to your leg." What did he mean?
4. What finally happened to Phineas?
5. What was ironic about Gene's part in the war?

## Topics & Questions for Further Discussion

1. Gene says, “I was subject to the dictates of my mind, which gave me the maneuverability of a strait jacket” (page 34). Where do Gene’s rules for himself come from? Why are they so strict?
2. Why does Phineas choose the pink shirt for a school flag, his emblem? And why does Gene so envy his ability to “get away” with this (page 25)?
3. Gene thinks Finny’s secret swim record is “too unusual for—not friendship, but too unusual for rivalry” (page 45). Why does this shock Gene? Why is rivalry so essential at Devon? What does it say about the dynamics of Gene and Finny’s friendship?
4. How do the school’s rivers, the Devon and the Naguamsett, represent innocence and experience in the boys’ lives?
5. How is it that Gene “becomes” Finny alone in their room after Finny’s fall (page 62) and the next day he’s “pretty sure I didn’t know Finny at all” (page 63)? What is the truth?
6. When Gene tells Finny he won’t start living by the rules, why is that “the most false thing, the biggest lie of all” (page 71)?
7. Why can’t Finny let Gene tell him what actually happened in the tree? Why does Finny call Gene to apologize for even suspecting him for a “second” (page 83)?
8. Finny says the winter loves him, while Gene calls the winter “treacherous” for Finny and his crutches. Finny further explains that “when you really love something, then it loves you back, in whatever way it has to love” (page 111). Why does Gene assert this is false, but should be true?
9. Though Leper does not play a large role in life at Devon, Gene has a lot of sympathy for him. Why is this? Why are the boys so affected by Leper’s joining the war? And were you surprised that Leper witnessed Finny’s fall?
10. Why does Brinker force Gene and Finny into the trial (page 165)? How do Brinker’s changing views of the war influence his behavior at Devon and with Gene?
11. What does Gene mean when he says “wars were made instead by something ignorant in the human heart” (page 201)? Do you believe he has “made [his] escape” from fear (page 10) by the time he revisits Devon as an adult?
12. Do you agree with David Levithan in the afterword that “human nature doesn’t change very much over time” (page 205)? How does *A Separate Peace* illustrate this?