***Passing*, Questions on Excerpt 6:**

1. **Give the background to this passage.**

This is the end of the novel. Clare has just fallen to her death from a window in Felise’s apartment. She was there with Irene and Brian for a party. Earlier that day Irene and Felise had met Jack Bellew on the street. Because Felise cannot pass, Irene suspected that this gave her away as a black person to Bellew and, through her, Clare as well. Irene considered warning Clare but decided against it.

As she suspected, Jack understood and came to the party shouting “damned dirty nigger!” As Jack approached her, Clare fell out the window to the ground 6 floors down. How she fell remains unclear.

Another important element of background is the fact that Irene believed Brian was having an affair with her husband.

1. **Why does the idea of Clare not being dead cause “fear” (l.6) for Irene?**

That surprising thought is presented through **hyperbole** (“so terrifying, so horrible”, l.1-2) and as one that might also cause Irene to kill herself since she has “to grab hold of the banister to save herself from pitching downwards.” (l.2)

This near repetition of Clare’s death is interesting since it suggests that Irene is trapped in Clare’s fate and that she is not really in control of her actions and emotions.

This is a good starting point to understand Clare’s thought: there are multiple interpretations but the first one is maybe Irene’s fear of having to see Clare’s “glorious body mutilated” (l.6) if she is still alive. The use of the adjective “glorious” is a bit surprising in this context and it brings us back to Irene’s obsession for Clare’s beauty rather than Clare herself.

That obsession has turned into jealousy in the third part of the book and another, darker interpretation is simply that Irene was happy to be rid of Clare’s threatening presence and afraid that she might in fact not be.

In that perspective, it is also possible to suspect that Irene might have had something to do with Clare’s death, as suggested by her terror l.35 (“She had a moment of stark craven fear. “Oh God,” she thought, prayed, “help me.””) when she is asked about what happened.

But then again that fear might have to do with Irene’s failure to warn Clare about meeting her husband, making her therefore indirectly responsible for her death. This would in turn explain her insistence on protecting Jack when asked if he pushed Clare (l.41: ““No, no!” she protested. “I’m quite certain that he didn’t. I was there, too.”). Wouldn’t accusing Jack mean having to explain how he knew about Clare’s passing and therefore confessing her own indirect guilt?

Irene’s state of mind remains ambivalent to the reader and leaves several interpretations open. The **fast-paced dialogue** and quick succession of events reinforces that impression. But what’s striking is that Irene’s emotions seem to have nothing to do with grief for Clare.

1. **Comment on l.31-33 ( ““It’s impossible […] quaked under her.”).**

Contrary to the other parts of the dialogue, Brian’s voice is introduced only after he speaks. This is interesting since it shows us that this outburst is unexpected for Irene, and Brian’s tone of voice is indeed described as something that she has “never heard before” (l.33). The next sentence describes Clare collapsing and the juxtaposition of the two suggests that this is the consequence of Brian’s “frenzied” reaction rather than the situation itself. While remaining ambivalent, this detail suggests that Irene is reading into her husband’s reaction and trying to guess what his relationship to Clare actually was.

1. **Comment on the last two lines of the novel.**

The **opening hyperbole** (“Centuries after” l.36) is a suggestion that Irene has lost touch with reality for a while. Besides, the choice of the word “centuries” is not just **hyperbolic**, it is also vague, which also shows how disconnected from reality the Irene—**the focaliser**—has become.

In the same way, the **description of** the other speaker—probably a policeman—as merely a “strange man” (l.46) is unexpected. Earlier on in the passage (l.36), she was also unable to identify this man who is obviously a detective. This is another instance of Irene being disconnected from reality, possibly from the shock, but the use of the adjective “strange” is surprising. No explanation is given as to why this man is strange. One way to understand this is simply that Irene is in shock and unable to comprehend why someone might want to inquire about what happened. Yet, elsewhere in the passage, she seems aware of the implications of her conversations with the others.

Thus, another interpretation might be that the presence of a policeman, a representation of the law and therefore of her potential guilt, is simply so impossible to envisage, so alien that it impedes her very perception of his role in the situation.

In any case, Irene’s shocked perception combines with the very bureaucratic phrase used by the man (“Death by misadventure”, l.36) and his very formal expression (“I’m inclined to believe”, l.36) to create a sense of overall detachment that is almost **cruelly comic.** In that perspective, the man’s invitation to go “have another look at that window” (l.37), though understandable, does sound strange, particularly since he seems to invite everyone around him to come and join. There is something almost absurd about this statement, a bizarre note to end the novel on—all the more so as the passage opened on Irene being attracted to the window. The novel seems to cruelly insist on taking us back to the place of the tragedy.

Is this to suggest its inescapability? Or maybe this is to say that this remains an open-ended novel—like an open window? In that way choosing to end the novel not on the narrator’s focalized voice but on the voice of a neutral investigator is a significant choice—Larsen seems to invite us to go and read back…

The **words in bold** are key words to write and talk about a novel. For your exam, you need to look them up if you don’t know them, learn them and start using them.

The words underlined are useful words to know and use for your own literary analysis. For your exam, I recommend you learn them and practice using them.