Journal: Passing

Answer the following in complete paragraphs using textual detail and quotation. Make connections to other writers or texts whenever it seems helpful to do so.1. The metaphor of passing accrues several layers of meaning. What are they? How do they relate to each other? 2. Whose story is this? Clare’s or Irene’s? 3. What does this passage mean: “[Irene] was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same? Herself. Her race. Race: The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be all three.”4. It has been suggested that Passing uses race more as a device to sustain suspense than as a compelling social issue. What is the relation of race to subjective experience in the text?5. What is the significance of narrative endings in Larsen? Why does Passing refuse to specify how Clare is killed and who is responsible? 6. Does the heightened attention to color and clothing and atmosphere in Passing makes us wonder if Larsen’s concentration on mulatto characters indicates an unmistakable “privileging” of whiteness. NOTE: Notes on Larsen's Passing the subtleties of Nella Larsen’s Passing create interesting problems. Such problems derive from the general tendency of readers to elevate one social category of analysis over all others, often ignoring the interactive working of each on the other: race on gender, gender on class, and so on. Readers attentive to class will find the narrow class spectrum of this novel off putting, for it can seem on the surface to be a mere apology for the black middle class, showing little awareness of and bearing on the poverty that the masses of blacks suffered in 1920s Harlem. While attention to irony, point of view, and rhetorical strategy is essential to reading any text, with Nella Larsen it is especially so. In passing, for example, understanding that Irene Redfield, from whose perspective much of the novel is told, is an unreliable narrator is key to understanding the novel. Equally important is the function of Clare and Irene as doubles, a strategy that undermines Irene’s authority as the center of racial consciousness, clarifies the points in the narrative’s critique of the black middle class, and uncovers the issues of sexuality and class that an exclusive focus on race conceals. It is important to think about 1920s Harlem and the literary and cultural confluences that shaped the New Negro Renaissance while reading this book. It is critical that the movement be defined not by its “unities” but rather by its “contraries” and that it be seen as the site of a class-based contestation over the terms and production of black art. The aesthetic theories produced by such writers and intellectuals as Alain Locke (“The New Negro”), Langston Hughes (“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”), and Zora Neale Hurston (“What White Publishers Won’t Print (Links to an external site.)”) are essential background for this novel. None of these attempts to articulate the terms of an emerging “black art” can be divorced from a discussion of the production and consumption of the texts, especially the system of white patronage during the period, which necessarily affected and at times constrained artistic freedom. So, consider the audiences for this work--primarily white. ---Deborah McDowell (co-editor, Heath)