
‘He God to You?’: Transgressing the Line Between Love and Concubine in the Neo-Slave Narrative, *Wench*”

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Abstract

This research paper is a literary analysis of Dolen Perkins-Valdez’s neo-slave narrative, *Wench*. It examines an often overlooked dimension of the slave narrative, anti-heroism. Utilizing the anti-heroine as a theoretic lens, I argue that Perkins-Valdez’s portrayal of the protagonist, Lizzie, works in stark contrast to the heroism of both the traditional slave narrative and the more contemporary neo-slave narrative, revealing the anti-heroic qualities of one slave who considered but dared not escape to freedom. Lizzie’s refusal to transgress the boundary between slavery and freedom, while simultaneously deliberately thwarting the escape of others, places her firmly within the sphere of the anti-heroine. The character’s life not only magnifies but catastrophically details the grotesqueries with which she contends and to which she contributes, consistently clashing with, and at times crossing over, the line between victim and villain. The anti-heroine in the context of the slave narrative, whether factual or fictional, is not an easy read due to the graphic nature of some of the incidents detailed; but I contend that it is a vitally important contribution to this canon of literature. While it is inspiring to read of the heroic female slave who escapes to freedom with her life and her dignity intact, it is equally moving to read and to learn of the complexities, the ambiguities, the entanglements, and, quite frankly, the villainy that is such a large part of who we are as humans. Lizzie’s fatalistic decisions force the reader to soberly reflect on the human condition, the history of the slave concubine, crossing the geographical boundary from slavery to freedom, the realities of those who did not escape, and of those who died trying.

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