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Addictive substances, slavery, and the traumatized body in nineteenth-century American literature

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Abstract

Addiction narratives in nineteenth-century American literature have long been read either as moral exhortation or as disease, as Crowley (1994) contends. Yet a close reading of Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman, and Edgar Allan Poe posits that, addictive substances (whisky, rum, molasses, the bottle, the cask) act rather than recede into the backdrop. Drawing on new materialism, global commodity history, and the body theory of slavery, this paper argues that these substances work as actants which, together with persons, institutions, and spaces, compose human–nonhuman assemblages that rewrite the body as a traumatized body, doubly coded by pleasure and terror, by liberation and enslavement. The study distinguishes three modalities of the addicted body—the governed (Douglass), the seduced (Whitman), and the possessed (Poe)—and shows that all three share a single material-political structure. Relocating nineteenth-century American addiction narrative from the moral-medical frame into a materialist and corporeal one, the paper demonstrates what a thing-powered reading of the body contributes to the literature of slavery and capital, and what new materialism gains once it must account for the racialized and commodified flesh.

Introduction

The history of the concept of addiction begins in confusion rather than clarity. In 1819 the German-Russian physician C. von Brühl-Cramer settled on *Trunksucht*, "addiction to drink", modelling the term on *Lesesucht*, the "addiction to reading" that had swept late eighteenth-century Germany. "Alcoholism" did not appear until 1849, when the Swedish physician Magnus Huss coined it, the suffix *-ism* denoting toxic diseases such as *ergotism* (Courtwright, 2019, p. 86). The etymology itself makes an argument. Addiction was born undivided between behaviour and substance, between the cultural compulsion to read and the chemical compulsion to drink. That conceptual promiscuity has never been fully resolved, and it governs how the texts examined here should be read. By 1881 the metaphor Douglass had reached for in 1855 had hardened into a title, *Drugs that Enslave* (Kane, 1881), which catalogued the opium, morphine, chloral, and hashish habits as forms of bondage. The enslavement this paper tracks belongs to the period's own vocabulary.

Douglass, reflecting on the slaveholder's holiday, concludes that "[i]t was about as well to be a slave to *master*, as to be a slave to *rum* and *whisky*" (Douglass, 1994, p. 292). Whitman's narrator, looking back on his first fall, traces "the outset of all these frailties" to "that fatal night when Colby drew me into the drinking place; where, amid music and gayety, the first step in my downward road was taken" (Whitman, 2007, p. 89). Poe's narrator, accounting for his violence, names "the Fiend Intemperance" as the agent that possessed him (Poe, 2006, p. 184). Each writer describes the substance and also assigns agency to it, so that the drink becomes something that enslaves, seduces, or possesses. Read through new materialism, addictive substances function as actants, sources of action that may be human or nonhuman and that, in collusion with the governance of slavery or capital, produce what this paper calls the traumatized body.

The etymological lesson amounts to more than historical curiosity. Because addiction was born undivided between behaviour and substance, between the cultural compulsion to read and the chemical compulsion to drink, the analyst is licensed to place a cultural ritual and a material ingestion on the same plane of explanation. That move makes Douglass's holiday, a ceremonial and alcohol-mediated suspension of labour, and Whitman's drink, a material ingestion, comparable instances of a single phenomenon. The undivided concept pre-empts the objection that a slave's coerced festivity and a clerk's purchased bottle belong to different orders of thing, before new materialism reads both as human–nonhuman assemblages in which an actant rewrites the body.

John Crowley's *The White Logic* (1994) traces the nineteenth-century shift from a moral paradigm, in which drunkenness was "a choice, albeit a sinful one" (p. 12), to a medical model in which inebriety, like addiction to gambling, became "a disease of the will" (p. 16), an incapacity to stop drinking. Abigail Fagan's "Bloated" (2019) carries this line of inquiry into the gendered and embodied politics of temperance writing. Both accounts concentrate on discourse about drink, and discourse alone leaves the object inert.

Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (2022) remains indispensable. She reads the enslaved body as the site where terror and enjoyment fuse structurally, and her reading leaves no room for the passive victim. Her account of "coerced festivity" (p. 32), the "harsh command to merrymaking" (p. 67) under slavery, names the very mechanism this paper extends. That corporeal approach to slavery has since shaped a broad Atlantic and Americanist scholarship on the racialized body, yet its intersection with the material culture of intoxication remains largely unexplored.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) and the material ecocriticism of Serenella Iovino and Oppermann (2014) have supplied the vocabulary of thing-power, actant, and assemblage, and the "material turn" has reshaped how critics approach objects, environments, and bodies. Yet the new-materialist readings of nineteenth-century American addiction narrative remain thin. Poe studies in particular stay largely within psychoanalytic or Gothic-aesthetic frames, and the material culture of his tales (the cask, the bottle, the gin) has seldom been granted agentic status. The most substantial recent work runs on another axis. Markley's reading of *The Sign of Four* (1890), as a neighbouring case, shows the hypodermic needle producing a "post-human appetite" that "no longer belonged to human physiology alone, but could be implanted in the body via a device" (2024, p. 416). The emphasis falls on discourse, race, and imperial hierarchy, but the ontological claim about the thing itself goes unmade. Some scholars treat the substance in these tales as a mere backdrop to the human psyche, others as an instrument of that psyche. This paper reverses both readings.

Addiction studies, slavery studies, and new materialism have run in parallel lines and have not yet met at the body. The three fields have therefore left Douglass's molasses, Whitman's bottle, and Poe's cask to be read as moral props, as symptoms, or as metaphors, never as the agents that compose the body alongside persons and institutions. This paper intervenes. It asks what happens to the reading of

nineteenth-century American literature when the substance is granted the status of actant rather than instrument.

New materialism supplies the foundational framework and the analytic vocabulary throughout, namely Bennett's thing-power, actant, assemblage, and edible matter. Global commodity history supplies the historicity and the political economy of the substances, from Mintz's sugar–rum triangle and "false commodity" (1985) to Courtwright's psychoactive revolution, "liberating–enslaving pleasures", and limbic capitalism (2001, 2019). Body theory, in the form of Hartman's coerced festivity and pained body, gives the traumatized body its corporeal definition, and the paper deliberately refuses the psychoanalytic and cultural-trauma path.

Douglass's *Narrative* (1845, cited here in Douglass, 1994) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855, cited here in Douglass, 1994) supply the governed body, Whitman's *Franklin Evans* (1842; cited here in Whitman, 2007) supplies the seduced body, and Poe's "The Black Cat" (1843, cited here in Poe, 2006) and "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845, cited here in Poe, 2006) supply the possessed body. Published between 1842 and 1855, all the texts instantiate variation on one structure, and in each, an addictive substance rewrites the body, yet the location of coercive power differs. It stays external and sovereign in Douglass, commercial and capitalistic in Whitman, internalized in Poe.

The "traumatized body" of this paper's title does not name a psychopathological trauma in the Freudian or cultural-trauma sense. It names a Hartmanian body. A passive, rewritten body is caught in the entanglement of terror and enjoyment, of pain and pleasure, where power and matter jointly inscribe the flesh. To be traumatized here means to have one's body composed by an actant-substance in collusion with a governance of power, which operates when pleasure and terror occur in one scene, when agency is assigned to the substance, and when the substance acts in concert with an institution.

The Thing as Actant: Addictive Substances under New Materialism

New materialism begins by dismantling the Western division that equates matter with passive inertia. Bennett's project in *Vibrant Matter* is "to articulate the elusive idea of a materiality that is itself heterogeneous, itself a differential of intensities, itself a life" (Bennett, 2010, p. 57). At its centre stands thing-power, "the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness" (Bennett, 2010, p. xvi). Bennett borrows the term actant from Bruno Latour, for whom "*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor—or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant" (Latour, 2005, p. 71). An actant, in turn, is "any entity that modifies another entity in a trial", and its "competence is deduced from its performance" rather than posited in advance (Bennett, 2010, p. viii). The term stays deliberately agnostic about the human–nonhuman boundary. Neither subject nor object, an actant intervenes, and it earns its status by what it does in a given trial rather than by a pre-existing essence. The bottle, the cask, and the molasses can therefore stand on the same analytic plane as the master, the narrator, and the wife. Each intervenes, and each demonstrates its efficacy in the event rather than assuming it.

This reframing matters most for the study of intoxication. The moral and medical paradigms alike treat alcohol as a passive instrumentality, a thing used by a human will. Vital materialism reverses this, making the substance an actant "at work both inside and outside of selves" (Bennett, 2010, p. 62). The three primary texts supply three distinct modes of the thing's agency. In Douglass, molasses "rewrites desire", as the slave who steals molasses is forced by the master, whip in hand, to eat it "until the poor fellow is made sick at the very mention of it" (Douglass, 1994, p. 67). The substance reorganises the body's appetites and sensory memory. In Whitman, the bottle tempts, as the narrator's "eyes were caught by the sight of tempting bottles of liquor, arranged on a bar" (Whitman, 2007, p. 61). In Poe, drink "possesses", as a "gin-nurtured" malice penetrates the narrator's body and displaces his "original soul" (Poe, 2006, p. 184). Three verbs—rewrite, tempt, possess—but one ontology. In each case the substance occupies subject position with a transitive verb and a narrated bodily effect.

Where "actant" comes from matters for how it is used. Latour inherits the term from a semiotics that refuses the subject-object divide. Bennett (2010) in turn draws on a lineage she names explicitly, "Epicurean, Spinozist, Nietzschean, and vitalist traditions" (p. 9), and above all on Deleuze and Guattari's "material vitalism" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), in which vitality is "immanent in matter-energy" (Bennett, 2010, p. x). Spinoza's *conatus*, the effort of each thing to persist in its being, grounds the "vitality" Bennett describes, with the consequence that "all things" are "animate, albeit in different degrees" (p. 5). This is not a traditional vitalism that posits a separate animating force, and Bennett is careful to "theorize a vitality intrinsic to materiality as such" (p. xiii). The analytic payoff is "distributive agency" (p. 23). According to Bennett, "the efficacy or effectivity to which that term has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field" (p. 23), so that "[t]he locus of agency is always a human–nonhuman working group" (p. xvii). Her "parliament of things" moves the unit of analysis away from the individual human and toward "the (ontologically heterogeneous) 'public' coalescing around a problem" (p. 108). Neither the drink nor the drinker is then the problem. For addiction, the addictive effect emerges from the drink–body–institution assemblage. In this frame the "outside" of the self is a mesh rather than a boundary, especially when the self already consists of the nonhuman, so that ingestion merely makes the composition visible. The three primary texts now look like three instances of that mesh—the molasses-mesh, the bottle-mesh, the cask-mesh—each a local parliament in which the human is outnumbered by the things that compose it.

Distributive agency depends on the assemblage, whose ontology Bennett is careful to specify. An assemblage, she insists, is a "non-totalizable sum" (p. 24), open-ended where a stolid block would be sealed. Beyond the vital force of each member lies an effectivity proper to the grouping as such, an agency of the assemblage. No single member can therefore be named the cause—not the drink, not the drinker, not the whip. Addiction emerges from a grouping whose membership is ontologically mixed, and it belongs to neither the drink nor the drinker. The passage stages a human–nonhuman working group doing something, and it opens onto neither a sovereign human will nor a diseased one. The analyst's task is to inventory the members—bottle, whisky, molasses, cask, whip, tavern, holiday, plantation, body—and to ask what each contributes to the action.

Bennett's own opening scene makes the claim visceral. Encountering "one large men's black plastic work glove, one dense mat of oak pollen, one unblemished dead rat, one white plastic bottle cap, one smooth stick of wood", she watches the objects "shimmied back and forth between debris and thing" and "exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call" (p. 4). Yet the actant is not exotic. It is the bottle cap, the stick, the rat, and, for this paper, the molasses, the whisky, and the cask. The methodological consequence is to attend to "the it as actant", to "name the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things" (p. 3). When Douglass's master forces the slave to eat molasses, when Whitman's narrator meets the "tempting bottles", when Poe's narrator is possessed by the Fiend, the things are empowered and they empower.

Bennett's most direct interface with addiction studies is her category of edible matter. "[E]ating", she writes, "constitutes a series of mutual transformations between human and nonhuman materials" (p. 40). The metabolisation of food "renders more plausible the idea of a vital materiality" because "the outside and inside mingle and recombine" (p. 50). To ingest molasses or whisky is the most immediate scene of that mingling, and the boundary between the body and the world gets crossed rather than maintained. "My 'own' body is material", Bennett observes, "and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human", and the "crook of my elbow. .. is 'a special ecosystem',. .. [t]he its outnumber the mes" (p. 112). The self already is a human–nonhuman assemblage, and ingestion simply makes the composition visible.

Bennett presses the point to a literal microbiology. On her account the self is a porous composition already inhabited by the nonhuman, whereas the fortress defended against the world belongs to a different ontology. Rather than breaching a boundary that was ever secure, the ingested substance joins a body that was always already an assemblage. The addicted body is thus a body disclosed, its composition made visible at the moment of ingestion, for what looked like invasion is disclosure all along. Douglass's molasses, Whitman's whisky, and Poe's gin are simply the most dramatic of the countless nonhumans that compose the human, and the texts' genius lies in noticing the composition itself in the act of drinking. This is the theoretical lever that relocates Douglass's molasses passage, or specifically, the scene becomes a reconfiguration within an assemblage, with the master's cruelty only one member of it. The slave's body is rewired by a substance acting in concert with a whip and a plantation space. The same lever rereads Whitman's drinker, whose "face, all dirty and brown" (Whitman, 2007, p. 62) registers a bodily change wrought by a material rather than a moral stain, and here the addicted body is the body as matter changed. And it rereads Poe's narrator, whose "gin-nurtured" malice literalises the claim that nonhuman materials compose the human.

To grant things agency is not to release them from history. Bennett herself warns against a "naive" vitalism that forgets power, and political economy supplies the corrective. Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1985) offers the indispensable genealogy. Sugar, he shows, passed "from a luxury and a rarity into a commonplace and a necessity" (p. xxix) after 1650, and its production depended on a doubled triangular trade. The famous triangle links Britain, Africa, and the Americas, and a second in which "[f]rom New England went rum to Africa, whence slaves to the West Indies, whence molasses back to

New England" (p. 43). In both triangles, Mintz insists, "the only 'false commodity', yet absolutely essential to the system, was human beings" (p. 43). The molasses that Douglass's master wields carries inside it a circuit, which is a node that converts enslaved labour into metropolitan pleasure.

Courtwright (2001) globalises the point. He names the "psychoactive revolution", namely "people everywhere have acquired progressively more, and more potent, means of altering their ordinary waking consciousness", rooted in "the transoceanic commerce and empire building of the early modern period" (p. 2). Two of his later concepts sharpen the nineteenth-century scene. The first, "liberating–enslaving pleasures" name the paradox that the same substance delivers freedom and bondage at once (Courtwright, 2019, p. 67), and the formulation that Douglass's "slave to rum" anticipates by a century and a half. The second, "limbic capitalism", describes "a technologically advanced but socially regressive business system" that "encourage[s] excessive consumption and addiction" by "targeting the limbic system" (p. 6). The 1840s tavern that Whitman's narrator enters is, quite precisely, the nineteenth-century precursor of limbic capitalism, a space engineered to capture the brain's reward circuitry through music, women, and drink.

What Courtwright calls the "psychoactive revolution" was a democratising process, in which European farmers and planters "expanded world supply, drove down prices, and drew millions of less affluent purchasers into the market, democratizing drug consumption" (Courtwright, 2001, p. 3). The global drug commerce was also "highly selective" in that Europeans "chose to ignore or suppress many novel psychoactive plants" while elevating wine, opium, and spirits (p. 3). That selectivity corrects any naïve vitalism, since imperial preference shapes the actant's career. Limbic capitalism sharpens the mechanism further. Its business model is to "encourage early and frequent consumption", to "treat the lads, and you'll have their money in the till when they're adults", and to profit disproportionately from the heaviest users, since "80 percent of alcohol sales go to the 20 percent of customers who are the heaviest users" (Courtwright, 2019, p. 4). Whitman's 1840s tavern is the nineteenth-century instance of exactly this logic, which functions as a space engineered to capture the brain's reward circuitry and to convert capture into lifelong custom. The molasses Douglass's master wields and the bottle Whitman's narrator eyes are nodes in circuits of exactly this kind, converting enslaved labour and urban anxiety, respectively, into metropolitan and commercial pleasure. Markley extends the circuit into the later century, "[t]he slave trade and drug trade shared transoceanic routes", so that addictive substances arrived already carrying a racializing logic (Markley, 2024, p. 414). Commodity history and the body theory of slavery name one circuit, not two contexts.

Mintz (1985) likewise frames his project as following production to where and when it became consumption, a method that refuses to sever the pleasure of the metropolitan cup from the labour of the colonial field. He chooses as his epigraph Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's 1773 verdict that coffee and sugar have accounted for the unhappiness of two great regions of the world, the Americas depopulated to plant them, Africa depopulated to cultivate them (Mintz, 1985). The molasses in Douglass's passage admits of no local reading either, but it cannot be a local cruelty without also being a node in that unhappiness. The substance's biography, its passage from colonial commodity to bodily actant, forms

part of its agency. To grant thing-power is therefore never to evacuate history but to read the thing's career as itself a composition of empire and capital.

Thing-power and the historicity of things together establish the premise this paper works from: an addictive actant rewrites the body, and that rewriting has both a material causality (the substance alters the flesh) and a historical complicity (the substance arrives freighted with slavery and capital). The premise carries two built-in corrections. The first guards against a naive vitalism that would celebrate the liveliness of things while forgetting the terrain on which thing-power flows, and the second guards against a commodity-neutral reading that would treat the actant as a free, floating agent when imperial preference and capital in fact shape its career. Holding the two in tension is what distinguishes a political ecology of things from a mere animism. With the theoretical scaffolding in place, the next section turns to the three bodies themselves.

Three Addicted Bodies: Governance, Seduction, Possession

Thing-power stays inert until it is pressed against a text. The three primary works supply three modalities of the addicted body, each produced by an addictive actant operating under a different regime of power. The differences among them—governed, seduced, possessed—turn on a single variable, namely the location of the coercive force that conscripts the substance. Setting the same rewriting of the body under three regimes of power lets those differences illuminate the shared ontology. Each modality takes its name from where coercion sits: governed (external, sovereign), seduced (external, capitalistic), and possessed (internalized). Table 1 makes the anatomy visible.

Douglass's autobiographies contain the most explicitly political scene of substance-induced bodily rewriting in the corpus. The mechanism is force. A slave, Douglass reports, "loves molasses; he steals some." The master's response is to "go off to town, and buys a large quantity; he returns, takes his whip, and commands the slave to eat the molasses, until the poor fellow is made sick at the very mention of it" (Douglass, 1994, p. 67). Two things act here, and only one of them is human. The whip is an instrument, and the molasses an actant, and the latter does the real work of reorganising the slave's appetite and his sensory memory, installing an aversion where a desire had been. Bennett's edible matter becomes literal—the outside and the inside mingle, and the body is recomposed. What the master wields is a pedagogy of the flesh, a cruelty made instructive, and the substance performs the instruction.

The same logic governs the holiday. Douglass argues in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that the holidays "are among the most effective means, in the hands of slaveholders, of keeping down the spirit of insurrection among the slaves" (Douglass, 1994, p. 290). The slave is "induced to drink" so that, when the holiday ends, he "staggers up" from the "filth and wallowing" and returns to the field "rather glad to go. .. back again to the arms of slavery" (p. 292). The climactic sentence names the structure before naming its theory. The slave's relation to the master mirrors the slave's relation to rum and whisky. Addiction, on this account, continues slavery's governance by external means. The substance becomes a liquid

component of the disciplinary apparatus, wherein the assemblage of molasses, whisky, whip, holiday, and plantation space trains the body to prefer bondage.

Douglass shows with unusual precision how this governance worked. Masters tried every means to maximise the holiday's stupefying effect, most memorably by betting on which slave could "drink the most whisky without getting drunk", a wager that turned degradation into a competition (Douglass, 1994, p. 67). The slave learns far more than drinking, schooled to take pride in his ruin. The fraud even has its own rhetorical name. When the slave, freshly released for the holiday, asks for a few hours of virtuous freedom, the master answers with a degree of wickedness that Douglass names outright, artfully labelling the debauch with "the name of liberty" (p. 67). A deliberate semiotics therefore produces the governed body quite as much as a substance does, when the drink is poured into a vessel stamped Liberty, and the body that emerges prefers the stamp to the thing. Douglass thus supplies the slaveholding instance of what Courwright would later theorise as liberating-enslaving pleasures.

Hartman (2022) theorises the same structure as coerced festivity, the "harsh command to merrymaking" under slavery, in which the theatricality of the enslaved emerges only "after the body has been made subject to the will of the master" (p. 67). Douglass in *Narrative* corroborates the point from the enslaved side. "It was deemed a disgrace not to get drunk at Christmas", (Douglass, 1994, p. 66) and moreover, the holiday itself stands as a "fraud, instituted by human selfishness, the better to secure the ends of injustice and oppression" (Douglass, 1994, p. 291). Yet the governed body is not wholly mute. The Juba song, "We skim de pot, / Dey gib us de liquor" (p. 290), hides within its nonsense "a bid for freedom" (Hartman, 2022, p. 119–120). The traumatized body thus carries, even under governance, the trace of insurgence.

The governed body is, in one sense, the most legible of the three, because its coercion is named and visible. The whip, the holiday decree, the master's wager, each is an instrument whose purpose Douglass can name and the reader can see. Far from mitigating the governance, this legibility attests that the body is rewritten precisely because the power rewriting it declares itself. The traumatized body here is produced in full view, and the shame Douglass reports registers the bodily residue of a governance that needed the slave to know he was governed even in his pleasure. Whitman and Poe reverse the arrangement, hiding coercion inside a pleasure or a will. The governed body therefore proclaims its subjection, while the seduced and the possessed bodies present subjection misrecognized as freedom or as self.

Early in the *Narrative*, Douglass says outright that the holiday serves as an instrument of rule, rather than a respite from it, since the holidays are "among the most effective means in the hands of slaveholders in keeping down the spirit of insurrection" among the slaves, a "conductor" and "safety-valve" that draws off "the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity" (Douglass, 1994, p. 66). As the medium of this governance, whisky makes the holiday a safety-valve rather than a revolt. Read materially, the safety-valve is an assemblage of molasses, whip, holiday, plantation, and the enslaved body, each an actant, together producing a body that returns gladly to bondage.

Whitman's temperance novel supplies the second modality, and the difference is structural. Where Douglass's body is governed by a sovereign command, Franklin Evans's body is seduced by a commercial space. Douglass has the whip, while Whitman (2007) works through the "seductive enchantments" of the "musical saloons", places that "multiply" because their keepers have learned that "MUSIC, as a lure to induce customers" is the most profitable makeweight (p. 113). No one orders the first fall, and it happens by capture. Walking the street, the narrator catches sight of the "tempting bottles", and then, yielding to the toxic impulse, he enters. At that moment the bottle is the actant and the bar its stage.

The novel charts a progressive physiology of addiction that reads, almost uncannily, like Courtwright's disease model. The narrator moves from "two or three times" drunk to the point where he "could not spend the day. .. without drinking five or six times before dinner, and as many more between that and bedtime" (p. 54). His cognition becomes, in his own word, "*obfuscated*": "[t]he mind becomes. .. *obfuscated*, and loses the power of judging quickly and with correctness" (p. 82). The change is written on the flesh as well. Franklin Evans grows so gloomy on drink that he laments: "My face, I felt, was all dirty and brown" (p. 62). The addicted body is the body as altered matter, the outside has, in Bennett's sense, recomposed the inside.

The social ritual has its own name. Franklin and his circle, in the novel's phrase, "used to call" their nightly round of bar-rooms a "red circle" (p. 34). The tavern assembles persons, music, women, and liquor, and its logic is the profit logic that Courtwright would later name limbic capitalism, and "[t]he persons engaged in the sale of ardent spirits", use music to draw customers in (p. 113). At a death scene the overturned brandy bottle lies "at his side" as witness and accomplice (p. 110), the substance outlives the man it helps to kill. The contrast with Douglass is exact. The slave's drink is commanded in the name of liberty, the clerk's drink is sold in the name of pleasure. One is governed, and the other seduced. Both are traumatized bodies, though power source differs, sovereign in the first, capitalistic in the second.

Two further features of the seduced body repay attention, as the editors note in the "Introduction". The first is the insight that economic speculation and intoxication are "versions of the same intemperance", with "capital being the strongest source of excessive appetite, and the most destructive" (Castiglia and Hendler, 2007, p. xlv). Addiction and accumulation rhyme structurally. Both are unbounded appetite, and both, in the novel's logic, mark the characteristic excess of a market society. The second is the curious addiction to reform, and Franklin's "repeated ritual of confessing and being 'reformed' becomes addictive", and even the countryside's "monotony" fails to cure him once he is "addicted to the variety of the city" (p. xlv). The "seductive scene" embodies more than liquor. Entering the saloon, the narrator finds "beautiful women—warbling melodies sweeter than ever I had heard before, and the effect of the liquor upon my brain, seemed to lave me in happiness, as it were, from head to foot", and he exclaims: "Oh, fatal pleasure!" (Whitman, 2007, p. 27), and he is "completely enthralled, and drank deeper even than the night before" (p. 30). The "red circle" is therefore a social ritual, its name already marking the circularity of the compulsion, but a solitary drinker would have had nothing to name at all. The tavern assemblage—boardinghouse fellowship, "public toilets, cashed checks and loaned money", space for "labor and

political meetings, recreation, and even sleep" (Castiglia and Hendler, 2007, p. xxi)—forms the urban infrastructure of the seduced body, a human–nonhuman working group in which the bottle is only the most visible actant and the profit logic is the silent one.

What distinguishes Whitman's modality from Douglass's is the mode of coercion. Douglass's body answers a command issued from above, while Whitman's yields to an offer extended from the side. Power is present in both, whereas its visibility differs. Where the master's whip is legible as violence, the tavern's music is legible as pleasure, and that legibility is itself the mechanism. Quite simply, the body is captured by what it experiences as its own desire. The red circle names this capture precisely, for the circle is both the route and the trap, a round that returns the body to the bar as if by its own will. Courtwright's limbic capitalism names the neural correlate, as the business targets the limbic system, the part of the brain responsible for feeling and for quick reaction rather than "dispassionate thinking" (Courtwright, 2019, p. 6), turning evolution's survival circuits into profit. The 1840s tavern is the period instance of exactly this logic, and Franklin Evans its documentary. The seduced body hence mistakes its capture for its freedom. Courtwright's liberating–enslaving pleasures are here realized through the market, with the master's command withdrawn from the scene.

This capture takes the form of the red circle, and the name accounts for everything: a circle has no exit. The nightly round of bar-rooms is a ritual whose repetition makes the compulsion visible, a collective choreography in which bodies train one another to desire the drink. Courtwright's saloonkeepers describe the same recruitment logic that Whitman's novel dramatizes a century and a half earlier. The tavern captures by holding out belonging, where the master captures by the whip, and it converts that belonging into lifelong custom. The seduced body is therefore always a social body, and its trauma the loneliness that the social ritual disguises.

The seduced body reaches beyond the saloon, in space and towards death. The "red circle" of nightly bar-rooms is a geography of capture, a circuit the body is trained to repeat. At the death scene a bottle of brandy lies overturned at the side, and the bottle becomes a witness that survives the man it helps to kill. The "long glass tubes" through which liquor is imbibed (Whitman, 2007, p. 42) and the "colors of the chequer-board" (p. 28) that the narrator remembers even a decade later are actants of sensory memory, triggers that, in Courtwright's terms, work like the "familiar tavern sign" that "can trigger powerful cravings" (Courtwright, 2001, p. 94). The seduced body is thus a body whose environment has been rewired by things to desire its own ruin.

Poe supplies the third and most extreme modality, in which the coercive force is neither a master nor a market but something inside the body. "The Black Cat" opens with a self-diagnosis, in which the narrator's "disease" is alcoholism, and "what disease is like Alcohol" (Poe, 2006, p. 184). The phrasing matters. The narrator occupies the double position of patient and diagnostician, and that split forms the rhetorical core of the addiction narrative. He then names his agent as "the Fiend Intemperance" (Poe, 2006, p. 184). The drink is a "fiend" that possesses, an agent planted in the foreground of the tale.

The gouging of the cat's eye is the scene where the actant becomes flesh. A "gin-nurtured" malice "thrilled every fibre" of the narrator's body, and his "original soul" fled (Poe, 2006, p. 184). Malice here has a material substrate. It is a substance-fed entity, the gin its nutrient, the body its culture. This is Bennett's claim that nonhuman materials compose the human, pushed to its Gothic limit. And Poe supplies the conceptual twin in "The Imp of the Perverse", where perverseness is defined as "a mobile without motive", an "overwhelming tendency to do wrong for the wrong's sake", a "radical, a primitive impulse" (Poe, 2006, p. 230). Structurally, the Imp proves an actant inhabiting the body, or a nonhuman force that "does things" from within.

"The Imp of the Perverse" unlocks the possessed body, because it names an actant that needs no external institution in order to function. Perverseness, in Poe's definition, is a mobile without motive, a radical, primitive impulse, an overwhelming tendency to do wrong for the wrong's sake (Poe, 2006, p. 230). Unlike the whip or the tavern, which need a master or a market to direct them, the Imp directs itself, given that it is the actant fully internalized, the governance of power migrated into the flesh. Poe's modality therefore marks the limit case of the traumatized body. Douglass's body is governed from without, Whitman's from the side, Poe's from within, by a perverse agency that the subject experiences as his own even as it destroys him. The possessed body is thus the body in which the distinction between self and actant has collapsed.

The violence chain confirms the structure: the eye of Pluto, the hanging of the cat, the murder of the wife, the walling-up of her body, the shout that betrays the corpse. Each step depends on the substance, which produces the violence and drowns its memory at once. "I again plunged into excess", the narrator says, "and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed" (Poe, 2006, p. 184). The loop runs drink, violence, remorse, drink to drown memory, and new violence. It has a name of its own. Althofer and Musgrove (2018), taking up Derrida's sense of the pharmakon as at once poison and antidote, describe a Gothic pharmacography running from seduction to disablement, in which the drug taken for escape turns into what enslaves the consumer. Poe's "Fiend Intemperance" is that structure personified, an agent that inflicts the wound and drowns its memory in one motion. Space, too, takes its order from the substance, in which the "den of more than infamy" centres on "one of the immense hogsheads of gin, or of rum", which "constituted the chief furniture of the apartment" (Poe, 2006, p. 185). The cask, not the drinker, is the room's protagonist. Festivity has imploded, from public carnival to the solitary, mechanical repetition of the "vile haunts" he "now habitually frequented" (Poe, 2006, p. 185). The possessed body is the body from which the substance has expelled the social altogether, leaving only the drug and the Imp.

The structure is not peculiar to these two tales. "The Fall of the House of Usher" dissolves the family mansion and the body in the same downward motion, and "The Cask of Amontillado" yokes wine to live burial. In each, the substance mediates a collapse of the human into the material. In "The Cask of Amontillado", the wine is the bait and the building is the tomb, and the two meet when Montresor walls his victim among the casks of the catacombs. The substance does more than occasion the murder, and it serves as the instrument and the alibi simultaneously, the promise of pleasure that delivers the body to the wall. "The Fall of the House of Usher" performs the same collapse at the level of structure, dissolving

the boundary between the decaying mansion and the decaying sibling bodies until house and flesh become one falling thing. Across the tales the pattern holds that a substance offers intimacy and returns entombment, and the human is drawn into the material. This is the possessed body taken to its logical limit, where the actant has wholly expelled the social and the only remaining relationship is the one between a body and the thing that buries it. Poe's distinctive contribution lies here, showing the actant serving no social institution, only a pure, self-annihilating antisociality that strips the person of society, pet, and home until all are ruined.

The coercion in Poe is internalized to the point that it appears as the narrator's own will, yet the text repeatedly exposes the will as possessed. The narrator reports that "[t]he fury of a demon" instantly possessed him the moment he resolves to gouge the cat's eye (Poe, 2006, p. 184). The violence is his, but the agency is attributed elsewhere, to a fiend that has entered the flesh. This inverts Douglass. His coercion is external and named, where the master's whip makes the actant's work visible, and Poe's Fiend Intemperance makes it invisible by lodging it inside the victim. The reader is enlisted in the same structure. The narrator's calm, almost judicial tone—he calls his account "a series of mere household events" (Poe, 2006, p. 183) invites the reader to consume the violence as entertainment, so that the pleasure taken in the tale replicates the pleasure taken in the drink. Poe's distinctive contribution is therefore double. He shows the actant serving no social institution, and he shows the reader as the final actant in the assemblage, the one whose enjoyment completes the circuit of ruin.

Table 1
The three forms compared

Form	Text	Operation of the thing	Source of power	Bodily consequence
Governed	Douglass, autobiographies	Forced ingestion (molasses + whip)	Slavery's governance	Desire rewritten; aversion trained
Seduced	Whitman, *Franklin Evans*	Sensory capture (music, tavern, bottle)	Commercial capital	Progressive addiction; bodily discoloration
Possessed	Poe, "The Black Cat" / "The Imp of the Perverse"	Internal possession (Fiend / perverseness)	Internalized (no external power)	Unchecked violence; body-horror

Source: compiled by the author from the passages cited in the text

The three forms differ on exactly one variable, the location of coercive power, and agree on the ontology: an addictive actant rewrites the body. Whether a master wields the substance, a capitalist sells it, or the flesh incubates it, the result is the same traumatized body. Read in this light, the taxonomy maps the variable location of power instead of sorting characters into types. Douglass's body is governed because the coercive force is external and sovereign, Whitman's is seduced because it is external and capitalistic, and Poe's is possessed because the force has migrated inside the flesh. Those differences matter. They determine whether the traumatized body can be resisted (Douglass's Juba), reformed (Whitman's

confession), or only destroyed (Poe's catastrophe). Yet the shared ontology maintains that in every case an addictive actant rewrites the body in collusion with a governance of power.

The taxonomy also rebukes the term addiction itself. In the moral and medical frames, addiction names a property of the person, a vice or a disease located in the will or the brain. Read through new materialism, addiction names instead a property of an assemblage, namely what happens when an actant-substance conspires with a governance of power to rewrite a body. The three modalities are three ways of organising the assemblage, and they differ in who holds the whip, the till, or the will. To say that Douglass, Whitman, and Poe depict addiction is therefore less informative than to say they depict three arrangements of the same human–nonhuman composition.

The Traumatized Body: The Double Coding of Pleasure and Terror

The three forms are three faces of one construct, though a typology alone would have kept them apart. Examined through the lens of the traumatized body, they reveal that the construct's defining feature is a double coding of pleasure and terror, of liberation and enslavement, inscribed on the same flesh.

Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (2022) anchors the body theory. In the chapter "Innocent Amusements", she reads the enslaved person's "simulated jollity" and "coerced festivity" as part of a larger project of "dissimulat[ing] the extreme violence of the institution and disavow[ing] the pain of captivity" (p. 32). The "harsh command to merrymaking" means that the enslaved body's theatricality "emerges only in the aftermath of the body's brutal dramatic placement" (p. 67). In "Redressing the Pained Body", she turns to the pained body and its memory, the body that, in Douglass's phrase, "steals away" in flights (p. 110). Her contribution rests in showing that under slavery enjoyment is never innocent and pain is never purely pain, for power interweaves both.

Hartman's lexicon for this interweaving is richer than the single phrase "coerced festivity" suggests. She reads the enslaved person's "simulated jollity" and "instrumental recreations" (p. 32) as part of a larger investment in, and fascination with, black enjoyment that the regime itself produced, a fascination expressed in the master's harsh command to merrymaking, his bacchanals in which the enslaved body performs a joy it does not feel. Roth (2005) has shown how persistently the Dionysian and carnivalesque traditions tie licensed release to intoxication, carnival being the place where drink is permitted rather than merely present. Douglass's holiday takes that permission and makes it compulsory. Enjoyment under slavery, then, is never the slave's own but a theatricality that emerges only in the aftermath of the body's brutal placement (Hartman, 2022, p. 67). The traumatized body is therefore not confined to a body in pain alone, as the pain and the imposed pleasure are the same inscription, written by the same hand. Hartman's account thus supplies a method along with the theme of coerced festivity, namely to read the body as the site where power and matter jointly compose what feels like freedom and what is in fact bondage.

Douglass's holiday gives the slaveholding form of this structure. Merriment masks the whip, and "rational enjoyment" is "frowned upon", while "wild and low sports" are encouraged precisely because

they “disgust the slaves with their temporary freedom” (Douglass, 1994, p. 67). The coerced festivity supplies the slaveholding instance of double coding, in which the pleasure is real enough to the body but engineered to reproduce bondage. Whitman supplies the capitalistic instance, force without the name of force. Music and merrymaking are the “seductive enchantments” (Whitman, 2007, p. 113) that mask the fall, and the narrator’s “delicious” (p. 27) sensations at the saloon are genuinely pleasurable and genuinely ruinous. The double coding here is achieved by the market, the master having stepped out of the frame. Poe supplies the aesthetic instance. The Gothic body-horror of “The Black Cat” sutures the reader’s pleasure in the tale to the victim’s pain within one textual structure, wherein the narrator’s calm, almost clinical tone reports violence that the reader consumes as entertainment. The traumatized body’s double coding is here transposed into form, the pleasure of reading and the pain of the body coexist in a single sentence.

In each text the trauma has no single event behind it. What traumatizes the body is a structural fusion, where an addictive actant and a governance of power act on it at once, so that what feels like liberation (the drink, the holiday, the tale) is also what binds. The structure has a modern analogue in Berlant’s cruel optimism, attachment to an object that promises the flourishing it obstructs (Berlant, 2011). Berlant’s obstacle, though, stays impersonal, whereas here a master, a market, or an internalised governance supplies the object, and the obstruction serves someone’s interest.

Read together, the three texts stage the double coding on three registers of power. Douglass’s holiday is its sovereign instance, in which the pleasure is commanded and the terror is the whip that stands behind the command. Whitman’s saloon is its capitalistic instance, where the pleasure is sold and the terror is the slow ruin that the market externalises onto the body. Poe’s tale is its intimate instance, for the pleasure (the reader’s, the narrator’s) and the terror (the victim’s, the narrator’s own) come from the same prose and the same substance, with no external hand required. In Douglass the double coding is dramatized by the holiday that masks the lash, in Whitman by the “seductive enchantments” that mask the fall, and in Poe by the calm narrative tone that reports violence the reader consumes as entertainment. The traumatized body is a flesh on which pleasure and terror have been made indistinguishable by an actant working with power, and the structure remains legible in all three. The paper’s working definition therefore withholds the psychoanalytic and cultural-trauma registers, because the trauma here is corporeal and political, with nothing intrapsychic about it. It is also why Scarry’s account of the body in pain (1985) accordingly serves as a useful but deliberately subordinate interlocutor rather than as the frame.

The new-materialist frame earns its keep precisely where the moral and medical frames fail. To read molasses as an actant is to stop reading it as a rhetorical ornament of the master’s cruelty, to read the tavern as an assemblage is to stop reading it as a site of individual vice, and to read the cat’s death as the working of a gin-nurtured malice is to stop reading it as the mere evil of a madman. The move relocates addiction. No longer a defect of the will, it becomes a reconfiguration of force within a human–nonhuman assemblage. Yet this gain carries a risk that must be named. Bennett’s “vibrant matter” can drift towards depoliticisation, a celebration of vitality that forgets the terrain on which thing-power flows.

The corrective is already embedded in the corpus. Hartman's account of slavery's violence and Mintz's political economy insist that the substance always arrives freighted with power. The molasses carries the sugar–rum triangle inside it, and the tavern is a limbic-capitalist machine before it is a convivial room. The paper therefore keeps the non-moralizing language and the political correction in tension.

The stakes are visible in Bennett's own closing creed, where she writes that she believes in "one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen", and that "it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies" (Bennett, 2010, p. 122). Generous towards things, the creed seeks to chasten fantasies of human mastery. Yet that same generosity, left unguarded, can dissolve the specific gravity of power—the whip, the plantation, the profit—into a generalised liveliness. Keep Hartman (2022) and Mintz (1985) as permanent correctives, and the matter-energy Bennett (2010) celebrates is already a matter-energy organised by slavery and capital. The traumatized body is what this guarded celebration finally describes, namely, the body doubly coded by pleasure and terror, rewritten by an addictive actant conspiring with a governance of power, whether that governance is the sovereign command of the plantation, the profit logic of the tavern, or the internalized Imp that needs no external hand at all.

Conclusion

This paper sets out to move nineteenth-century American addiction narrative from the moral-medical frame into a materialist and corporeal one. It reaches three principal findings. First, addictive substances in Douglass, Whitman, and Poe act, and they join persons, institutions, and spaces to compose human–nonhuman assemblages, leaving behind the roles of metaphor and backdrop. Second, those assemblages produce three modalities of the addicted body—the governed, the seduced, and the possessed—which differ only in the location of coercive power yet share one material-political structure. Third, the concept that gathers them is the traumatized body, or the flesh doubly coded by pleasure and terror, rewritten by an addictive actant in collusion with a governance of power.

The paper relocates the study of addiction in nineteenth-century American literature out of the moral-defect and disease frameworks and into the analytic terminology of thing-power. It connects global commodity history, Black studies, and Poe's Gothic tradition, redrawing the map of addiction in the period. And it answers, with a concrete textual instance, the call within new-materialist criticism to bring thing-power to bear on the body, showing what that theory looks like when it is made to touch the flesh.

A materialist close reading that inventories the actants in a scene offers itself as a reusable procedure, something to pick up again on the next passage. It asks of any passage in which a substance appears: what is the thing doing, who is it conspiring with, and what body results? Applied beyond the three authors, the procedure can reopen the temperance novel, the bar-room fiction, and the postbellum realist text as scenes of human–nonhuman composition, and that a description displaces their standing as moral or medical documents. The procedure disciplines its reader against both the moralizing that blames the will and the biomedical reduction that locates the cause in neurons alone. It insists, instead, on the assemblage.

The argument also complicates the familiar map of nineteenth-century American literature. The 1840s are usually divided into the transcendentalist, the sentimental, the slave-narrative, and the Gothic, while this paper proposes a cross-cutting axis, the literature of the actant-substance, along which Douglass, Whitman, and Poe, otherwise shelved apart, turn out to write the same body from three positions of power. The traumatized body is thus a structure shared by the decade's most disparate writers, and to call it the theme of a single subgenre would be to understate its reach.

The three modalities, read together, also disclose a gradient of political visibility. The governed body is the easiest to indict, because its coercion is named; the seduced body is harder, because its coercion wears the face of pleasure; the possessed body is hardest, because its coercion has migrated inside the victim and presents as his own will. This paper therefore aims to make the invisible coercions visible again, to read the seduced and the possessed bodies as governance, however they may present themselves, whether as freedom or as fate. The traumatized body names what is left when that reading is complete, a flesh on which power and matter have jointly written the same line, and which no single theory—moral, medical, or material—can fully possess.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Y. L. wrote the whole manuscript, and she takes full responsibility for writing, reviewing, and editing.

Data Availability

The materials supporting the findings of this study are the published literary texts identified in Supporting Material S1 and the coding scheme and quotation locators in S2 and S3. No new empirical data were generated. The texts are not reproduced for copyright reasons; all quotations carry page locators to the editions cited.

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