Title of Paper: ‘The Worrying Torment That Was His Portion’: Gout, Debt, and Over-consumption in Ellen Wood’s East Lynne
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Abstract:

This paper analyzes the relationship and similarities between two forms of overconsumption, gout and debt, in Ellen Wood’s Gothic sensation novel East Lynne. Published in 1861, the novel articulates a number of anxieties plaguing Victorian society, prevalent among which is the issue of overconsumption that is exemplified in the characters of Lord Mount Severn, who suffers from both gout and debt, and the young heir Frances Levison, who racks up debts recklessly. I use seventeenth-century playwright Thomas Dekker’s metaphor of ‘City Gout’ for debt (coined in the second of his popular pamphlet sequence, the Bellman Series) as a means of further solidifying the cultural relationship between these two conditions. I argue that Wood uses these two like states as a means of providing commentary upon the wanton overconsumption that she saw threatening to swallow up the Victorians.

Keywords: gout, debt, East Lynne, consumption, Victorian, Thomas Dekker, anxieties, Gothic novel

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Images of gout filled the pages of *Punch* and other British publications in the nineteenth century—overweight men with linen booties loll on couches, satanic creatures poke, prod, and gnaw the toes of well-dressed elderly gentlemen, and caricatured quacks offer vile, ludicrous remedies to desperate, corpulent men. Advertisements for medications also littered most of these periodicals, further evidence of a country lamed by this curse. As well, gout played a consistent supporting role in the fictions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; bumbling, often comic characters plagued with gout hobble across the pages of such novels as *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, *Roderick Random*, *The Countess of Dellwyn*, *Persuasion*, and *Bleak House*. Many of these depictions are exaggerated and satirical, but they represent what was a relatively widespread and serious problem for British men of the upper classes during the nineteenth century: the dreaded and extremely painful gout. In contrast to the often amusing representations of gouty characters in the novels of Smollett, Sarah Fielding, Austen, and Dickens, Ellen Wood’s sensation novel *East Lynne* provides a much more serious critical commentary upon this prevalent disease.

The frequency of gout within Victorian society at first might seem to be contradictory. After all, the Victorians are the proponents of temperance and moderation. One 1847 article in *Ainsworth’s Magazine*, “Maxims for the Newly-Married,” exemplifies the Victorian mindset. The author stresses self-control above all things for newly married couples:

> In all that concerns conduct in life of both sexes, the golden rule of moderation should be most carefully attended to. Excesses of disuse and abuse are equally prejudicial to human nature. Providence has given to both sexes moral and intellectual functions and physical powers, in the moderate use of all of which there is always pleasure, in their neglect danger to health, in their abuse the necessary punishment of pain and misery. These are the natural and moral laws, obedience to which procures health and happiness, as sure as their infringement entails unhappiness and disease (“Maxims” 523).

The emphasis on moderation and self-control within this passage exemplifies the Victorian preoccupation with temperance. The author goes on to give specific advice as to how exactly these married couples ought to observe self-control and moderation in all aspects of their lives. With regard to diet, the writer cautions, the types and quantities of food as well as dining hours should be kept “regular” so as not to “vex” the digestive system (“Maxims” 523). The “disease of excess” caused by a lack of moderation in this case might certainly refer to gout, as it is known to cause much “pain and misery” to the sufferer. These extended cautions and pleas for prudence evidence Victorian anxieties about the consequences of immoderation.

Gout was known to be a disease that physically manifested the immoderation and indulgence of the sufferer, thus no other ailment more effectively embodied the result of habitual intemperance and gluttony. The seriousness of this disease was often underestimated, however, not only with regard to the bodily complaints of the victim but also the causes of the disease.

Today we know that gout is a rheumatic disease that is characterized by “needle-like deposits” of uric acid in connective tissue, in the joint space between two bones, or in both. It is “one of the most painful rheumatic diseases” (NIAMSD).
Major causes of gout include genetics (18% of people with gout have a family history of the disease), gender and age (men aged 40-50 are far more prone to gout), being overweight, drinking too much alcohol, and eating too many foods rich in purines (NIAMSD). Foods rich in purines include grouse, organ meats, sweetbreads, shellfish, veal, oysters, goose, partridges, and pheasants, as well as alcohol, particularly fortified alcohols such as port wine, champagne, and claret (NIAMSD). It is no surprise, then, that gout affected mainly members of the upper class, as persons of the lower classes could not afford such protein-rich foods and costly drinks; instead, they existed largely on bread, potatoes and a few root vegetables, and weak tea. In *Consuming Fictions: Gender, Class, and Hunger in Dickens’s Novels*, Gail Turley Houston provides an example of a typical menu for the upper-class Victorian household:

**First Course:**
- One Soup—say Puree of Artichokes—One Fish, Cod Slices in Oyster Sauce—Remove with Smelts or White Bait
- Removes—Saddle of a Mutton—Turkey in Celery Sauce
- Two Entrees—Cutlets a la Provencale—Sweetbreads larded in any White Sauce

**Second Course**
- Two roasts—Partridges—Wild Ducks
- Jelly of Fruit—Cheesecakes—Meringue a la Crème
- Vegetable—French Salad on the Sideboard
- Removes—Ice Pudding—Beignet Soufflé
- Dessert of eleven dishes (8).

This menu is mind-boggling, even for today’s readers, who are well-accustomed to large portions and protein- and sugar-rich diets. If the average dining experience for the upper classes involved so many of the foods we know now to be richest in purines (not to mention the possible variety of fortified alcohol that would have accompanied the meal such as port, champagne, claret, or liqueurs), then it follows logically that having gout was indicative of high social station during this time.

The Victorians were fairly certain of the central cause of gout: too much rich food and drink, which certainly characterized the eating and drinking habits of many members of the upper classes in Great Britain. However, Britons had for many years associated gout with other “social” diseases; seventeenth-century physician Thomas Sydenham, who was known as the “English Hippocrates,” noted “Gouty patients are, generally either old men, or men who have so worn themselves out in youth as to have brought on a premature old age—of such dissolute habits, none being more common than the premature and excessive indulgence in venery, and the like exhausting passions” (Sydenham qtd. in Rodnan 181). The theories of this famous doctor were well-known and still carried considerable weight nearly 200 years later, thus this association of gout and venery would have been known and seems to have been accepted still. One medicine demonstrates this connection by advertising a cure for gout that would alleviate “Gleets, and other such WEAKNESSES […] the Ruin and Bain of the More Flourishing Part of Mankind, Punished in the Person of Onan.”
The key similarity between venereal disease and gout, then, other than the victims, was that both ailments were considered to be caused by overindulgence. Ralph Blegborough, a London surgeon, published a popular treatise in 1803 that also connects excessive sexual intercourse and gout, thereby following in Sydenham’s stead. He asserts that the *post coitum* ‘collapse’ predisposes one to gout, and the severest attacks of gout are typically followed by strenuous sexual exertion (Porter and Rousseau 130). Gout was then associated with overindulgence of both sexual and gustatory appetites.

If the disease itself was the result of excess, treatments for gout continued along the same lines. Over the years they varied depending on what was in vogue, but their extreme natures remained fairly consistent. During the seventeenth century, one recommended treatment included the following gruesome instructions:

*Take two spaniel whelps, two days old, scald them, and cause the entrails to be taken out, but wash them not. Take four ounces brimstone, four ounces turpentine, one ounce spermaceti, a handful of nettles, and a quantity of oil of balm, and put all the aforesaid in them stamped, and serve them up, and roast them, and anoint you where your grief is* ("The Gout" Chambers’s 464).

Such grisly remedies did not die out, despite the many medical advances of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the Victorians maintained their share of treatments for gout that would make many a modern reader feel squeamish. *Chambers’s Journal* reported that one anonymous Cardinal bathed his legs every morning in pig’s blood because it helped ease the pain of his gout ("The Gout" Chambers’s 463). Some people even took to carrying or wearing amulets to prevent the disease; the right foot of a frog wrapped in a deerskin was said to protect against gout (Porter and Rousseau 126). The waters of Bath and other fashionable spas were also thought to be beneficial to sufferers of gout; by the early nineteenth century, though, some doctors began to recommend sea-bathing in favor of such chic resorts (Porter and Rousseau 126), and sufferers of gout and other rheumatic diseases began to populate seaside towns and villages, as evidenced in Part Two of *East Lynne* when Isabel Vane visits Boulogne for her health. Though ‘taking the waters’ at these places may have provided some relief of gout symptoms in the joints, the atmospheres of these watering holes were not conducive to the patients’ well-being; the baths at Bath, for example, were staffed by servants carrying and fetching rich delicacies and stout ports and liquors, all of which were aggravating for gout symptoms. It seems that even in the attempt to cure gout, sufferers still erred too far on the side of excess. Gout was associated with overindulgence in all stages—prevention, contraction, and treatment.

Gout’s prevalence in nineteenth-century literature then serves as a metaphor for a society foundering on excessive indulgence. The Victorians commonly practiced the trope of using a single diseased individual to represent a social problem (Houston 11), thus an army of gouty individuals limping through the nineteenth-century novel signals a significant social and physical disease. Does the illness of British society then simply mean that too many people are developing gout? Yes and no. In this instance, gout is only a symptom of the real disease, overconsumption.

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1 Gleets is a term for chronic gonorrhea.
During the mid-Victorian period Great Britain was at the height of imperial expansion. The British Empire had colonial outposts all over the world, in Hong Kong, India, the West Indies, the Americas, and Africa. The principal consequence of this expansion was in its exploitative effects upon the native peoples and environments of these various places. Because of this expansion of the empire and the subsequent exploitation of the land and its inhabitants, these settlements exported many new goods into Great Britain. Britons were now able to buy all sorts of imported foods and other goods such as vanilla, cocoa, tea, sugar, silks, china, and jewels, and buy them they did (Shields 216). The British upper-class table, as evidenced from the previously cited menu, contained plenty of the fruits of empire. Sugar and spices, once extremely rare, became everyday edibles. All of this consumption, though, certainly had consequences. One effect of overconsumption was obviously the physical ailment gout, but there was another, perhaps even more serious, consequence of this tendency toward gluttony.

Around 1608, playwright and dramatist Thomas Dekker published a series of popular pamphlets, the Bellman series. Dekker himself was a prisoner for debt of the King’s Bench, and he uses the second Bellman pamphlet, *English Villainies Discovered by Lantern and Candlelight*, to describe the problem of imprisonment for debt, which he metaphorically identifies as “City Gout” (Benbow 52). What better metaphor for debt than that of the disease of gout? Both conditions were thought to be caused by overindulgence and gluttony: the sufferer of gout ate and drank far more than was good for him, and the debtor exceeded his income by spending beyond his means. As well, their waxing and waning natures often mirrored one another: a debtor might enjoy periods free from the harassment of creditors and the gout-sufferer would have days free from pain. However, the negligence of each respective sufferer’s finances or diet would eventually lead to “worrying torment.” Debt and gout were common problems in Great Britain in the nineteenth century, and their likening in *East Lynne*, particularly after Dekker’s popular work a few centuries before, seems natural.

Interestingly, though, despite the fact that gout was a serious and painful problem for the sufferer, depictions and literary representations of the disease are often comical. Though from the eighteenth century, Tobias Smollett’s Squire Matthew Bramble from *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* is perhaps the most famous gouty, comical figure in English literature; his life depends on his gout, and the temper tantrums he throws render him ridiculous. In the nineteenth century, though, there is no shortage of amusing gouty characters in the British novel. Sir Leicester Dedlock in Dickens’s *Bleak House* fairly crows about having the disease as a part of his noble inheritance, while the greedy, splenetic General Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, as Akiko Takei argues convincingly, has gout but refuses treatments for it because he is proud to have the disease, as it signifies his upper-class station (268). Even George Eliot allows herself a sly jab at the disease: Dr. Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, who at the beginning of the novel was ambitiously planning on making great medical discoveries and finding a cure for typhus, is marked as a failure at the end and was pathetically only noted within the medical profession for writing a treatise on gout. These rather comical representations of gout are common, yet one might wonder why the painful disease and the victims are satirized so frequently. The
answer may lie in Elaine Scarry’s explanation of pain in The Body in Pain. She argues that when one speaks about another person’s pain, it is with a degree of separation, so that even if one wants to, he/she cannot grasp the nature and seriousness of that pain; in contrast, one “cannot not grasp” the nature and degree of his/her own pain (Scarry 4). Thus, even though Smollett, Austen, and Eliot all certainly knew people with gout, none of them actually suffered from the disease, so it was easy for them to satirize it within their works. Dickens is another story; he was diagnosed with gout later in life, but the work in which the disease is featured most prominently, Bleak House, was written more than a decade before his complaints began (Slater 582). Further, gout was also considered by many to be a self-imposed disease, simply the result of gluttony and overindulgence, so making fun of it might have been a way of shaming those who had brought the ailment upon themselves through intemperate consumption, much in the way people joke about those who suffer from sexually transmitted diseases and infections today. There was a prevailing attitude of “he/she brought it upon him/herself,” which many people believed rendered mockery of the illness acceptable to provide a lesson and warning for others.

Victorian writer Wilkie Collins did famously have gout, but even the corpulent Count Fosco in The Woman in White, an excellent candidate for the disease based on his corpulence, middle age, and high social station, does not have it. Collins, then, would not satirize a disease he knew to be extremely painful from personal experience. Indeed, the pain of gout led to Collins’s dependence on laudanum, arsenic, and nitroglycerines (Porter and Rousseau 174-5). As well, Ellen Wood does not seem to mock gout and its victims in her highly popular sensation novel East Lynne, even though she did not have the disease herself. She did know pain, though, as she suffered from an agonizing curvature of the spine since her early teens (Jay xvi). Nonetheless, her portrayal of Lord Mount Severn in East Lynne, a sufferer of gout, points to a more serious concern for the physical disease and the underlying social problem it represents. Wood’s likening of Lord Mount Severn’s disease with debt and overconsumption in East Lynne exemplifies prevalent Victorian anxieties about wanton immoderation in an age of colonial expansion and dependence upon material goods; her continual preoccupation with debt and over-expenditure throughout the course of the novel serves to provide commentary on a nation whose gluttony threatens to consume it.

Scholarship on East Lynne itself is rather scant; most scholars focus on the sociocultural implications of Lady Isabel’s scandalous behavior in running away from her husband Archibald Carlyle with Francis Levinson for studies of Victorian society and women’s roles in particular. Critics such as Gail Walker explore Isabel Vane’s ‘sin’ of flouting Victorian mores and subsequent punishment of having to see her children raised by another, a punishment Walker argues would resonate strongly with the Victorian female reader, who would have been taught that chastity and marriage and subsequent motherhood were the goals she was to strive for above all others (Walker 28). Walker also references Elaine Showalter, who argues that East Lynne is a radical, subversive novel for its sympathetic portrayal of an adulterous heroine as well as the explosion of repressed female emotions that occur throughout the novel (24). Ellen Bayuk Rosenman also explores the agency that such explosions of
emotion enable Isabel, particularly with regard to what she calls “melodramatic masochism,” the result of Isabel’s misdeeds and painful accident; she argues that it is only through Isabel’s transgressions and subsequent demotion in class that she can pass as a governess, which allows her greater privilege within the Carlyle house than she ever had as Lady Isabel, wife of Archibald (27). Andrew Maunder, though, provides an important New Historicist interpretation of East Lynne in his article “Stepchildren of Nature: East Lynne and the Spectre of Female Degeneracy.” Reading the novel through the context of British society in the mid nineteenth century, a place that an 1860 edition of The Lancet called “a literal breeding ground of decay,” Maunder explores the trope of degeneration and decay within the novel as a metaphor for what many Britons thought was a moldering society, particularly with regard to an apparent national loss of feminine purity and propriety (Maunder 59). These works, while all providing valuable interpretations of the novel, center almost entirely on feminist social critiques. I intend to enhance such readings of the novel by focusing less on gender and more on a national social problem that, while tied to gender, can be seen as having perhaps a more universal effect on Great Britain. Few if any critics have addressed the issue of gout within the story; thus, my discussion of gout and overconsumption in East Lynne will help to provide a greater understanding of the cultural context from which Ellen Wood produced the novel.

The topic of gout and overconsumption in English literature in general is also one that deems further investigation and analysis. Aside from Roy Porter and G.S. Rousseau’s Gout: The Patrician Malady, which covers both a social and medical history of the disease, few if any scholars have produced book-length works that examine social attitudes toward gout. While Porter and Rousseau’s book is invaluable to any scholar studying social and cultural representations of gout, their work does not examine any literary work in detail, as their purpose is to provide a broader overview of the medical and social aspects of the disease; indeed, mentions of literary representations within their work serve merely to highlight general attitudes toward gout. With the exception of Akiko Takei’s previously mentioned work, which concerns Northanger Abbey, other publications regarding gout and literature such as David S. Shields’s “The World I Ate: The Prophets of Global Consumption Culture” focus only on gout in the literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Gail Turley Houston’s Consuming Fictions does address the issue of food consumption in Victorian fiction, but her work focuses primarily on the opposite problem: lack of consumption, or anorexia, and she looks specifically at Dickens’s works in her analysis. This lack of nineteenth-century literary scholarship focusing on the representations of gout in literature is surprising, as both the frequency of its mention in nineteenth-century British periodicals as well as Porter and Rousseau’s dubbing of the Romantic and Victorian eras as “the Indian Summer of gout” reveal that the disease was certainly alive and well during this time (Porter and Rousseau 143). My work will attempt to begin eliminating this absence of discussion and analysis of what was a prevalent ailment in Victorian England and is reflected as such within its literature.

Lord Mount Severn, gout’s victim in East Lynne, is introduced in the opening sentences of the novel. The aging aristocrat is sitting on an easy-chair, and his “once attractive face bore the pale, unmistakable look of dissipation” (Wood 5). Not only
does ‘dissipation’ indicate disintegration or moldering (“dissipate,” def. 4b), but the *OED* also defines the word as “to scatter or consume wastefully (money, resources, faculties)” (“dissipate,” def. 5). Thus, the initial description of his very face immediately suggests the peer’s over-consuming and squandering ways. One of his feet is also “cased in folds of linen, as it rested on a soft velvet ottoman; speaking of gout as plainly as any foot ever spoke yet” (Wood 5). Thus, Lord Mount Severn is identified as an avid consumer of rich foods and drinks by his gouty condition, as Victorian readers would have immediately recognized. This picture of the gouty foot is also significant; the foot itself “speak[s] of gout as plainly as any foot ever spoke yet,” a grammatical construction that indicates the foot itself is active in this description. The gouty foot, then, and, by association the disease itself, takes on an active role within the illustration of Lord Mount Severn. It is perhaps his most distinguishing characteristic within the opening scenes of the novel. This active role of the gout is ironic, though, as its very action is the direct cause of Mount Severn’s inaction and inability to move, for which the earl excuses himself to Archibald Carlyle, his guest, for his not rising to greet him and for the necessity of having him ring the bell for the servant later. The crippling effects of the gout leave Mount Severn virtually powerless in his own home.

Though Mount Severn’s gout suggests gluttony, readers do not have to wait long to learn that his consumption in other areas is also excessive. He is identified as “the most reckless among the reckless, […] the spendthrift among spendthrifts, […] a gamester among the gamesters, […] a gay man outstripping the gay” (Wood 5). The earl’s history soon reveals that, along with having gout, Mount Severn is deeply, ruinously in debt. His description causes the knowledge to come as little surprise; he is apparently the most extreme in any area of vice. The most reckless, the most careless with money, the biggest gambler, and the “gayest” of all others-- the extremity of Lord Mount Severn’s behavior and his utter disregard for pecuniary conservation identify him as a natural candidate for both gout and debt, those diseases of over-consumption. Further, the phrase “the gay man outstripping the gay” also indicates sexual overindulgence, as older, now obsolete (though common during the nineteenth century) usages of the word “gay” indicate promiscuity, hedonism, dissolution, and lewdness (“gay,” defs. 4a and 4b). Lord Mount Severn, then, has attained the trifecta of the effects of Victorian over-consumption: gout, debt, and a reputation for promiscuity.

Mount Severn’s debt and gout appear interrelated; they operate in essentially the same way. Both resulted from habitual overindulgence, and both now trouble him chronically. His ruin from debt “had not come yet—that is, it had not overwhelmed him,” but the “worrying torment that was his portion [was] well-nigh driving him to distraction” (Wood 6). This description could easily be applied not only to the mental anguish and anxiety the lord feels as a result of his debt, but also to the suffering his gout causes him. The disease is characterized by an often lingering ache that may abate but never completely disappears between severe attacks (NIAMSD); it is a gnawing, persistent pain that clings to the sufferer and is never totally forgotten, as is Mount Severn’s deep debt and the possible embarrassment of the foreclosure of creditors that may result from it at any time.
Lord Mount Severn’s character of a wasteful and unrepentant spendthrift is solidified when the narrator informs readers that “Years ago, by dint of looking things steadily in the face and by economizing, he might have retrieved his position, but he had done what most people will do in such cases—put off the evil day sine die” (Wood 6). The earl, then, seems to have knowingly continued his wanton spending and ignored the possible consequences of his overindulgence, even to the point that he has left his daughter completely unprovided for upon his death. Lady Isabel is entirely destitute after Mount Severn dies; she even has to ask her relative, the new Lord Mount Severn, for pocket money before journeying to live with him and his wife at Castle Marling. While he is alive, the gouty earl continues to mortgage both his health and credit to an unthinkable extent through his reckless overconsumption.

The earl’s gratuitousness and extravagance in life and money matters seem directly linked to gustatory indulgence, as evidenced in the scene during which Carlyle dines with him at East Lynne. The peer, though he clearly knows he is suffering from gout, does not refrain from setting a grand table full of “rich viands, too varied and rich for [his] gout” (Wood 66). Nor is he willing to skip his nightly wine: “every glass was little less than poison to him in his state of health, but he would not forgo it” (Wood 67). The earl continues to willfully ensnare himself deeper and deeper into the clutches of gout. His doctors have advised him to change his diet in order to alleviate his own suffering, but he steadfastly refuses—he is too fond of the pleasures of the moment in the form of delicious foods and beverages to practice any self-denial to assuage future pain. Just as the earl refused to economize in order to save his finances years ago, he also refuses to temper his eating and drinking as a means of easing his gout. His neglect of both conditions further heightens their similarities, and Wood’s portrayal of the peer provides a shocking example of wanton overconsumption and indulgence that would have appalled many of her Victorian readers.

The lavish dining table at East Lynne seems to be a contributor not only to Mount Severn’s gout, but also to his debt. Carlyle notices “the unnecessary profusion of splendor” when he sits down to dine with the earl (Wood 66). The table affords a “display of shining silver, of glittering glass, of costly china, […] various wines and rich viands” (Wood 66). There are also many servants in attendance who are all dressed in expensive livery. The description of the dinner scene is important for several reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates the earl’s unwillingness to economize in his diet; as I discussed above, he wants those rich foods and wines because of the momentary pleasures they afford him, evidence of his greediness. Further, the spread of the food and drink on the table emphasizes its cost; the array is “unnecessary and unjustifiable,” but again, the earl likes presiding over a well-stocked table and so is unwilling to economize in appearances. He is dining only with his daughter and Carlyle, but he wants to appear to advantage nonetheless. Mount Severn’s insistence on maintaining such a grand table at home indicates his dependence on consuming these goods and his need to maintain the appearance of wealth and high station. Because of this dependence on overconsumption, the earl’s gout and his debt both continue to worsen.

Soon the Earl of Mount Severn is unable to hold his debt at bay any longer and is forced to quietly sell East Lynne. Carlyle buys the estate, but Mount Severn
The Victorian stays on there for a while to keep the sale of the estate a secret; if people knew he had sold it, his creditors would have swooped in and claimed all the money he realized from the sale, which he says he needs for his personal use, perhaps to maintain his grand lifestyle for a while longer and keep Isabel in the dark about his monetary embarrassments. Debt then serves to trap the earl at East Lynne in order to keep up appearances. The house becomes a kind of debtor’s prison for the earl; if he leaves and Carlyle takes possession as its rightful owner, his pecuniary embarrassments will become unbearable and he will be at the mercy of his creditors. Then, when the peer is finally ready to leave the house, another force keeps him prisoner there: gout. The disease comes back with a vengeance, and Mount Severn is unable to leave East Lynne ever again. His condition is unbearable: “The gout came and the gout went; not positively laying him up in bed but rendering him unable to leave his rooms” (Wood 68). The pain of the earl’s gout increases in severity, just as his debt had increased in severity and forced him to sell the estate. The mirroring actions of debt and gout that imprison the earl further solidify their relationship to continual overconsumption.

Lord Mount Severn’s gout continues to worsen. After a brief interlude from the illness in which he prepares to finally leave East Lynne with Isabel, he experiences a sudden, violent attack the night he and Isabel are to attend a concert. Though he is too ill to attend, Isabel makes ready to go and then goes to show herself off to him. She is dressed in an abundance of diamonds and a costly dress of white lace, and the earl admonishes her: “You vain child! You have dressed yourself to please your vanity!” (Wood 76). In the midst of his scolding his daughter for her “vanity,” though, the earl is struck with a paroxysm of pain and cries out—the gout has made itself known. This moment is significant; the earl is scolding Isabel for what he thinks is her conceit in dressing in her finest clothes and jewels for a simple country concert, and his gout, evidence of his own vanity, selfishness, and overconsumption, cuts short his dressing-down of Isabel. In fact Isabel has only dressed herself in that manner as a means of showing the residents of West Lynne that she thought poor Kane’s concert a worthy affair, not from any vain motives. In this scene, Mount Severn’s gout takes on an even more active role in his life and in the novel by silencing him with what is his final deadly attack.

Soon after the scene with Lady Isabel in the earl’s rooms, gout finally overcomes Lord Mount Severn. According to the footman, who heard it from the physician, the gout entered the peer’s stomach, which was sure to be fatal (Wood 82). This diagnosis might seem odd to modern readers, but to the Victorians nothing would have seemed out of place; although Alfred Baring Garrod proposed that gout was caused by deposits of uric acid in the joints as early as the 1840s (Porter and Rousseau 176), his theory was not largely accepted till the very end of the nineteenth century and was not proven till well into the twentieth. Instead, some Victorians believed that gout was caused by an inflammation of the stomach and subsequent metastasis to the limbs, and it could eventually begin moving back from the limbs into the stomach and organs, which would be fatal for the victim (“The Gout” Examiner 73). Ellen Wood took to reading medical textbooks shortly before and during the time in which she wrote East Lynne (Jay xviii), so this theory would most likely have come to her attention. There were certainly treatises and texts espousing other
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theories about the cause of gout, though, so it is significant that Wood chose for Lord Mount Severn to die from gout in this manner. She would have known the disease originated from the stomach, if not in its actual manifestation then at least from the manner in which sufferers contracted the ailment—their rich diets. That Mount Severn is said to ultimately die of gout moving into his stomach is significant, his overconsumption was linked to his stomach and in the end the disease moving into that particular place was the cause of his death. The manner of the lord’s death can be seen as more of Wood’s insightful commentary on the gluttony and self-serving ways that she and many others saw as threatening the health of British society.

The corporeal nature of debt and its likeness to gout is further exemplified after the earl’s death when his creditors arrive. Two men deceitfully gain access to the bedchamber where Mount Severn’s body lies and “arrest the corpse,” or remain there in possession of the body and refuse to let it be buried till their debt of three thousand pounds has been paid (Wood 90). Further, when other creditors attempt to collect furniture or other property in settlement for Mount Severn’s debt and find there is nothing to be collected, some reveal that they have “taken the precaution to insure the earl’s life,” or insisted upon his taking out a life insurance policy in case of his dying before repayment (Wood 95). Both of these actions on the part of the creditors, the arrest of the body and insurance policy on the earl, reveal the very personal and physical nature of debt. It is not a condition that is purely abstract or that only involves bank-notes and checks; instead, to these creditors, Mount Severn’s life and body are essentially the same. Even when there is no longer any life in the body, the creditors are willing to seize it, arrest it, and refuse to let it be buried until they are paid. Debt is then again rendered like gout in that both depend largely on the assumed good health of the body; the borrower/eater continues to expend his/her credit unwisely until the body reaches such a state of ill health/bad credit that it can no longer go on. Foreclosure or severe illness must occur. Likewise, both practices end up having sickening physical consequences for Lord Mount Severn.

The legacy of her father’s gout, both the physical disease and the ‘city’ variety, remains with Isabel forever after, particularly during her time living with Lord and Lady Mount Severn after her father’s death and then during her marriage to Archibald Carlyle. Both the new Lady Mount Severn and Miss Corny, Archibald’s sister, frequently cast up her “expense” to her, which serves to make Isabel feel guilty, particularly because she is still haunted by her father’s debts. Nonetheless, East Lynne provides no further instances of gout, either the physical ailment or the “city” variety, until Part Two of the novel, when Isabel goes to the seashore at Boulogne to recuperate under her doctor’s orders. The sea-shore was a place where sufferers of gout came in hopes of relief from sea-bathing, but such places were also crawling with gout refugees of another sort—sufferers of ‘city gout’, or debt. Carlyle warns Isabel to make acquaintances discriminately, as many of the other people at the seaside have “kites flying,” or have passed bad checks, in England and so flee to the Continent as a means of escaping debts and duns (Wood 203). With this warning, Carlyle soon goes back to East Lynne, leaving Isabel alone at the shore. His words prove ominous, as gout soon rears its ugly head again, only this time in the form of another man in debt, Frances Levison.
Francis Levison is another marked example of an upper-class man infected with “city gout.” Matthew Pires notes that his very presence in Boulogne indicates that he has an “unnatural relationship” with money, as exemplified by the way in which his anticipated inheritable wealth is much greater than his actual available resources (173). His reappearance in the novel is heralded first by the appearance of “a gouty man in a list shoe” limping along the sea-shore while Isabel sits outside to take the air. Soon after, Frances Levison “comes slowly on” to the pier (Wood 205). His appearance in close conjunction with the gouty man immediately suggests a similarity between the two. Further, Levison, though a strong young man, walks, as the gouty man does, very slowly and laboriously. The proximity and gait of the two men on the pier suggest their likeness, and it turns out they are alike, for Levison soon reveals that he is at Boulogne in an effort to escape his debts in England. The juxtaposition of the anonymous gouty man and Levison is significant. While both walk slowly on the pier, it is for very different reasons; the gout sufferer has a real physical ailment, though arguably brought on by himself, while Levison has only come to the shore to seek relief from “city gout.” His slowness is only the result of indolence, another characteristic many industrious Victorian readers might despise. Wood’s depiction of this scene and the seemingly minor detail of the gouty man in the background actually provide commentary on the prevalence of illnesses resulting from overconsumption that were infecting so many members of British society.

Levison is revealed later to be a murderer and conspirator as well as a scoundrel after he runs away with Lady Isabel, but, much like Lord Mount Severn, he is also afflicted with a severe case of overconsumption and debt. Levison has borrowed money all of his adult life on the expectation that he will inherit his uncle’s title and estate. When the old uncle does die, though, Frances Levison finds that his previous “debts and damages” were far more than he had ever imagined and thus eat up much of his inheritance (Wood 447). What is left over he immediately sets about squandering by means of gaming, racing, cock-fighting, and extravagant housekeeping. Like Isabel’s father, then, he is “a spendthrift among spendthrifts.”

Also much like Isabel’s father, Levison becomes imprisoned within his own home by debt. A particularly pressing debt forces him to stay within his home for several days; he sees no one and all callers are told he is unwell. However, also like Mount Severn, his lawyers manage to “patch [the debt] up for a time” (Wood 453) and Levison is able to leave his home again, though constantly accompanied by the gnawing ache of his “city gout.”

In contrast to Ellen Wood’s serious depiction of the actual disease gout, she does present humorous depictions of the “city gout” as applied to Francis Levison. When confined in his house by debt, Levison is terrified when he learns that a creditor has called and forced his way into the house. He “back[s] into the farthest corner of the room,” terrified of arrest by his creditors, much like a frightened puppy (Wood 453). Then, when he goes to West Lynne to stand for the parliamentary election, he is berated by the imperious Miss Corny, Archibald Carlyle’s sister, when he raises his hat to her in the countryside. A mob of laborers on the scene hears her scolding and rushes to her aid. They grab Levison and haul him, “tremble[ing] in his shoes,” to the edge of a pond (Wood 465). The pond is “green, dank, dark, slimy, sour, [and] stinking,” and Levison is disheveled from rough handling by this time, with “sundry
rents and damages appear[ing] in—in another useful garment,” presumably his trousers, thus exposing his underwear and body (Wood 466). Wood’s detailed depiction of this scene, given the relatively serious tone of the rest of the novel, plainly indicates her desire to make it a comical one. Indeed, the scenario is absurd: the pompous dandy with his pants ripped being thrown into a nasty green pond is resonant of something that might occur in a slap-stick television sit-com. Nonetheless, like humorous depictions of gout sufferers in other Victorian novels, Wood creates a comic picture, but it bestows further serious commentary upon reckless overconsumption. Levison, the seducer, jilter, murderer, and all-around bad guy experiences embarrassment of a much more public and acute kind than even poor Lady Isabel did. In fact, the humiliating pond-ducking may have been an even more fitting punishment for Levison than prison because his overconsumption and debt largely resulted from his concern with making a grand appearance. Wood’s depiction of Levison’s punishment and eventual fate indicates that he brought his punishment on himself and is to be laughed at instead of pitied, which raises an interesting question regarding Wood’s novel and those of other Victorian writers: is it acceptable to mock people for mental suffering and humiliation, but not for physical ailments? In any case, this scene at the green pond effectively seals Levison’s fate; he is soon brought to trial and convicted of murder; he lives out the remainder of his days in penal servitude, a rather poetic justice for one so pampered and idle all his life. His “city gout” is finally cured.

*East Lynne*, a wildly popular and successful novel, provides modern readers with an interesting window through which to peer into Victorian England. The novel allows readers to see the prevalence of two very serious diseases. This examination of gout and “city gout”/debt is important in not only understanding Victorian society, though; it is also relevant for twenty-first century readers. Our society is also riddled with debt and obesity— and even gout is making a comeback, as recent commercials for a particular gout medication evidence. By understanding the insensitivity with which nineteenth-century British writers treated the disease, perhaps we can in turn examine our own treatment of people whom society views as “having brought their problem on themselves” such as the obese and avoid repeating the mistakes of the Victorians by not casting out and mocking people who are suffering and thus most in need of help and understanding.
Works Cited


