

# The Tyranny of Taste: An Exploration of American Fashion in the Mid-1800s



Graham J. Patterson

*The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For the full text, please scan the QR code.*

## **Abstract**

In mid-19th-century America, clothing served multiple roles. It symbolized racial superiority for the white elites by drawing on Western traditions, styles, and history to establish dominance. Clothing also reinforced highly defined gender roles, as women's attire compensated for men's more drab attire. However, most relevant to this paper is how clothing was used to divide social classes. This paper explores how fashion evolved during the decade before, during, and after the American Civil War, focusing on its role as a marker of social class. The period from the 1850s to the 1870s was tumultuous in American history, as abolitionists clashed with Southern enslavers in a struggle over American identity, all against the backdrop of expanding industrialization. Clothing served as a key player in this struggle, as it legitimized the authority of different ruling classes. The findings of this research are that elite Americans' monopoly over fashion, and tight control of who could wear what devolved as industrialization and modernization fundamentally changed how people interacted with clothing. Elite's continued to use European court fashion to associate themselves with a hierarchical system, but new technology allowed more and more people to afford and take part in this industry. Men's fashion remained relatively stagnant during this time moving toward a more egalitarian style as industrialization lowered production, labour, and time costs. In contrast, women's fashion changed enormously over the three decades. Women were often used as symbols by men to display wealth, as new developments in manufacturing, trade, and synthetic production allowed for more elaborate stylistic expression. As styles came and went the role of fashion publications, fashion patterns, and industrial manufacturing opened up elite styles to the lower classes. This transition began the decline of elite control over clothing. Because clothing is such a visual representation of class and social mentality, examining how people regulated their attire in the past provides a deeper understanding of history as a whole. To analyze these dynamics, this paper utilizes a combination of magazines, etiquette guides, and daguerreotypes to investigate how fashion during the three decades surrounding the Civil War evolved and reflected class hierarchies. It specifically examines how the American elite dressed on the East Coast, with a primary focus on New York City and other major metropolitan centers of the era.