Money Can’t Buy Taste

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Money Can’t Buy Taste by Melissa Beatriz Nuila, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in English: Literature at San Francisco State University.

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the novel *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell displays that money and taste do not go hand in hand all the time but is a skill. *North and South* shows the difference between having wealth to afford luxury items and putting them on display or having good taste. In the thesis, it will also be argued that Gaskell uses the sense of sight and touch to differentiate what items in the spectrum of fashion and textile and home décor are of good taste or are a display of wealth. Gaskell displays this argument by having the main character, Margaret, be the pendulum of taste and be able to interact with people of a higher or lower social economic class than of her family. On both sides of the spectrums of economic class status, they are characters whom Margaret interacts that either display a sense of good taste or simply the idea of a grand display of wealth. The manner that Margaret and the other characters can detect if an item is of good taste or for a grand display of wealth is by how the items affect their senses of touch and sight in the novel.
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Introduction

Money and taste are usually assumed to go hand in hand. Many would believe one cannot have taste without money, or money without taste since, most of the time, things that are considered tasteful tend to be in the more expensive price range. At first glance, the mere idea of having good taste but not having enough money to fund such a lavish style is unthinkable. However, that is not always the case. Money and taste do have a correlation due to the expense of most high-quality items; automatically, it is assumed that since things of good taste are expensive, money should go hand in hand with taste. Yet if a person has all the money in the world, buys everything that is new and fashionable because it is expensive, and wears it all together, does that make what they are wearing tasteful? No. What they are doing is participating in mass consumption and a display of wealth. Having good taste does not always mean that one’s possessions are new and expensive; they can be something passed down. A person with good taste will know that it does not matter how much you have of something; it’s how you use it or wear it that defines whether you have only money, or good taste to go with it. Elizabeth Gaskell explores this idea of having the skill of taste and its effect with the human senses, as well as its lack of connection to the personal wealth in the novel *North and South* (1854).

To define the difference between people who are merely wealthy versus those who have both good taste and wealth, one must understand what taste is. How do people know when something is of good taste? Taste has been dissected by many authors, however, David Hume breaks down the concept of taste in a manner that makes it almost tangible enough to physically grasp. In his essay, “Of the Standard of Taste” (1751), he explains how taste is something much
more than merely choosing an object that makes one happy or sad, but rather the process of understanding the reason behind why something would cause such emotions: “But all determinations of the understanding are not right; because they have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of facts; and not always” (Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste”). Taste is something that is beyond what makes a person materially happy or sad. Instead, it is rooted in understanding on a deeper level the reason why that object brings forth an emotional connection of pleasure or revulsion.

“Of the Standard of Taste” is an essay in which Hume focuses on describing how taste is defined in the literal, written sense, such as within novels; however, he does also mention that his breakdown of taste could be used in all aspects of the world of art. Understanding this, Hume points out that something of good taste, such as a novel in this case, is something that is indeed popular, but isn’t something that is merely popular for a short time, and then quickly forgotten. Something of high taste is able to withstand the test of time; it will not become irrelevant through the passage of time, but instead will retain its value because its attraction is a constant beam that draws in appreciation throughout time. Hume uses examples such as Ogilby, Milton, Bunyan, and Addison to showcase how if a person had to rank the importance of these authors, they would likely choose Milton and Addison because of their high-brow reputations, however this is where tastes can differ. Taste is not solely based upon reputation, but how an object interacts personally with someone based on three factors; delicacy, practice, and sense.

Hume expresses that a person who has good taste, or can be taught good taste, possesses a certain understanding of delicacy. Delicacy, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means “The quality of being pleasing or delightful, esp. to the eye, mind, soul, etc.; loveliness, beauty,
Hume mentions that a person’s senses, such as sight, touch, taste, hearing, and smell, play a significant role in perceiving and understanding good taste: “Where the organs are so fine, as to allow nothing to escape them, and at the same time so exact, as to perceive every ingredient in the composition” (Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste”): this is what Hume defines to be “delicacy of taste”. Delicacy is using all of one’s senses to be able to perceive all the ingredients that factor into the experience that they are having. Understanding that the sight of something is just as important as its smell because the object is comprised of various parts of a whole is a key factor in understanding the delicacy of taste.

An example that Hume mentions to demonstrate the delicacy of taste is with a story in Don Quixote (1605). Sancho pleads that he is someone that has a great understanding of wine, however when he calls upon two kinsmen to give their opinion of the wine that was to be of excellence due to its “being old and of a good vintage”, and so proposing that it should automatically receive a favorable reaction according to Sancho, this is not the case. When one of the kinsmen tastes the wine, he mentions “the wine to be good, were it not for a small taste of leather, which he perceived in it” (Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste”). The reaction to such a supposedly fine wine that ought to be pristine due to its age is unfathomable within the narrative; after all, how could a fine wine taste like leather? The next kinsmen proceeds to taste the wine, and his reaction to it is much like the first kinsmen’s, but with a twist: “but with the reserve of a taste of iron, which he could easily distinguish” (Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste”). Hume of course mentions that both of the

kinsmen’s reactions were ridiculing judgment, but at the end of the story we are told that once and for, when all the wine was finished, at the bottom of the hogshead laid a rustic old key with a leather thong tied to it.

The kinsmen were ridicule by their peers that were enjoying the wine thinking that nothing wrong it it,due to their keen observations of taste in assessing the wine because at the time those around them thought their observations were ridiculous. Sancho simply thought that the wine’s flavor would be nothing but perfect because, as Hume mentions, it was “old and of a good vintage”, therefore it was preserved under great conditions. Although, this turned out to be far from true. Hume is referring to in having delicacy of taste, is not only using one sense to see things, but using all of one’s senses to be able to capture all the ingredients that make up the object; even the smallest factors must be perceived. Sancho simply used sight in the most basic form; Sancho saw that the wine had survived the test of time and made a hasty and false assumption that the wine therefore must be fine. However, the two kinsmen also took this observation in hand, one saying that the wine was good, but had a flavor of leather, which was not a purposeful or appropriate ingredient. The second also agreed that the wine was good, but tasted a flavor of iron, which came from the old leather key. An old key tied with a leather thong is something that is not commonly used in wine and one would not assume that such a flavor would come from such a vintage wine, but they were able to catch those two accidental ingredients even if it made no sense to anyone else, but to them it did. The two kinsmen didn’t only use their sense of sight to see that the wine was kept in good conditions, but they used their sense of taste not only at a surface level manner, but at a much deeper level in which they didn’t only sense the tartness that came from wine, but everything that made that specific wine. This is what Hume is trying to express with delicacy of
taste. The kinsmen could tell the flavor of the wine, and the iron of the nail and the leather of the key thong all apart from one other. That delicacy, being able to take everything that makes an item and be able to push away all status value and focus how all the pieces come together.

The second thing that a person must have to understand taste is practice. Practice makes perfect, and understanding taste does not break that rule. Hume mentions that at times it may be hard for a person to be able to tell when something is of good taste, and what is not if they don’t have experience on either side. They must have some knowledge of comparison between what is tasteful, and what isn’t tasteful in order to be able to catch the subtle differences: “It is impossible to contemplating any order of beauty, without being frequently obliged to form comparison between the several species and degrees of excellence, and estimating their proportion to each other” (Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste”). The best way to understand this is by thinking of the comparison between work of art and an imitation of the work. An example of this that will be mentioned later on in this thesis is imitations of Indian shawls as opposed to shawls made in India. The reason that people might buy imitations for the statues value that the original items displays from sight or because they have never experience the original item to compare the imitations to, and why people of taste may not have a new Indian Shawl, or not have one at all, is that they can spot the difference.

The third thing that one must have is good sense; one must have good reason to perfect one’s taste by comparison between multiple works with each other, and between every element of the work in order to be clear of prejudice. Hume mentions this “strong sense, untied to delicate sentiment improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character” (Hume, ”Of the Standard of Taste”). Good sense is
understanding how to compare artwork without prejudice of its background, but to also see the item on its own as a whole. This can be done only by exposure and experience to a range of art work. Good sense is combining sense, delicacy, practice, and skill, and using them to make a concluding reaction of the items in good conscience. Hume mentions this “Same excellence of faculties which contributes to the improvement of reason, the same clearness of conception, the same exactness of distinction, the same vivacity of apprehension are essential to the operation of true taste ( Hume, “Of the Standard of taste”).

Hume does point out that there are two sources of variation that can come from these demands of the understanding of taste. The first one is the want of delicacy, meaning that the person’s senses have a defect, such as lost of sight or touch; therefore unable to properly notice all the ingredients that the artwork is comprised of so they can’t give an honest opinion on all the factors that make up the artwork. The second is not being able to separate one’s own sentimental background or prejudice from the work of art. This means allowing the a person who is in a place of power to influence their palette and opinion on what ought to be considered to be of high value within their culture. Taste is not something that is in a single place, time, or cultures. Constant like air through time. Only a few can notice its soft approach like a soft breeze that allows the air to lightly brush upon their cheek.

John Paul Kanwit focuses on the aesthetic movement and its accordance with taste through the lens of household items and social perception in Elizabeth Gaskell's novels. In the article "Mere Outward Appearances"? Household Taste and Social Perception In Elizabeth Gaskell's North and South", he focuses on how Gaskell uses home decor to display whether a person has the skill of taste, or simply money. Kanwit focuses on understanding the difference between taste and money,
and the effect that will come to the social classes if the knowledge of taste is lost due to the desire for grand displays of wealth, which had begun to surge in both classes.

Kanwit brings up the idea of who is responsible for deciding what is tasteful and how it is taught to others: "conception of society, the upper class was primarily responsible for modeling good taste” (Kanwit, 193). Kanwit believes that the upper class was the one that was tasked with the modeling of “good taste” due to their having the means to buy items that were of high quality. Some people in the upper class desired a gaudier style than a tasteful one, creating a domino effect of the loss of taste in fashion. The upper class was seen as a role model for good style and taste to the middle class; if the upper class proceeded to adopt the vulgar French style, then the middle class would follow as well. Kanwit mentions how “the British upper-class desire for gaudy dress, a fashion motivated by the desire to display wealth, threaten the power structure more than political clubs or agitators” (Kanwit, 193). Disregarding taste in fashion, and simply focusing on the grand display of wealth, allowed for the idea that social class mobility was easily possible if people had enough funds. It encouraged the idea that if one has enough funds, even if it is considered new money, and can shop from the same places as the wealthy upper class, then that would render one equal with the upper class. This idea, as Kanwit mentions, did “threaten the power structure” more than anything due to its ability to destabilize the rigid separation between the middle and upper classes. This can be seen when Kanwit indicates how “As more of the middle class acquired products that had previously been restricted to the rich, commentators often labeled their tastes as vulgar to differentiate them from those of the upper class” (Kanwit, 192). In order to create or strengthen the barrier between the new middle class and longstanding upper class, besides wealth and access to high-end products, taste became a focal point for the upper class.
Since the middle class was starting to be able to have access to high-end products, the idea of taste became influential, namely the way in which they would interact with the high-end products as a way to tell those around them if they possessed taste, or just money.

If the surge of gaudy or vulgar style rose in the upper class, it could cause the destabilization of the separation between the middle and upper class; but what was considered to be gaudy and vulgar? Kanwit conveys that “French designs were popular in Britain because of ‘a vulgar taste’ for what is far-fetched and high priced” (Kanwit, 192). The gaudy and vulgar style was not very British but more of a French patriotic style. Kanwit conveys how it was important to have good taste to be patriotic to Britain, while to be overly ornamented with items that bore no connection to one another was considered to be very French. Pointing the idea that just because something is popular and in style at the moment, it doesn’t mean that its tasteful. It just what is eye catching at the moment.

Claudia Carroll views taste in North and South much like Kanwit does as a theme that comes up when there is a chance of economic instability or social class mobility. In the article, “Taste in North and South Reconsidered: A case for Attention to Downward and Lateral Mobility in the Victorian Novel”, she mentions how much of the time that taste is brought up in “North and South” with Margaret and Mr. Thornton is to mask that they have moved downward in social class. Carroll mentions this when she points out that both Margaret and Thornton have suffered falling down the social scale at some point in their life: “Margaret and Thornton’s shared experience of downward mobility [is] their motivation for using taste as a form of cultural capital” (Carroll, 657). Both use taste as a means to mask that downward mobility as a form of social currency to elevate their statuses. Carrol uses the example of the wallpaper that Margaret
finds vulgar as a means to hide the fact that her family have moved downward in the economic and social scale. Carroll mentions how Margaret’s concern for the overly ornate wallpaper is to be understood as a coping mechanism for her anxiety over her family’s decreased social standing in Milton society. Pointing out that both Margaret and Thornton though have different economical background have delicacy of taste.

Carroll’s article examines taste as a coping mechanism for both Margaret and Thornton when they are forced to acknowledge that the social class that they had in the beginning of their lives is no longer the one that they find themselves in at the time that the novel takes place. Margaret came from having a high social status due to being a preacher’s daughter but lost that status when her father gave up his profession. Thornton, on the other hand, experienced a loss of fortune when his family lost their assets due to his father’s speculation, and John had to rebuild himself from the ground up. Carroll’s points out that both Margaret and Thornton are characters that have good taste, despite their different upbringing and now their social classes statues. Though they both have moved down from their original social class statues taste is a skill that is something that is removed from a person because they have changed in social or economical class statues.

Following the theme of taste, Marjorie Garson talks about how Gaskell merges taste and simplicity with Margaret in her chapter “Stately Simplicity” from the book *Aesthetics, Subjectivity, and Social Power in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*. Garson mentions how Gaskell created Margaret with the idea that “The romance heroine must also dress with consummate taste but never spend a moment thinking about her appearance”, meaning that the character must wear taste in a manner that is effortless, never really having to think about showcasing her delicacy of
taste because it comes naturally to her (Garson, 292). Margaret does this constantly throughout “North and South”. Whenever she is depicted being the exemplar or informer of taste, Garson mentions that she is not presenting this skill in a manner that suggests that she is putting on an act. It doesn’t matter what she wears; it’s the manner in which she wears it that displays her delicacy of taste.

Garson mentions how the fit of the clothing for the heroine has to be perfect because it is what makes the heroine, in this case Margaret, stand out and be the informer and judge of good taste. Garson points this out by stating “We hear no more about this distant relative, who has lived and died solely to put the heroine into black silk for the introductory tableau; to balance Eastern ornament with English simplicity”, mentioning that the first time that the reader is informed of what Margaret is wearing, it is a black dress (Garson, 291). Usually when someone is in mourning they wear black to show that they are grieving since black is not eye catching; yet Margaret becomes the center of attention in her black silk mourning dress, because it is simple but fits her well. Not only does it fit her well, but it has a balance of Eastern Ornament with the silk fabric, but the plain fit and cut points to the ideology of English simplicity.

Garson points out that Gaskell displays Margaret’s taste in a manner of simplicity, that what she own or wears is not over the top to the point that she is lost in the her clothing, but works as a team. This can be noticed when Garson mentions how Margaret is devoid of vanity and materialism, therefore she is not influenced in her choice of wardrobe based on the expense of fabrics and materials. Margaret’s wardrobe is built of tasteful pieces that work well with one other, but most importantly fit her well. As Garson mentions, “one is supposed to be able to ‘possess’ the beauty of an object without possessing the object itself”, meaning that a person can
own an object, in this case a clothing item, of high taste or materialistic value, but doesn’t know how to wear it (Garson, 294). The item was bought for the simple fact of possessing it, with no thought on really being able to own it. Margaret has a wardrobe that she possesses in all metaphorical and literal manners. Her wardrobe is one that is simple, but fits her well. Garson states that Margaret may dress simply, but always tastefully. She points out Margaret stands out due to her sense of delicacy of taste, pointing out again that Margaret is at time the judge and jury of good taste. Influencing the idea that Margaret is pendulum of good taste, no matter where she is.

These three different sources all have taste in their mind in some way or another. However, they never seem to connect taste to pleasure, or how taste can bring gratification to the human senses. The object of this thesis is to examine how characters’ tendencies to decorate themselves through fashion or home decor allows the viewer to know if they have taste. In North and South, Elizabeth Gaskell mentions how in London, upper class taste is not granted automatically to those who have wealth, being the more money a person has, the more taste they have. That’s not the case in North and South. Taste is understanding and knowing that what you own should be pleasing to you. It should be pleasing to the human senses: sight, touch, and smell. This attention to the sensory element of taste will be expanded with a focus on fabric, fashion, and home decor displayed in North and South. Fashion and home decor are affected by money and taste, or lack thereof. Good taste tends to bring a positive reaction to the human senses compared to a gaudy style, which tends to over-stimulate the senses in an overbearing negative manner.

Taste is a hard thing to grasp, yet Elizabeth Gaskell found a way to showcase how the character of the novel interacts with certain objects to display good taste independent of wealth.
As mentioned before, this thesis will focus on fabric, fashion, and home decor to demonstrate the way Gaskell displays taste and its effect on the human senses in her novel *North and South*, as well as how she brings up the idea that money and taste don’t always go hand in hand.
Chapter 1: Fashion

In order to understand taste and decorum, it is important to first examine their relationship with clothing and texture, and what makes this connection significant in the novel. First, we can use as an example a clothing item that Margaret continuously encounters throughout the novel, the Indian shawl. What is the importance of an Indian shawl apart from trade? Jennifer Ann van Schoor mentions in her article, “The Indian Cashmere Shawl and Social Status in British Art 1760 -1870,” that the Indian Shawl was a way to indicate the social class of which a person was a part. Since the Indian shawl “functions as an object that signals taste and refinement and most importantly it is a symbol of wearer’s moral integrity,” this means a woman who wears this specific clothing item has taste, refinement, and integrity, which are all important points of Margaret’s characterization in North & South (Van Schoor, Jennifer Ann) (as shall later be discussed in this essay). The Indian Shawl would have been a social symbol to represent family pedigree, with aristocratic women popularly being depicted wearing it, in portraits in order to give off a sense of the proper modes of status and domesticity, emphasizing “the image of motherhood . . . in the portraits and the display of familial pedigree through the context of the country house and estate” (Van Schoor, Jennifer Ann,). To upper class and aristocratic members of the 19th century, family pedigree was of utmost importance to display and communicate as a means to show interconnection and continuity between the past and the future. In order to do so, women would wear these shawls to be able to signal that they had taste because they came from an aristocratic family and valued pedigree.
Now that we have discussed the historic and symbolic importance of the Indian shawl as a representation of taste and social class, we can begin to examine how it applies to Margaret Hale in the narrative. At the beginning of the novel, there is a moment in which she models the Indian shawls that are going to be passed to Edith: “She touched the shawls gently as they hung around her, and took a pleasure in their soft feel and brilliant colors” (Gaskell, *North, and South*, 11). Gaskell uses the word “soft” to describe the high quality of these shawls that are being passed down from Ms. Shaw to her daughter. The idea of the pleasure that comes from the physical feeling of the texture, compared to the pleasure of showcasing the item itself comes up here. These shawls that Edith is receiving are not new, but are being passed down to her from her mother, which brings up the idea that something does not have to be new to have value; instead, it is what the item is made from that gives it its worth and appeal. The Hales and Shaw’s understand this concept as members of a long-standing high class, and thus holders of good taste. The idea is that taste is not something that you buy; it is something you learn from your family and social circle. Also, Margaret does not really focus on what people will think about her wearing an Indian shawl, but instead her attention is on the feeling and sensory experience of touching it — How it feels against her skin, how the soft material gives her external pleasure as her skin is in contact with the fabric, but also the internal pleasure it gives her as well. Wearing this shawl, feeling its “soft” texture, and seeing its “brilliant colors,” internally pleases her because she is thinking about the fabric and how it makes her feel. The fabric does not make her think about class or wealth, but simply the visceral feel of it. At the end of the day, that is what a high-quality texture ought to do for someone with tasteful sensibilities; true good taste is unaware of itself.
The idea of taste becomes clear as day when Margaret finally moves to Milton and starts to see the difference between wealth’s meaning in London and Milton. She observes how people in Milton do not care about the feeling and quality of an item, but only its perceived social value. This is seen when Margaret notices how people dress in Milton, the way their clothes look and fit on the “people [that] thronged the footpaths, most of them well-dressed as regarded the material, but with a slovenly looseness which struck Margaret as different from the shabby, threadbare smartness of a similar class in London” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 60). She observes how in Milton, people tend to buy expensive clothes of whatever style is current, however it does not necessarily fit them well since they do not know how to dress properly in fine attire. From afar, Milton people may look chic and fashionable, but, up close, people can notice that their items of clothing do not fit, or flatter them well at all in their “slovenly looseness.” What is more important for the people of Milton is to be able to easily make a distinction between the classes by wearing gaudy and expensive materials even if they do not know how to do so properly as Gaskell expresses. They want to shamelessly display and make clear that they are from a wealthy class amongst the rest of the town’s working population; however, as a contrast in London, its wealthy class members want people to know that they have good taste, as Margaret lets us know by describing their “threadbare smartness.” She is pointing out the idea that, in Milton, the material wears the people, instead of the people wearing the material itself. They merely care about showing off the expensive fabrics that their items of clothing are made from, while in London, it is more the fit and feel that take priority in fashion. Edith’s dress, for example, is made from good quality material, and it fits her so well that she feels comfortable enough to move around and fall asleep
in. Even as she was curled up and asleep, she looked peaceful and beautiful in the fabrics of her dress.

When Mr. Thornton first meets her, he notices how Margaret dresses differently in comparison to those around him in Milton: “Her dress was very plain: a close straw bonnet of the best material and shape, trimmed with white ribbon; a dark silk gown, without any trimming or flounce; a large Indian shawl” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 63). The pieces that make up her attire are simple and plain, but they fit her well. She knows how to use the simple items of clothing in her possession, and combine them together in a manner that will flatter her best. She does not need “trimming or flounce” because the quality of the material of the items that she owns is of an intrinsic quality that adding frills to would simply take away from its beauty of simplicity. What does serve as decoration to her ensemble is her “large Indian shawl” that Mr. Thornton notices right away. Her dress may be “plain” and not colorful, but her bonnet has a good shape and is of the “best material.” All of these pieces as an outfit are very flattering to her complexion, as Mr. Thornton notices. All of this emphasizes that Margaret has taste, because taste means knowing what fits and flatters you well, as well as what material works best to add to the result without sacrificing practicality. A bonnet that keeps its shape and still looks well on her, and a dark silk gown that fits her “ivory complexion” all point towards this characterization. The silk alone is enough to communicate to people that she comes from a high-class family due to the expense of making a dress from such a fabric. The whole outfit together displays her family’s class status socially and economically. She is a lady with the means to own clothes that are fitted to her specifically. The large Indian shawl she is wearing shows that she comes from old money, not from Milton’s newly borne industrial wealth. Mr. Thornton even says himself once he notices her
attire that she appears differently from the fine ladies of Milton: “A young lady came forward with frank dignity, a young lady of a different type to most of those he was in the habit of seeing” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 62). Here Gaskell is drawing for us a clear distinction between money and class. Mr. Thornton’s wealth is newly acquired; he created and maintains his fortune from cotton mills, an industrial trade, something that is very new in England at the time, and, therefore, so is his wealth. Since he lives in an industrial town, his social circle is primarily made up of such possessors of new money who have yet to come to understand taste as an aristocrat, or the taste of those in proximity to aristocracy. This taste is what Margaret possesses as a member of a well-bred family from the Southern, non-industrial region of England.

It is important to emphasize that in the industrial city of Milton, everything is machine-made via mechanical processes, and no longer created by hand. So having anything that is handmade is rare and tasteful. So, when Mr. Thornton notices Margaret and her simple dressing manner, but, namely, wearing her Indian shawl, this is a key point to highlight Margaret’s taste: Van Schoor mentions that manufactured shawls did exist, however, they didn’t hold the same value as an Indian shawl since they were made from machines and therefore but mere imitations of the real artifacts. Suzanne Daly also mentions in her article, “Paisley Kashmir Mapping the Imitation Indian Shawl”, that these imitations of Indian shawls were very popular in industrial towns whose people would buy them to give the illusion that they had taste. This is reflected in how people in Milton buy expensive fabric to simply give off airs that they have taste because they can buy the expensive fabric; however, that it is not effective since their clothes still do not fit them well. Therefore, Milton is merely imitating what they think is taste without really understanding factors besides expense, such as fit, in regards to the attire that they are wearing.
To have taste – real taste – is indeed to seek good quality in the material of one’s clothing items, but also to value good craftmanship in order that they be shaped to fit oneself specifically. Marjorie Garson mentions this in *Moral Taste: Aesthetics, Subjectivity, and Social Power in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* in the chapter “Moral Taste”: “In the context of modern machine manufacture- a context evoked by north and south, where the manufacture of cheap textiles is the business of the romantic hero – the hand-made shawls of India would register as the real thing.” (Garson, 293). Therefore, what is machine-made is really a false imitation of something that was done by hand. Therefore, people in Milton simply want to mimic what is considered fashionable in their choice of materials, but are merely imitating the good taste which Margaret truly possesses.

This idea of items that are so well made that they can last a lifetime and be passed down is a theme that is brought up with the idea of taste in Gaskell’s Novel *North and South*. In *North and South*, there is an idea of the comfort and pleasure of the owner of the item that is set in comparison with the grand display of wealth in mass commotion. The distinction between having money versus having taste is emphasized when money is used to simply buy in a style of display, extravagance, and mere pretense, showing off that one has the means to buy a new wardrobe every new collection or season that arrives. Taste is spending money on an item that will be used for a long time, yes; but it is also eye catching because it is classic, and of fine craftsmanship. Taste also informs the ways in which that owner interacts with the item. The focus of sight is not on the items and how they look on their own, but how they look on, and are used by the owner. That is taste.
The Hale family comes from the south of England, Helstone and London, where the more conservative, old money society is dominant, while the Thornton’s are from Milton, which is an industrial town with new money. The Hales do not have as much money as the Thornton’s do, however, they have taste due to their delicacy of taste pallet and practices. Elizabeth Gaskell brings up the idea that taste is something that you cannot buy, no matter how much money you have. Taste is something that is taught. That is the difference between the Hales and Thornton’s. Since taste is something you cannot buy, it is knowledge or skill that can be passed on instead. It creates a wall that new money cannot cross, which was something that the Victorian high middle class was afraid of. According to Nils Clausson’s “Romancing Manchester Class, Gender and the Conflicting Genres of Elizabeth Gaskell's North and South,” many people at the time had a fear of citizens overstepping their class status to a higher one than that into which they were born: “the permanent fear and anxieties of the early Victorian middle and high class felt threatened by class changes from below” (Claussen, 10). Clausson’s points out that taste was something created exclusively by the upper class as a way of creating a barrier between the newly elevated people that were moving from simple working class to a level of high middle class. People who were part of the middle class were now offered the grand splendor exclusive high price range items that had been only affordable to the highly rich.

Mrs. Hale’s family has more experience with luxurious and tasteful artwork, and this is where the novel begins with Margaret in London during Edith's pre wedding social gathering. The whole social function is lavish, but nothing seems over the top; everything is just the right decoration and detail for an event in London. Everything is so normal that Edith falls asleep during the social gathering for her pre wedding gathering: “But as Margaret half suspected, Edith had
fallen asleep. She lay curled up on the sofa in the back drawing-room in Harley Street, looking very lovely in her white muslin and blue ribbons” (Gaskell, North and South, 7). Gaskell starts the novel with Margaret's family being used to good taste, and so much so that they don’t feel the need to be constantly on display, hence Edith feeling comfortable enough with falling asleep. Secondly, Edith is so used to fine textures like the white muslin that she is comfortable enough to fall asleep in it. This shows that she has been around such fine textures all her life and doesn’t feel at all different in her wedding dress and the texture it is made from.

Margaret is in the same class as Edith due to their relation as cousins and fellow education in London. She even says to herself that she was not surprised when she found Edith asleep in the “Crimson damask sofa in a back drawing-room” (Gaskell, North and South, 7). She sees Edith as simply taking a little nap. She doesn’t think Edith has to be constantly with her guest putting up a show. Edith has nothing to prove; everyone knows that she comes from a wealthy and high-class family. Margaret isn’t thinking about the guests, and what they will think about Edith not being at the party showing off her lovely dress to everyone, nor does she think about the dress being ruined from Edith sleeping in it. She is more focused on Edith being able to rest after having such active day of dress fitting.

Gaskell wants to leave it clear that the Margaret has class and taste. This is way she describes Edith's dress when Margaret sees her: “Edith had rolled herself up into a soft ball of muslin and ribbon and silken curls and gone off into a peaceful little after-dinner nap” (Gaskell, North and South, 7). Gaskell uses the word “soft” to describe the texture of Edith's dress. The material isn’t stiff, but soft and natural. She doesn’t have to tell us that the dress was made with high-quality ribbons and satins because she is showing us as much through Edith’s interaction with
texture. Edith is completely comfortable in simply curling up on a sofa and napping; the texture of her dress won’t interfere. This moment not only allows the quality of the material to be known, but also shows how commonly Edith interacts with such high-quality textures in that she doesn’t give any thought to wrinkling or ruining the dress by sleeping with it on.

Considering the pleasure that Edith’s dress brings to Margaret in this opening chapter, as well as the comforts that Edith knows, coming from a wealthy family, let us compare this image to Fanny Thornton’s decision over the fabric of her wedding dress. Gaskell describes this scene when Mrs. Thornton and Fanny are in the dining room in the Thornton household looking at fabric swatches for her wedding dress: “Mrs. Thornton and Fanny were in the dining-room; the latter in a flutter if small exultation, as the maid held up one glossy material after another, to try the effect of the wedding-dress by candlelight” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 351). Fanny does not touch the fabric; instead the maid is the one who handles the materials. This moment showcases that Fanny cares only about the “effect” of fabric, and how it looks to others, never a thought to how the fabric will feel on her skin. Fanny doesn’t even have a desire to touch the swatches of fabric because she isn’t the one holding them up. She is much more focused on how people will see her wedding dress. As taste relates to a sense of sight, something might look nice from afar, but taste means that an item ought to look lovely both at a distance, as well as from up close. Fanny isn’t really thinking about how people will see her dress up close, because she is more focused on the way the light will be reflected on the fabric from afar. Gaskell even goes as far as to say that the fabric is a “glossy material.” Gloss is usually a superficial, eye catching style of fabric that is used to suggest wealth or expense. Fanny using “glossy material” for her wedding gown shows that her main purpose for the dress is to message the amount of wealth her family has. Fanny never once touches
the swatches, or displays a reaction of pleasure, or desire to come in contact with the swatches. This is in contrast with Edith, when is first introduces to the read wears a dress that may not reflect light, but Margaret lets us know that she enjoys the feeling of the muslin dress on her skin in which she can fall asleep peacefully.

Even Mrs. Thornton notices that Fanny is having a hard time picking which glossy material to choose, and expresses a wish for her to listen to her brother: “Neither taste nor dress were in [Mrs. Thornton’s] line of subjects, and she heartily wished that Fanny had accepted her brother’s offer of having the wedding clothes provided by some first-rate London dressmaker” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 350). In this moment, Mrs. Thornton confirms that neither she nor Fanny possess the skill of taste regardless of their wealthy status. Taste is a skill that a person learns and develops. Edith is wealthy and possesses the experience and practices of taste, but while the Thornton are also financially prosperous, they have yet to develop such skill. The Thorntons have the means for Fanny to be provided “with the finery, which certainly rivaled, if it did not exceed the lover in her estimation” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 350). This means that the whole reason for surrounding herself with this glossy “finery” is to showcase her family’s wealth in Milton society.

In the focus upon fabric and fashion and their connection between sense and taste in *North and South*, we have observed the differences between social and economic classes, from London high society to Milton high society; however, we have yet to discuss how Margaret's views on taste are affected by her interactions with the lower social classes.
The best character to showcase this is Bessy, who is an employee of a cotton fabric factory. Margaret becomes friends with her even though they are from different social classes. Bessy, like Hume mentions, has the style of delicacy and taste, which she practices even though she cannot afford luxury; she isn’t a master of deploying these skills, but she is being taught. Her practice comes from her interactions with Margaret, and though comparing her style of fabric and clothes to the typical Milton wardrobe.

When she interacts with Margaret’s attire throughout *North and South*, Bessy has a childlike wonder in reaction to Margaret’s clothes: “Bessy lay back silent, and content to look at Margaret’s face, and touch her articles of dress, with a childish admiration of their fineness of texture” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 100). Bessy’s experience with Margaret’s style of clothing and texture is without bias, pure like a child’s wonder. She enjoys watching Margaret’s style of clothing; it is pleasing to her sight and does not cause her any discomfort when she looks at Margaret’s dress from up close or far way, since either way, the sight of the texture of Margaret’s clothing is visually pleasing for Bessy.

Bessy has the knowledge and understanding of what is the focus point for Milton high social class fashion: not what is tasteful, but what is vulgar. What is Vulgar though? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines vulgar as “Senses relating to the common class of people; commonplace; lacking in refinement, coarse” (OED)\(^2\). The whole point of the fashion of Milton’s high social class is to be eye-catching, but not in the manner that Margaret’s dress is, for all her

attire as a whole comes together to create a great single piece of artwork that, as a result of her whole ensemble coming together so well, cannot help but be eye-catching. Milton’s version of eye-catching isn’t how well the texture or pieces come together, but how the economic value of each piece that stands out on its own is represented. Bessy mentions to Margaret how the attire that people wear in Milton is very displeasing to the sight due to all the color and disarray: “‘It’s different fro’ common. Most fine folk tire my eyes out wi their colours; but somehow yours rest me’” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 100). Bessy points out that the texture in fabric, and color scheme in Margaret’s clothing do not result in discomfort to her sight but create a sense of pleasure in comparison with the attire of the upper-class people of Milton. Bessy mentions how the “fine” folk tire her sight but like how looking sight to the sun and not looking away can hurt and tire your eyes. In this moment, Gaskell is pointing out that money and taste don’t always go hand in hand. Margaret isn’t the wealthiest person in Milton; she is right in the middle, not a member of the working class, but she does not have the same amount of wealth that the Thornton’s, or many other mill owners in Milton tend to have as members of the town’s financial upper class. She is someone that can move through both low and high class society. Even though she doesn’t have the same amount of wealth that these “fine folk” have, her attire is much more pleasing to the eye compared to theirs. It would seem that the amount of money that these “fine folks” of Milton have ought to correspondingly result in much more pleasing, eye-catching attire in comparison to Margaret’s, because they are able to spend more than her. However, that is not the case because money, even if it does have the consequence of providing accessibility, is not the sole factor of taste. The high-end displays of social class in Milton attire are very loud with their pieces and “colour” as Bessy mentions and create nothing but restlessness for the person who is observing them. Margaret’s
attire brings Bessy peace, and gives her “rest”, emphasizing that Margaret’s attire causes pleasure in sight and sense.

Bessy, in interacting with Margaret and the attire that invokes calmness and pleasure, now has something to compare to the “tired eye” style of clothing that the Milton “fine folk” wear. Before meeting Margaret, Bessy had nothing to compare with the style of clothing that the people in Milton wear: “I never knew why folk in the bible cared for soft raiment afore. But it must be nice to go dresses as yo’ do” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 100). The character of Bessy is thus another way in which Gaskell displays that money and taste don’t always go hand in hand. Bessy is able to learn to differentiate between what is worn for a grand display of wealth (as the people of Milton tend to do) and what is worn for fashion due to it being an art piece on its own; this is how Margaret displays her taste. Bessy expresses that before her acquaintance with Margaret, she had never understood why anyone would care about wearing such “soft raiment” since all she knew before was what she saw people in high social circles wear in Milton, namely the colors and texture that were so harsh on the sense of sight for people, and for that very reason were “eye-catching”. However, even though these clothes are eye-catching, it does not bring about envy, or a desire on Bessy’s part to wear such clothes. In contrast, Margaret’s attire brings forth a desire of imagination on Bessy’s part for what it would be like to wear such “soft raiment”. Bessy bring up the idea that surely having fabrics and dress style as Margaret has must feel like even to the skin to the touch and to sight. This can be notice when she expresses how people in the “bible care for soft raiment afore”, giving the illusion that such style or clothes surely is of a heavenly nature. Bessy is a character in *North and South* that Gaskell uses to showcase that even though one might not be from the wealthiest of classes, they can still be taught the skills that are necessary
in denoting taste. Bessy is not at all wealthy, yet she has a delicacy of taste, and skill with touch and sight; these skills are being improved by her interactions with Margaret, providing opportunity for Bessy to gain practice in taste.

Another example of this discernment is when Margaret is deciding upon which dress she is going to wear to the Thornton dinner party. Margaret may not have the funds at the moment to be able to splurge for a new dress for the dinner party like many other young “fine” ladies would, but she already has dresses that are well-made and tasteful enough to have survived the test of time. To Margaret’s mind, she believes that even though they are not new, these dresses are so well-crafted that there is hardly any need for alteration, because they are pieces of art that fit her so well already that it would be unnecessary to buy a new dress for the occasion. This can be seen when Margaret’s mother asks her if she is sure that she will wear the white silk dress, and Margaret responds, “‘Oh yes, mamma! Mrs. Murray made it, and it’s sure to be right; it may be a straw’s breadth shorter or longer-waisted, according to my having grown fat or thin’” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 146). Margaret knows that the dress will be perfect for the dinner party even though it is not new; she has already worn it in London during Edith’s engagement. But the dress is so well-made and crafted, that even after a year it has not lost its beauty. That is what Gaskell indicates to us as taste; it is not lost through time like typical fashion trends, but lasts for a lifetime in its timelessness.

When Margaret chooses her “white silk” dress as the one that she will wear to the Thornton dinner party, Bessy is the character to showcase what is truly important in the realm of clothing attire for Milton high society; it is the subliminal code messaging they give to one other
in their choice of dress. The grander their attire is, the more they show the more money spent on their clothing items, and thus the more wealth they possess. Bessy mentions how the ladies dress for such events: “‘But them ladies dress so grand!’ said Bessy with an anxious look at Margaret’s print gown, which her Milton eyes appraised at sevenpence a yard” (Gaskell, North and South, 148). This moment gives the reader a clear view on how Milton society women do not dress in thinking about how the fit of the clothing but how grand their dresses will be perceived as, but for Bessy she sees them dress in a “harsh” or “grand”. Bessy doesn’t notice right away the manner in which the print gown that Margaret is wearing fits her, but her “Milton eyes” right away “appraise” Margaret’s textile at a cost of sevenpence a yard. Following this observation, Bessy expresses her concern with the choice of dress that Margaret might wish to wear at the dinner party: “‘That’ll do!’ said Bessy, falling back in her chair. ‘I should be loth to have yo’ looked down upon’” (Gaskell, North and South, 148). This allows the reader to notice two things: First, Bessy doesn’t want anyone looking down at Margaret because her dress is not grand in color, nor new enough; and thus, secondly, how Bessy knows that the Milton eye is not focused on taste, but on the economic messaging of wealth that fashion can express. Gaskell mentioning that Bessy could tell that the yard of fabric for Margaret’s dress costs sevenpence in a such a casual setting suggests that it would be correct to assume that people in Milton will easily notice and judge the cost of fabric and labor that went towards creating the dress Margaret will wear to Thornton’s dinner party. Bessy is worried that if the dress doesn’t demonstrate an acceptable amount of money spent on the dress, then people will look down upon Margaret, even if her dress was made to be worn for a much finer occasion, such as her cousin’s London wedding.
Even though Bessy views Margaret’s dress in a more economic Milton view, it doesn’t remove the fact that Bessy is someone who has a delicacy of taste with her senses. When she tells Margaret how she pictures seeing her in her “white silk” dress, Margaret and the dress are not separate, but Bessy instead imagines them as one. Bessy mentions how she imagines Margaret’s hair will look, “wi yo’r hair blown black wi’ the very swiftnesso’ the motion, just like the way it grows, a little standing off like” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 148), followed up with how she believes the dress will look on Margaret. She asks if she can come and see her get dressed, and touch her: “Let me come and see yo’ in it. I want to see yo’ and touch yo’ as in very deed yo’ were in my dreams” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 148). Knowing what Margaret usually wears, when Bessy hears Margaret describe the dress, she can’t help but have an overwhelming desire to see and touch Margaret’s “white silk” dress. She is able to imagine the beauty of the dress that Margaret describes she will wear, even though it might not be grand enough in the eye of Milton due to its age and simplicity. However, Bessy has a keen sense of sight and touch, much like Margaret, and is able to notice the tasteful and dream-like feeling that the description of the dress invokes.
Chapter 2: Home Décor

We have discussed fashion and texture and its connection with taste, next we should observe taste through the lens of home decor. John Paul Kanwit mentions in his article, “‘Mere Outward Appearances’? Household and Social Perception in Gaskell's *North and South*”, that “Gaskell’s novels demonstrate both an awareness and critique of mid-Victorian discourse on household taste” (Kanwit,197). Kanwit expresses that Gaskell shows the difference between having only money, or both taste and money, with household decor. Kanwit looks at home decor as architectural; it is an art. Everything must go together in an excellent flow. The material used for the artwork must be of good quality. He points this out by mentioning J.C. Robertson’s idea of the middle class buying artwork because they can afford it, not because they know the artist or the meaning behind the work; it is simply a status symbol. This idea of Robertson that Kanwit mentions can be found in the J.C Robertson editor of *Mechanics’ Magazine* which argues “That French designs were popular in Britain because of “a vulgar taste...for what is far-fetched and high priced” (Kanwit,192), let in keep in mind that the meaning of vulgar as mention before is “Senses relating to the common class of people; commonplace; lacking in refinement, coarse” (OED)³. Robertson calls this act of simply mindless consumption as “vulgar taste”. Kanwit mentions that Gaskell brings up this critique of “vulgar taste” in art consumption in home decor in her novels, including *North and South*. Decorations and the placement of objects are all individual art pieces that come together to create one significant work of art that have the mean fund to

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purches or people with taste know well. The point of home decor is to make the location feel like a place where people live in, not to emulate a museum without any personal touch. A person without taste buys home decor, such as a piece of art, only with the intention of showcasing said piece of art and gives no thought to its compatibility with the other pieces in the house. Therefore, the location becomes nothing more than a performance and loses its whole purpose of being a home. The item, instead of serving as part of a household, becomes a singular object of performative display; this is what Kanwit is focused on in his essay.

Beatrice Bazell also focuses on home decor in her article, “The atrocious Interior: Wallpaper, Machinery and 1850s Aesthetics in North and South”. Bazell, unlike Kanwit, focuses solely on the idea of taste and how it is executed in *North and South*, analyzing wallpaper through the idea of home decor. Bazell alludes to the thought process that it takes to pick a wallpaper, stating that Gaskell understands “the sheer imaginative potency of wallpaper within fictional rooms” (Bazell,36). Picking the wallpaper of a room, real or fictional, is a significant factor in the layout of a room and home because everything else must complement the wallpaper because it serves as the background for the whole house and room; everything is connected to the wall. If the wallpaper is very extravagant, it shows that the owners of the house want the wallpaper to be very eye-catching as the focus of the room. Bazell mentions how with wallpaper, "Gaskell can articulate a measured critique of values of contemporary British society” (Bazell,37). The values Bazell refers to are Victorian society fears that in deliberately decorating their homes and having the contents of décor in not favorable manner, well juxtaposition of interior décor and its currency in both economic and imagination in Britain. Bazell achieved this notion by pointing out how in
“North and South” the wallpaper should be the backdrop for the décor of the room and not be the center of the attention, however there are character like Mrs. Thornton, who disregards how well furniture should blend with the wallpaper, resulting in nothing being a consistent and harmonious whole. This indicates to Margaret that Mrs. Thornton is more interested in what people can perceive of her from the objects that she has around her than what the person can understand from being in her presence. Everything in the room stands out on its own. Nothing blends and connects to one other.

Understand that Bazell points out the importance of wallpaper the very first time that wallpaper stands out on its own in North and South: when Margaret is discussing the over-flamboyant décor that the wallpaper in the Crampton house has to her parents. She tells her mother to “prepare herself” for the wallpaper in the drawing room at the new house that she will be moving to in Milton: "‘But, oh mamma! Speaking of vulgarity and commonness, you must prepare yourself for our drawing-room paper. Pink and blue roses, with yellow leaves! And such a heavy cornice around the room” (Gaskell, North and South, 66). Margaret uses the same term that Robertson uses to describe the middle class simply buying artwork with no thought to the meaning behind it; she calls the wallpaper "vulgar." Margaret notice that it is filled with colors that don't flow, meaning that the color scheme of blue, pink, yellow don’t blend together smoothly as one to create a single art piece. After all the meaning of flow in the Oxford English Dictionary is something that is able “to glide along smoothly” (OED)⁴. The wallpaper has "pink and blue roses" which blue is

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a primary color but a blue rose is not a natural occurrence causing them to stand out. Though pink is a natural rose color both pink and blue are strong colors on their own. When these two colors are forced together, they tend to clash with one another. Then leaves also stand out in their unusual color; usually, the leaves are green. Green leaves let everyone know that the flower is healthy and only turns yellow when the flower requires water or sun, in other words, when the flower is wilting. The clashing colors used for the roses and leaves on the wallpaper divide the image into three focal points: the blue roses, the pink roses, and the yellow leaves. Margaret also points out that the cornice around the room is "heavy" and overly decorative. Other pieces that are part of the wall decor of the drawing room stand out. Each piece of wallpaper, and the cornice around the room stand out independently. The original decorator of the house never gave thought to how all the pieces would look together as a whole in the drawing room, but rather only thought of each individual piece as its own social symbol. Although yes the house is being presented for rental and the original owner won’t live there, from the décor of the house we know two things. One the importance for the owner of the house again isn’t that the décor of the house makes the house feel like a home but showcases the wealth that was spent to decorate the house. Secondly, the owner might have thought that the over display of wealth in the decoration might impress a person to want to live in such a house, since Milton high society lens at time was more of a economics lens than a pleasurable lens. Therefore, for most people in this community this type of wallpaper would not be vulgar or too busy but eye catching, even desirable in Milton high society. But Margaret has taste. Margaret can notice the busy and unorganized appearance of the wallpaper because she knows that everything needs to be followed well in a room that is tasteful; money causes people to notice the display of social status that an object can offer with no regard to balance and flow.
Although it is common for the wallpaper to be in full view for all to see, Margaret tries to come up with a way to hide as much of the wallpaper as possible. She mentions to her father how they can set up the room with the furniture to hide the wallpaper since it cannot be repapered: “Your bookshelves will hide a great deal of that gaudy pattern in the dining room” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 62). Margaret shows again that she is not focused on the economic subliminal code messaging that is being spoken through home decor in Milton, but is more focused on the comfort of her parents and herself. The manner that she is planning to decorate their new home is not focused on spending as much money as possible; instead she is looking at what will be more pleasing to them. She mentions to her father that the rooms that should be repapered are the drawing-room and his bedroom: “Surely, you can charm the landlord into repapering one or two of the rooms - the drawing room and your bed room for mamma will come most in contact with them” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 62). Margaret here displays that she isn’t focused on outside opinions, but is focused on what will be pleasing to her mother. The two rooms that she mentions that should be repapered are the two rooms that her mother will be more in contact with, not where more most visitors or guests will be in. Her point of focus is on comfort for her mother’s pleasure of sight; this is can be done by removing the “gaudy pattern” and picking a wallpaper that will be softer and that will go well with all the heavy cornices that the rooms already have. In the case of the rooms that cannot be repapered, Margaret thinks that hiding as much of it as possible with furniture that will fit well with the size and occupation of the rooms will be the most effective compromise.
Stepping back from just the wallpaper, it is important to remember Kanwit mentions that a house should be balanced in its decoration and occupation. With this in mind, we can observe that this house in Crampton is not balanced with its three sitting rooms and three bedrooms. Margaret mentions how her and her father laugh at the arrangements: “There were three sitting-rooms; don’t you remember how we laughed at the number compared with the three bed-rooms” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 61). She points out how there is more focus on the house functioning as a show of entertainment than on being a home where the owners are going to be spending most of their time and comfort in. This is where taste comes into play again, because taste is the focus on the pleasure of the senses, such as sight and touch in this case. The comfort of sight and touch for the owner will be compromised for the grand display of having three sitting rooms.

To anyone whose focus was upon grand displays of wealth in lieu of utilizing good taste, the Crampton house would seem perfectly decorated. Mr. Thornton even mentions this when he picked out the house as a positive choice for the Hales, however upon seeing Margaret “with her superb ways of moving and looking, he began to feel ashamed of having imagined that it would do very well for the Hales, in spite of certain vulgarity in it which had struck him at the time of his looking over” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 63). Mr. Thornton sees that the home decor is no longer suited for Margaret and her family due to the way she holds herself, before meeting her Mr. Thornton had thought the house would be a perfect for the Hale family since it was decorated in Milton style and it fit their price range. After meeting with Margaret and seeing how she dressed, meaning how her clothes “fit” her well, and her style of clothing were not new or latest but were classic. She is not someone to be mesmerized by extravagance; she is not looking at her
surroundings in an expense signaling view, but she instead considers her home as a whole that should flow together. Mr. Thornton pointing this out to the reader allows us to understand that Margaret isn’t only a person who has taste in fabrics, but is also a person that has taste in home decor.

Edith Wharton mentions how there are two ways to decorate a house in *The Decoration of Houses*: “Rooms may be decorated in two by a superficial application of ornament totally independent of structure, or by means of those architectural features which are part of the organism of every house, inside as well as out” (Wharton, 9). She points out that some people decorate their house with no thought whatsoever for the layout of their house but simply with a “superficial” agenda, meaning that they are simply picking ornament for their grand display, and what will be understood from having said ornament — not picking ornament that flows well with the already built in architectural features of the house. The main focus of this “superficial application of ornament” with disregard for the “independent” structure of a house is the eye-catching display of overwhelming décor. Wharton expresses that the correct way that a home should be decorated is by taking into account the backbone of the structure that is already there, and building from that, making sure that all the ornament and décor work well with the house structure so that its flow is not interrupted, and everything works well.

In relation to such differences in taste and how they are showcased with house décor, Gaskell not only shows the difference with wallpaper, but with taking the room as a whole painting that must seem lived in. An example of this would be when Mr. Thornton enters the Hales’ drawing room when he goes to have afternoon tea at their house. Mr. Thornton compares the Hales’ drawing
room to his own: “But the drawing-room was not like this. It was twice – twenty times as fine; not one quarter as comfortable” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 79). Here is where taste comes out, because Mr. Thornton points out that his drawing room is larger than the Hales’, and also “twice – twenty times as fine”. With so much space and expensive finery in his own drawing room, one would think — if money and taste do go hand in hand — that his drawing room ought to also be twice or twenty times as comfortable as the Hales’. However, this is not the case, because Mr. Thornton himself mentions that his drawing room with all its high end décor is not even “one quarter as comfortable”. This is where money and taste break part. The Hales’ drawing room does not have mirrors or glass to reflect light, or any other such expensive items of home décor. What they had to decorate their home was not eye-catching or displaying any sense of wealth, but their home décor made the drawing room feel like a home instead of a museum. This is where the idea of a house being an organism, as Wharton expresses, becomes a perfect visualization for understanding taste in house décor, because the function of a house, or in this case the drawing-room, is to be livable, a place that is comfortable enough to spend significant time in. If the drawing room is no longer comfortable, its function of being a place to spend time, converse, and live in is lost to superficial décor. The whole point of superficial décor is not for a place feel comfortable or be lived in, but for the shallow experience that the décor will bring forth from the owner unto the viewer.

Everything in the room indicates to Mr. Thornton that it has brought the Hales pleasure, because it has been used. The room has many indicators that it is not a room for display, but a place that the family wants to spend valuable time in. Everything in the room has a function, but still fits well in the space and with the backbone structure of the house. From the way that the
davenport was open by the window, to the white china vase, everything is open, airy, and not comprised. Mr. Thornton notices, “Pretty baskets of work stood about in different places; and books, not cared for on account of their binding solely, lay on one table as if recently put down” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 79). The whole point of taste is the pleasure that a person receives when experiencing something of good taste; it’s the way they interact with the item, or in this case, the space. The room shows signs that the Hales do not think about grand displays of wealth with décor, because nothing that Mr. Thornton mentions is new or shiny; most of the things that he mentions are used or old, however bring the Hales pleasure and comfort. The pretty baskets of work allow the reader to know that the Hales take such pleasure from being in the room, that they have their needlework supplies readily available there for Margaret or Ms. Hale to spend time working on. Secondly, the books that they have are not new, but used and placed on the table in a random manner that indicates that someone had just been reading them. The books that they have are not for display, but to be read and enjoyed. Mr. Thornton even comments how everything in the room is placed with care and grace of thought: “It appeared to Mr. Thornton that all these graceful cares were habitual to the family” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 80). Everything in the room has some purpose of life and pleasure for the Hales, not for outsider thought, because each item indicates in one form or another some habit that the family member partakes in the room. This again is an example of good taste, because taste in décor is keeping in mind that the people that should most enjoy the décor of a room or house is its owners, because they will be the ones spending the most time there. This is in contrast to not decorating a room with items that the owner will never use, just for the sake of displaying these objects for their price. Everything in the drawing room has some sort of sign that it has been used by the Hale family — the open davenport,
the white china vase with the flower, and the table with books strewn about, all indicate their useful function in the household. All the items have been used and touched not once, but multiple times; the room is used consistently by the family.

Now let us compare the Hales’ drawing room, where the décor is not for display, but for life and practicality, to the Thornton’s’ drawing room; there is a contrast in how Margaret feels when she sees it against how Mr. Thornton felt upon seeing that of her own family’s. The first thing that Margaret notices when she sees the drawing room is that the room seems like it has never been touched or used. There is a linen drugget that is glazed and colorless which is used to cover the carpet so that it won’t get dirty. Also, “In the middle of the room, right under the bagged-up chandelier was a large circular table, with smartly-bound books arranged at regular intervals round the circumference of its polished surface” (Gaskell, North and South, 112). This whole sections point out how two key factors for home décor — the lighting, and the floor, which are items that would be most commonly used throughout the day — are covered up so that they won’t get dirty from use. Even the books are picked and arranged in a manner that shows that they are simply for display and not for touch. The “bagged up chandelier”, the covered carpet, and the books “arranged at regular intervals” are all items that should be used, touched, and bring pleasure to the owners of the house; however the way the room is set up suggests the idea that everything is covered so that the items are not dirtied, and will be in “perfect” display for when formal social events take place in the Thornton drawing room; everyone can marvel at the intricate flower pattern the light color carpet has, how the chandelier has not a single speck of dust on it, or how the books are so strategically arranged. The items will be admired, but not for the way that they look as a whole, or how they the make the room feel, but for the display of wealth that these items indicate.
The Thornton’s have the money to be able to afford to decorate their drawing room in any manner they desire, but that doesn’t mean that the manner in which they have decorated the drawing room is tasteful. This is much like how when Fanny was picking the material for her wedding dress, she never once touched the material, but was simply looking how it would look under candlelight reflection, showing that Fanny was more focused on the display of wealth that the dressed gave over how the material would feel on her skin. The very same thing is happening with the home décor in the drawing room. The Thornton’s are more focused on how the items in their drawing room will impress guests during social events, to such a point they have no desire to touch or uncover their own belongings.

Margaret even mentions how overly clean the room feels like to the point that it was almost painful to look at: “Everything reflected light, nothing absorbed it. The whole room had a painfully spotted, spangled speckled look about it” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 112). The whole room’s layout and spotless look does not encourage pleasure or any desire to spend time in it, and the whole point of a drawing room is to have a guest feel comfortable and welcome. Margaret also points out that not only does the room prevent the desire to touch anything due to its spotlessness, but it causes her pain too. Gaskell even mentions that Margaret finds the room’s quality so unpleasurable that she didn’t even notice the “peculiar cleanliness required to keep everything so white and pure in such an atmosphere or of the trouble that must be willingly expanded to secure the effect of icy, snowy discomfort” (Gaskell, *North and South*, 112). The Thornton’s are so focused on showcasing that they have the means to keep their drawing room always perfectly clean in spite of living so close to the mill, that they never give a thought to how it feels to be in an “icy, snowy discomfort”, because they only think about how people will notice their wealth. As for
Margaret, she may not have the ability to maintain her family’s drawing room in such a spotless manner, but it feels welcoming, as Thornton mentions in page 79. Margaret doesn’t see the room in a manner of assessing the Thornton’s’ wealth, but is reacting to the sense of pleasure, or in this case displeasure, that the room is giving. She notices that everything is so white, clean, covered, and staged, that the drawing room feels as if it has never had anyone it to begin with. Nothing in the room makes her want to touch, or feel comfortable enough to look at.

Comparing both of the drawing rooms, the reader can notice how taste and money don’t always go hand in hand. The Thornton’s have the means to buy everything that is fashionable for home décor, but don’t understand how to make the space feel livable and comfortable to be in. The main purpose of their home décor is for display; nothing is bought to be used, or bring any daily pleasure in their own house. As for the Hales, they might not have the funds to buy new books or a grand chandelier, but they do have taste, because they know how to use what they have, and coordinate items for a small room to feel not overbearing, but welcoming and comfortable. Everything they have in their home is for their own pleasure, and most importantly, actual use.
Conclusion

Taste as a whole is a very hard thing to describe; as mentioned in the beginning of the thesis, it would seem like air. It is not something you can physically touch like beauty. Hume breaks down some of the skills that are needed to be able to detect good taste and learn how to do so in his article “Of the Standard of Taste”. These skills are: the delicacy of taste, practicing how to discern between something that is tasteful and something that is ostentatious, and lastly, good sense. In understanding these three fundamental skills, we are able to make distinctions between what is of good taste around ourselves, disregarding mainstream consumerist influences. Hume allows us to have this backbone of tangible understanding of what is the process of being able to understand how to notice good taste.

Now adding this backbone of understanding of taste through Hume’s to Gaskell’s novel, *North and South*, we can use this lens to observe how taste is a skill that can be developed regardless of economic means. In fact, most of the time, the amount of money that a person has does not correlate to whether the person has taste or not. Having more money and the means to buy what is in fashion or the most expensive does not automatically make the item or the person a knowledgeable pendulum of taste. There is a misconception that money and taste go hand in hand due to things that are considered of high value tending to be on the higher end of the price range. However that doesn’t automatically mean that the most expensive, or in vogue items are the most tasteful. Items of good taste are indeed made from high quality products, but are not necessarily always the most expensive. Since they are well-made, they need not be bought frequently, but can be kept throughout time.
All of this comes to play in *North and South*. We have characters from high economical social statuses, as well as characters that are in the working class, and everything in between. Gaskell gives us an array of characters that are from different economic statuses to display how knowledge of taste does not go hand in hand with money; while they do have a correlation, the wealthier the character is does not automatically imply that they have a better awareness of taste. And vice versa, just because a character is of a low economic status doesn’t imply that they don’t have the delicacy of taste; they are able to know what is tasteful even if they can’t afford it.

The characters of highest economic status who Margaret interacts with most in Milton are the Thornton’s. Although they are all of the same family, Mr. Thornton is the only one that is more conscious of taste while his mother and sister are not as aware. For example, as mentioned in both previous chapters, Mr. Thornton is able to see that the manner that Margaret and her family dress, and decorate their home fits them well. From the first time he notices Margaret, he sees that her clothes may not be new or the latest in fashion, but they fit her figure and aura well. She is the one wearing her garments, and not the other way around. Secondly, when he is inside the Hales’ home in Milton, he notices that nothing is in splendor, and everything is used and loved. They use what they own, making the room feel like it’s been lived in. Thornton is able to notice this difference of living between his family and the Hales. After all, although his family is economically more elevated than the Hales, he becomes Mr. Hale’s pupil. Thornton is someone of high financial status that can notice the feeling of taste and how it invokes the senses. Now let’s move to his sister Fanny, who is so invested toward grand display of wealth that she really doesn’t think about the fit of things, for example her wedding her dress. Instead, she is more focused on how the light will be reflected on the material she will pick for her wedding dress. In addition, the home décor in the
Thornton drawing room that we discuss in chapter two, indicates how everything is cover or bagged away. The room is spotless, but because of its spotless nature, it seems like the drawing room has no life in it. The whole point of a house is for it to be livable, like a home, but in this case it more resembles a museum.

Margaret is our center, the pendulum of taste in London and Milton. She processes all the skills Hume mentions that a person must obtain in order to be a pillar of taste; after all she is the main character in this social problem novel. She is in a social and economical status where she is able to interact with both the high social and economical class of Milton, such as the Thornton’s, as well as being able share experiences with cotton mill factory workers, such as Bessy Higgins. Margaret is able to be an example of discerning between something that is tasteful, and distasteful for Thornton and Bessy. After all, as Bessy mentions, she truly never understood why people in the bible say they desire to dress in such “soft” “raiment” until she meets Margaret, and sees how she dresses herself compared to what is typical in Milton. The same goes for Thornton, who realizes that compared to his own, the Hales’ drawing room has life; it seems like it has been used, therefore people want to be there. Everything has been touched, and the items themselves indicate this. Thornton, like Bessy, mentions how his drawing room is typical of Milton since it is not comfortable, and finer than the Hales’, however when he is in the Hales’ drawing room, he feels like he can relax.

Lastly, we have someone that is in the cotton mill factory workforce, Bessy. She is someone that, although she can not afford the fine texture materials that Margaret owns, she is someone that knows about textiles and how they will be perceived in the Milton eye, as well as which ones are of a high quality and good fit. Gaskell gave Bessy the delicacy of taste, and good
sense, both of which she must practice. She possesses all of these three skills that are necessary to be able to detect what is of good taste even though she is not someone that can splurge on said items. The way she gains more experience, which is the second skill that Hume mentions, is by her interactions with Margaret, namely Bessy wanting to know what Margaret will wear to the dinner party, and to see and touch the fabric of her dress.

Gaskell points out that money and taste don’t always go hand in hand. She deconstructs this idea that because something is expensive and new automatically makes it tasteful. She demonstrates this by showing that even though Bessy can’t afford to dress in such “fine” textiles, she knows what textiles are “fine” and of good quality. This is from her experience in working with cotton, and also her interactions with someone that is a guide of good taste. Secondly, Gaskell mentions that to experience something of good taste, it doesn’t have to be something new: for example, Margaret’s Indian shawls, or Bessy’s admiration for Margaret’s dresses even though they are not new. Lastly, Margaret’s limited income lifestyle does not hinder her delicacy of taste, yet the Thorntons’ generous income does not result in the same skill.

As stated many times in this thesis, taste is something very hard to describe and to imagine, yet Gaskell does it. As we read this novel there are many quotes that display what is taste. One of the many quotes that Gaskell uses to display this grand idea of taste is when Margaret is talking to Fanny about the concert that Milton has and what type of music she enjoys. Fanny says, “I always have a larger order to give to Johnson’s the day after a concert” and Margaret responds, “Do you like new music simply for its newness then?” (Gaskell, North and South, 97). Those two lines define this idea of taste and its connection to money. Money can only buy something because it is new, in this case, the music. People like the new music because it is new, not because it sounds
good. This is taste vs money. Taste, like music, is not valuable because it relates to something new, but because it can bring a strong pleasurable feeling to your soul, and most importantly your senses. The sound of all the instruments working together in one cohesive musical composition. Good music, just like taste, is something that isn’t lost through time, because it is so well made that it will be listened to for a long time. Music that is simply popular because it is new will be forgotten as soon as the infatuation fades. Much like how a very wise women always said, *Pan para hoy y nada para mañana*, which translates literally to ‘bread for today and nothing for tomorrow’. Taste is so much more than just having the means to buy the bread for today; it is having the means to know which flour is best for the type of bread you will make, and how you get that flour to make that bread, and protecting that knowledge so that you can always have bread today and tomorrow.

Just like musical taste relates to sound, when things are just for a grand display of wealth, they are loud and noisy; everything clashes together and you cannot hear the beauty of the instrument because no one can hear what the rest of the musicians are playing, even if they themselves are not the best judges of music. They are only thinking about themselves. This is money, having the means to buy all the best musicians and set them up with their respective instruments and telling each one that they can play whatever piece of music composition at the same time. It doesn’t matter if they can afford to have the best musicians; they are all going to sound terrible. Compared to asking maybe one person because that is all they can afford, and telling them to play the best musical composition they know, when they play, it will sound like heaven. That is taste.
This is what Gaskell is trying to show us, that money and taste don’t go hand in hand. You can have money and no taste or taste and no money. Taste is having those delicacy of skills of knowing when something looks or feels loud and noisy, or pleasant and cohesive.


Cervantes, De Miguel. “Don Quixote”


Hume, David. *Of the Standard of Taste*. DigiCat, 2022
