

## Sartorial Primal Scenes: Clothing the Boundaries of Modernist Identity

Sartorial culture strongly influenced modern experiences of identity and how modernist writers represented those experiences in literary form. As fashion became a more prevalent aspect of modernity in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture, sartorial practices involving consuming and dressing assisted social subjects in negotiating restrictive social, racial and gender boundaries, and in constructing new ways of representing identities that fell outside of these boundaries. New ways of imagining, constructing, performing, representing, and negotiating race, gender, sexual, and class identity—either through personal dress or in literary form—were influenced by innovations in such visual commodity and consumer culture as the mannequins used in virtual merchandizing and the democratization of fashion created by the mass production of clothing. The sartorially-mediated identities represented in literary forms merged modernist aesthetics and fashion culture in ways similar to late-nineteenth-century painting's reliance on fashion for its content and, occasionally, for its form in representing the modern. This paper traces the work of several canonical modernist writers back to what important sartorial experiences—what I refer to as “Ur” sartorial moments—from their Victorian childhoods. These “Ur” sartorial moments, what Henry James would call “the germ” of their ideas, strongly influenced how they wove sartorial culture into modernist discourses about identity. To that effect, “Sartorial Primal Scenes,” recounts important sartorial Ur-moments in the lives of modernist writers like Edith Wharton, Nella Larsen, Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, James Weldon Johnson, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, all of whom explored connections between sartorial and narrative strategies, and the representation and experience of modern identity.