

EPISODE # 10

Rhythms In Poetry

Producer: Ryan Lepicier

Writer: Kristian Berg

Editor: Kelly Morris

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Time Code	Audio
01:00:00	A/CPB ANNOUNCER:
01:00.20.24	NARRATOR: IN THE 1920'S AND 30'S, LANGSTON HUGHES COMBINED LITERARY INFLUENCES WITH AFRICAN ORAL TRADITION AND THE BLUES. ACROSS THE RIVER IN NEW JERSEY, A FAMILY DOCTOR NAMED WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS CREATED POEMS LIKE SMALL JEWELS.
01:00.40.10	PANCHO SAVERY: They are both dealing with the experiences of common, ordinary, everyday people. You can pick up poems by either one of them and you can read them and you can say I can relate to that, I can understand that, I, I, I, I know what this means.
01:00.57.25	NARRATOR: THESE TWO WRITERS BROKE NEW GROUND IN THE GENRE OF MODERNIST LYRIC POETRY.
01:01.33.11	NARRATOR: AMERICAN CITIES WERE BURGEONING BY THE TURN OF THE 20th CENTURY. URBAN-BASED INDUSTRIAL JOBS ATTRACTED RURAL FAMILIES AND NEW IMMIGRANTS.
01:01.41.28	JACQUELINE DIRKS: Think about the fact that cities have new technologies, they have electricity, there's public transit. There are architectural features not only like department stores and amazing skyscrapers, but

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	<p>there is affordable single room housing, okay, which you can't often find in other places. And of course, jobs, because much of the new industry is concentrated in cities like Chicago, and New York, and other places. So these are, these are all reasons why people want to go to cities.</p>
01:02.14.04	<p>NARRATOR: IN THE MIDST OF THIS URBAN BOOM, WRITER EZRA POUND SOUNDED THE CALL FOR A NEW AMERICAN POETIC VOICE. HE LAUNCHED THE IMAGIST MOVEMENT, URGING OTHERS TO USE FREE VERSE, ECONOMY AND CONCRETE LANGUAGE BREAKING WITH THE TRADITIONS OF ENGLISH VERSE.</p>
01:02.32.24	<p>LISA STEINMAN: What Pound wanted was for poets not to sound like poets, but to be poets, um, which is to say not to be derivative but to go back to whatever creative sources that traditional poets had drawn on.</p>
01:02.46.26	<p>PANCHO SAVERY: In talking about making it new, he was talking about making the language pure, not using a lot of adjectives, not using unnecessary language and trying to make, ah, poetry closer to the condition of music really concentrating on rhythm.</p>
01:03.04.20	<p>NARRATOR: IN THE U.S. AND ABROAD, ARTISTS, MUSICIANS, WRITERS, AND OTHERS WERE CALLING FOR AND CREATING CHANGE.</p>
01:03.15.23	<p>JACQUELINE DIRKS: Before the war, surprisingly enough, a great sense I think of optimism, an idea that progress could go forward, not just industrial progress and technological progress, but a great impetus for social reform and social change that's carried through the war.</p>
01:03.34.18	<p>NARRATOR: THE DEVASTATION OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR LEFT THE WORLD IN A STATE OF SHOCK, WITH NO WAY TO MAKE SENSE OF SUCH BRUTALITY.... EX-PATRIATE POET T.S. ELLIOT FOUND A WAY TO MAKE A CONNECTION FROM THE RUINS OF THE OLD WORLD TO THE NEW URBANIZATION. ELLIOT DEPICTS A NIGHTMARISH LANDSCAPE OF SPIRITUAL</p>

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	DESOLATION...
01:04.01.29	<p>T.S. ELLIOT READER: <i>THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD</i></p> <p><i>April is the cruelest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing Memory and desire, stirring Dull roots with spring rain. Winter kept us warm, covering Earth in forgetful snow, feeding A little life with dried tubers.</i></p>
01:04.28.13	<p>NARRATOR: EZRA POUND EDITED ELLIOT'S ROUGH DRAFT OF THE POEM. TOGETHER THEY CREATED A COLLAGE PASTING TOGETHER LITERARY FRAGMENTS OF THE OLD WORLD, MAKING A POETRY FOR THE NEW WORLD FROM THE WRECKAGE OF EUROPE.</p>
01:04.43.26	<p>T.S. ELLIOT READER:</p> <p><i>These fragments I have shored against my ruins.</i></p> <p><i>While then I'll fit you. Hieronymos mad again. Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.</i></p> <p><i>Shantih shantih shantih</i></p>
01:05.08.26	<p>LISA STEINMAN:</p> <p>If you look at the footnotes or you go back and read the originals of all the things that are quoted and cited and eluded to in <i>The Waste Land</i>, it doesn't help you one wit to understand what's going on in that poem. It is, in fact, a kind of rubble of stuff that used to have meaning and used to go together and that doesn't seem to go together. That's the part of the point of the poem is that loss, that... sense of a, ah, a talismans of value of a civilization that doesn't seem to have a center anymore.</p>
01:05.38.20	<p>NARRATOR: WHILE POUND AND ELIOT WORKED TOGETHER ON <i>THE WASTE LAND</i>, THEIR INDIVIDUAL STYLES SPAWNED SCHOOLS OF POETRY WHICH BECAME INCREASINGLY INCOMPATIBLE. ONE POET HEAVILY INFLUENCED BY POUND'S WORK IN IMAGE AND SOUND WAS WILLIAM</p>

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	CARLOS WILLIAMS.
01:05.55.23	<p>PANCHO SAVERY: Williams felt that he was trying to move American poetry in... in a new direction, a direction that was less academic, that was more focused on natural speech rhythms, that was something that, at least theoretically, a ordinary, everyday person who didn't have a Ph.D. could pick up and read and understand and be moved by.</p>
01:06.22.14	<p>LISA STEINMAN: <i>To a poor old woman munching a plum on the street, a paper bag of them in her hand.</i></p> <p><i>They taste good to her. They taste good to her. They taste good to her.</i></p> <p>He's offering the poor old woman this poem and he's offering it to her for a kind of sensual pleasure of the sort a plum might give. And so it is the language on the page with all those wonderful line breaks.</p> <p><i>They taste good to her. They taste good to her. They taste good to her.</i></p> <p>You sort of roll the words around in your mouth the way you might roll the taste of a plum around in your mouth so it's comparable to a plum.</p>
01:07.04.17	<p>NARRATOR: WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS LIVED AND WORKED WITH COMMON PEOPLE... HE CHALLENGED THE POPULAR CONCEPTION OF AMERICA AND OFFERED A WIDER DEFINITION.</p>
01:07.14.20	<p>JACQUELINE DIRKS: Working class people were really still struggling to pay the rent and buy food first. There was much more of a struggle than people often understand.</p>
01:07.23.28	<p>NARRATOR: WILLIAMS CONCENTRATED HIS SUBJECT MATTER ON THE LIVES OF COMMON PEOPLE.</p>

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	HE WAS PROUD TO CLAIM HIS LATINO HERITAGE.
01:07.31.28	<p>PANCHO SAVERY: His mother was born in Puerto Rico, his father was English, and he spent part of his early life in the Caribbean. Spanish was the language that was spoken at home.</p>
01:07.51.01	<p>NARRATOR: BY HIS EARLY TEENS, WILLIAMS WAS DETERMINED TO BECOME BOTH A WRITER AND A DOCTOR. HE WAS EDUCATED IN SWITZERLAND AND EARNED HIS M.D. FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA. IN 1910, WILLIAMS RETURNED TO HIS HOME TOWN TO OPEN HIS MEDICAL PRACTICE IN EAST RUTHERFORD, NEW JERSEY.</p>
01:08.10.12	<p>PANCHO SAVERY: He spent his time driving around in his car, and going to visit his various patients, not only did he give them his medical services but he got something in return, and what he got in return was their language, the way that they talked to him.</p>
01:08.25.14	<p>WILLIAMS READER: <i>As a writer I have never felt that medicine interfered with me but rather that it was my very food and drink, the very thing which made it possible for me to write. Was I not interested in man? There the thing was, right in front of me. I could touch it, smell it. It was myself, naked, just as it was, without a lie telling itself to me in its own terms.</i></p>
01:08.51.03	<p>NARRATOR: WILLIAMS WAS FASCINATED BY THE MINIMALIST POETRY OF CHINA AND JAPAN... IN WHICH ORDINARY THINGS HELD DEEP PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE. LIKE CHINESE IDEOGRAMS, IN WHICH EACH SYMBOL VISUALLY DESCRIBES ITS OWN CONCRETE MEANING, WILLIAMS' POETRY DELIVERED ITS IDEAS THROUGH PHYSICAL OBJECTS.</p>
01:09.13.22	<p>PANCHO SAVERY: What Pound was trying to do with imagism was in certain ways to imitate what he saw as going on in Chinese and Japanese poetry, making language as pure and clean as possible, no excessive words, no,</p>

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	ah, overuse of adjectives direct treatment of the thing.
01:09.39.22	<p>WILLIAMS READER: <i>So much depends upon</i></p> <p><i>a red wheelbarrow</i></p> <p><i>glazed with rain water</i></p> <p><i>beside the white chickens.</i></p>
01:09.49.10	<p>PANCHO SAVERY: What is that? I mean what is going on in this poem? To me, the most important part of the poem is the first four words, <i>so much depends upon</i>. Here is this plain, ordinary, everyday image, a red wheelbarrow. It's something you would just normally walk by, ignore, not pay attention to. And Williams is saying, so much depends on this common, ordinary, everyday object. And, again, he's saying that is what is important, that is what is going to make American poetry different and significant, the fact that ordinary, everyday people, ordinary everyday objects, ordinary, everyday language, those are the things that are going to constitute American poetry.</p>
01:10.49.08	<p>NARRATOR: AS A MODERNIST, WILLIAMS IMAGIST WORK WAS INFLUENCED BY PAINTERS, SCULPTORS AND OTHER ARTISTS OF THE TIME. HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND OTHER ESSAYS OFTEN FOCUS ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF POETRY TO MODERN ART.</p>
01:11.05.20	<p>WILLIAMS READER: <i>It's what you do with the work of art. It's what you put on the canvas and how you put it on that makes the picture. It's how the words fit in. Poems are not made of thoughts, of beautiful thoughts. It's made of words. Pigments, put on, here, there, made, actually.</i></p>
01:11:28.18	<p>LISA STEINMAN: He's thinking about the fact that poems are made of language and it's the language that he's making the poems out of. So that it's not that the poems are about objects, it's that they become themselves sort</p>

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	of ordinary objects made out of his own creativity, American creativity if you will, and set in circulation in the world.
01:11.52.00	<p>WILLIAMS READER: <i>This is just to say I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox</i></p> <p><i>and which you were probably saving for breakfast</i></p> <p><i>Forgive me they were delicious so sweet and so cold</i></p>
01:12.08.00	<p>LISA STEINMAN: It's clearly an exchange between two people that share a refrigerator, um, and that have a kind of, um, teasingly affectionate relationship. It is an apology but it's also...it's also a kind of "so there." Ah. After all, you don't tell someone how wonderful what you've just deprived of them of might be, ah, unless there is that kind of tone of affection. And I think it makes us listen to the ways in which people use ordinary language and the kind of complexities of tone and...of personal relationship that...can be involved in such apparently simple language. So as a note you'd throw it out and not attend to the value of that language. When he gives it to us as a poem, we're paying attention to how much ordinary language can do and...the richness of it.</p>
01:12.55.00	<p>PANCHO SAVERY: And Williams is saying, this is fit subject matter for poetry and he is doing it in American rhythms and American speech patterns.</p>
01:13.08.00	<p>NARRATOR: ALTHOUGH HE WOULD NOT BECOME WELL KNOWN UNTIL AFTER WORLD WAR II, WILLIAMS INFLUENCE IN LITERARY CIRCLES GREW STEADILY IN THE 1920'S AND 30'S. WILLIAMS HAD A HUGE INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF BEAT POETS LIKE ALLEN GINSBERG.</p>

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	<p>AS A TEENAGER, GINSBERG HEARD WILLIAMS SPEAK FOR THE FIRST TIME. HE LATER SAID, "I REALIZED THIS NEW PRINCIPLE OF POETRY WAS IDENTICAL WITH A LIVING LANGUAGE RATHER THAN AN ARCHAIC LANGUAGE BEING IMITATED."</p>
01:13.36.11	<p>PANCHO SAVERY: Ginsberg sent some of his early poems to Williams and asked Williams to read them and Williams read them and really liked them, and Williams basically felt that Ginsberg was this new, up and coming poet whose work he really could appreciate.</p>
01:13.55.10	<p>LISA STEINMAN: I looked at my shelves of poetry, um, and couldn't find anyone I could clearly say was not influenced by Williams. In that sense I think he shifted who could talk as a poet and what kinds of language you could make poetry out of and he did I think open the door both for a kind of, mad stream of consciousness in poetry, on the one hand, and on the other hand—the other Williams—for that, um, clean lined, um, very carefully crafted, ah, skinny poem, if you will, ah, that we think of as very common these days.</p>
01:14.34.00	<p>NARRATOR: RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES IN NORTHERN URBAN CENTERS... WILLIAMS' MODERNIST POETRY FOCUSED ON CAPTURING THE FOLK VOICE AND FINDING AN AMERICAN RHYTHM THAT USED ECONOMICAL VERSE. HIS WORK PARALLELED THAT OF MANY OTHER WRITERS, INCLUDING BLACK POETS LIKE STERLING BROWN, JEAN TOOMER, CLAUDE MCKAY AND LANGSTON HUGHES.</p> <p>HISTORIANS NOW CALL IT THE GREAT MIGRATION WHEN BLACKS LEFT THE SOUTH SEEKING JOBS IN THE INDUSTRIAL NORTH.</p>
01:15.21.02	<p>JACQUELINE DIRKS: Something like the 90 million Blacks who began the century living mainly in the South begin to move in great numbers to Northern cities, okay? And they move both because of the economic opportunities there, to get away from agricultural dead-ends, especially of share-cropping.</p>

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01:15.42.22	<p>NARRATOR: THE GROWTH OF BLACK COMMUNITIES IN BIG CITIES BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS</p> <p>PRODUCED A CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN DANCE, VISUAL ARTS, AND MUSIC.</p>
01:15.54.02	<p>RAFAI ZAFAR: Many people say the Blues came right up the Mississippi but it came up during the Great Migration, ah, with people bringing their music, bringing their guitars, bringing the songs they knew up from the South.</p>
01:16.06.04	<p>NARRATOR: IN NORTHERN CITIES, BLACKS STILL FACED RACIAL DISCRIMINATION. DURING THE "RED SUMMER" OF 1919, RACIAL ATTACKS BY WHITES AGAINST BLACK COMMUNITIES SWEEPED THROUGH NORTHERN CITIES.</p> <p>IN THE FACE OF STRUGGLE, BLACK ARTISTS AND WRITERS CREATED NEW WORKS TO ESTABLISH THEIR CULTURAL IDENTITY.</p> <p>THE 1920'S WITNESSED A BURST OF CREATIVITY THAT IN NEW YORK CITY BECAME KNOWN AS THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE. IN A SEEMING CONTRADICTION TO RACIAL SEGREGATION, MANY WHITES WERE DRAWN TO BLACK CULTURE.</p>
01:16.54.24	<p>PANCHO SAVERY: For a lot of White people, Black people were the incarnation of what it meant to be free and uninhibited and allowing all of your subconscious things to come out. And so White people would be going to Harlem and listening to music as a way to get in touch with their true emotions.</p>
01:17.29	<p>RAFIA ZAFAR: Black Americans have been said to be the quintessential modernists because if being modern speaks to the condition of being alienated in the world, then who better than people who were forced into Diaspora, like African-Americans.</p>
01:17.45.00	<p>NARRATOR: ONE OF THE GREAT MODERNIST VOICES TO EMERGE FROM THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE WAS THE POET LANGSTON HUGHES.</p>

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01:17.51.15	<p>ALICE WALKER: I love his work. I am very happy to have it. You know he was a great political analyst. He was very funny. His simple stories are priceless.</p>
01:18.02.04	<p>NARRATOR: Langston Hughes was the first to publish the work of Pulitzer prize-winning novelist Alice Walker.</p>
01:18.08.12	<p>ALICE WALKER: What I really appreciate more than anything is just him, you know, his kindness. When it's all said and done, you know, what matters is that people in themselves have been able to express the wisdom that they've learned, and there's no better expression of wisdom than kindness—and he had this to just an amazing degree.</p>
01:18.36.16	<p>NARRATOR: THE CHILD OF DIVORCED PARENTS, HUGHES WAS RAISED BY HIS GRANDMOTHER IN MISSOURI AND BEGAN WRITING POETRY BY AGE 12. AFTER HIGH SCHOOL HE LIVED WITH HIS FATHER IN MEXICO AND LATER BRIEFLY ATTENDED COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY BEFORE WORKING HIS WAY TO EUROPE AND AFRICA. WHILE THIS ECLECTIC BACKGROUND WOULD INFLUENCE HIS LATER WRITING, HIS FIRST BOOK OF POETRY CAME OUT IN 1926 WHILE HE WAS STILL A SOPHOMORE AT LINCOLN COLLEGE. IT WAS CALLED <i>THE WEARY BLUES</i>... IN THE TITLE POEM YOU COULD HEAR THE RHYTHM OF THE BLUES...</p>
01:19.14.06	<p>RAFIA ZAFAR: <i>Droning a drowsy syncopated tune, Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon, I heard a Negro play. Down on Lenox Avenue the other night By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light</i></p> <p>(CROSSFADE TO SAVERY) PANCHO SAVERY: <i>He did a lazy sway . . . He did a lazy sway . . . To the tune o' those Weary Blues. With his ebony hands on each ivory key, he made that poor piano moan with melody.</i></p> <p><i>Oh, blues, swayin' to and fro on his rickety stool. He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.</i></p>

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	<p><i>Sweet blues, comin' from a black man's soul. Oh, blues. In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone,</i></p> <p>(CROSSFADE TO ZAFAR) RAFIA ZAFAR: <i>I heard that Negro sing that old piano moan. Ain't got nobody in all this world. Ain't got nobody but myself. I's gonna to quit my frownin' and put my troubles on the shelf.</i></p>
01:19.57.18	RAFIA ZAFAR: That's one of the great poems in the 20 th Century.
01:20.16.07	ALICE WALKER: Langston had a lot of rhythm. It's in, it's in, the, you know, the paragraphs. It's in the sentences. It's in the way he chose what comes next. African-American speech, especially in the south, is very rhythmic and very melodic. And it is, when you live there, it really is less of a mystery why there is so much music among the people. It's because the music is just in them. It's just innate, and it comes out in the language and the way people speak to each other, and the way singing used to be actually spontaneous. You just heard it all the time.
01:20.57.17	PANCHO SAVERY: So when Hughes is writing about music, whether it's jazz or blues, I think that he is really tapping into something that speaks to the essence of an African-American cultural tradition.
01:21.13.27	<p>NARRATOR: THE WORK OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS, WRITERS AND MUSICIANS WAS CHAMPIONED BY BLACK PHILOSOPHERS, EDITORS AND SOCIOLOGISTS LIKE ALAIN LOCKE, W. E. B. DU BOIS AND CHARLES S. JOHNSON.</p> <p>ALL OF THEM BELIEVED IN THE CONCEPT OF THE NEW NEGRO; THAT THE MODERN AFRICAN AMERICAN COULD FREE HIMSELF FROM NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES, TO ASSERT HIS OWN IDENTITY.... AND THAT AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE COULD BE DEFINED THROUGH THE ARTS.</p>

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	<p>HUGHES EMBRACED THIS CONCEPT AND DECLARED THAT BLACK WRITERS AND ARTISTS WOULD NOW "EXPRESS OUR INDIVIDUAL DARK-SKINNED SELVES WITHOUT FEAR OR SHAME." IN HIS POEM <i>THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS</i> HUGHES HONORS HIS AFRICAN ANCESTRAL ROOTS.</p>
01:22.00.18	<p>HUGHES READER: <i>I've known rivers. I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins. My soul has grown deep like the rivers. I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset. I've known rivers, ancient dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers.</i></p>
01:22.53.00	<p>PANCHO SAVERY: He's looking at all of these different great rivers and talking about how the experience of African and African-American people has been connected to these geographical spaces of the rivers.</p>
01:23.07.16	<p>RAFIA ZAFAR: The sort of the size and the age of the rivers, sort of, um, emblemizes the profundity of black consciousness. "My soul has grown deep like the rivers."</p>
01:23.17.18	<p>ALICE WALKER: I love that poem. Well, you see, Langston, like many writers, was an old soul, you know, from birth. He was pretty, you know, out there. And old souls, one of the ways that you recognize an old soul is that they are in love with their elders. He had that sense of people, old people, old Black people especially, being in a way indistinguishable in their essence from old rivers. You know, and that just came out of his, you know, his sense of himself being really pretty ancient. It's a very nice thing to know yourself to be ancient. You know not just old, but really ancient, and he had that sense.</p>
01:24.10.28	<p>NARRATOR: IN HIS WRITING HUGHES DID NOT SEPARATE HIS PERSONAL EXPERIENCE FROM THE</p>

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	<p>EXPERIENCE OF BLACK AMERICA. IN MONTAGE OF A DREAM DEFERRED HUGHES</p> <p>EXPRESSES HIS DISILLUSIONMENT WITH THE AMERICAN DREAM.</p>
01:24.25.22	<p>HUGHES READER: <i>What happens to a dream deferred?</i></p> <p><i>Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore-- and then run? Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over-- like a syrupy sweet?</i></p> <p><i>Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.</i></p> <p><i>Or does it explode?</i></p>
01:24.52.11	<p>PANCHO SAVERY: He was a very socially conscious poet. And so there's lots of politics in his work and I think that that influenced a lot of people as well because for... for a while politics was considered not the proper subject matter for poetry.</p>
01:25.12.08	<p>ALICE WALKER: And in fact, he only stopped reading his more socially critical work because he was harassed by, I think, Hoover ,um, and you know during the McCarthy era, so much that he . . . he sort of stopped talking about, you know, how wrong things were, at least publicly. They called him a Communist, and at that time it was very difficult for people to find work if you can label them Communist.</p>
01:25.50.00	<p>NARRATOR: HUGHES USE OF IMAGE, HIS THEMES, AND HIS STYLE ALL DEFINED HIM AS A MODERNIST. POETS LIKE HUGHES WERE PART OF A QUIET REVOLUION AGAINST CONVENTIONAL THINKING.</p>
01:26.02.00	<p>RAFIA ZAFAR: You can think in terms of the blues poetry alone using African-American music...within the context of a poem. A..."high art" literary form is modernist because</p>

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	it's the yoking together of things that aren't necessarily thought of as belonging together and that's making something new.
01:26.23.18	NARRATOR: MODERNIST LYRIC POETS LANGSTON HUGHES AND WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS STRIPPED THE LANGUAGE OF AMERICAN POETRY TO ITS ESSENCE. BY DISCARDING ABSTRACTION THEY CONNECTED THEIR WORDS TO COMMON PEOPLE AND EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE. THEY BROKE AWAY FROM THE ORNATE TRADITIONS OF THE PAST WITH CLOSE ATTENTION TO LANGUAGE AND INNOVATIVE TECHNIQUES. EACH WRITER FOLLOWED POUND'S DEMAND TO "MAKE IT NEW"... CREATING WORKS THAT CONTINUE TO CHALLENGE READERS AND INFLUENCE WRITERS TODAY.
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