



Poetry and the Church

Abram Van Engen, Stanley Elkin Professor in the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis

Session 1: A New Approach to Poetry

How do we understand and approach poetry? In this first session, Professor Van Engen helps us understand that poetry is not a puzzle to be solved, but an experience to undergo.

What we seek is an encounter, not an explanation.

Main Points

- Poetry is an art of language that is all about body and soul. It is an art of encounter and experience, rather than understanding or explanation.
- The goal of poetry is to draw you into the beauty or the complication or the interest of the language itself.
- Poetry is for us, not just for experts. If we want to read poetry in the Bible and beyond the Bible—if we want to know why this art form exists, why and how God delights in it, and what it has to teach us or how it might transform us—we have to believe that poetry is for us and requires our engagement.
- Poetry is far more than meaning or message. Poetry is not a sermon or an essay, but rather an experience.
- Start with beauty. Poetry draws us in not through understanding, but through beauty. God does this as well.



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Session 1: A New Approach to Poetry (cont.)

Content Questions

- What is your previous experience with poetry, whether through scripture (Psalms, Proverbs, parables, etc.) or elsewhere?
- How have you thought about poetry in the past? Have you found yourself trying to "decode" poetry, or have you been drawn in through the experience?
- For what reasons do you think God included poetry in scripture? What can we understand about God's character through his use of poetry?

Application Questions

- Recall a work of art you've loved—whether poetry or some other form such as literature, visual art, music, etc.—and reflect on how you first encountered it. How did it draw you in?
- Find a poem (you can find several options in the "Further Resources" document that accompanies this course at carverclassrooms.org, or simply look elsewhere), and engage with it. Rather than trying to understand what it means, consider how it is attempting to draw you in through encounter and experience.



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Session 2: How to Read Poetry

How does one start reading poetry? The answer may be more simple than you think. In this session, Professor Van Engen offers some tips for getting started in the world of poetry and a few tools used to understand and experience poetry in depth.

Poetry is just sitting there waiting to be read.

Main Points

- To get started reading poetry, just start!
- Share what you find. When you've encountered poetry that moves you, share it with others.
- Don't worry about what others think. You don't need to start with the "Great Poets" of history. Find something that speaks to you.
- Ask questions of poems as you read. Think through what the lines, stanzas, and music of the poem are contributing to the experience of reading or hearing the poem.
- Questions to ask of poetry:
 - How does the grammar work?
 - How do the lines work?
 - How do the stanzas work?
 - What is the music of this poem?
 - Why does this poem keep going?
- A couple of specific poetry forms mentioned in this session:
 - Sonnet: A poem of fourteen lines using any of a number of formal rhyme schemes, in English typically having ten syllables per line.
 - Villanelle: A nineteen-line poem with two rhymes throughout.



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Session 2: How to Read Poetry (cont.)

Content Questions

- What barriers have you experienced to starting to read poetry? What would it look like to "just start?"
- Have you shared poetry with someone? If so, what did that look like? How did the other person receive it?
- What questions have you found yourself asking of poetry when you read it? Which of the questions from this session occurs to you to ask the most? What about the least?

Application Questions

- Find a poem that speaks to you and share it with a friend. Share what about the poem made an impression on you, and ask your friend to share what their takeaways are.
- Choose a poem and read through it multiple times, asking the questions that are laid out in this session. Explore how the grammar, form, music, etc. of the poem are working to draw you in and create an experience.



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Session 3: Why Read Poetry

Why should Christians read poetry? In this session, Professor Van Engen gives some basic reasons why Christians and especially ministry leaders might want to try out poetry and learn from this form of art.

Poetry has so much to offer the church, but the main thing it teaches us is that human beings are both body and soul.

Main Points

- Poetry names creation. It participates in a task God assigned humans at creation: to name and to know the world.
- Poetry tells the truth. But it understands the truth as experience, not just as proposition or logic or rules or principles or statements. To know is to undergo.
- Poetry helps us fulfill the calling of Romans 12:15: to rejoice with those who rejoice, and to weep with those who weep.

Content Questions

- How have you experienced poetry "naming creation"? How do you think Christians can practice this vocation of participating in creation through language?
- What does it mean to "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant"? How can poetry's indirect approach help create connection in ways that plain language might fail?
- How do the Psalms help us to understand what it means to "weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice"? How can we look for that in other poetry?



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Session 3: Why Read Poetry (cont.)

Application Questions

- Think about a time in which someone close to you has been either "weeping" or "rejoicing." How did you meet them there? How could poetry help you do this in future circumstances? What might that look like?
- What can your church or other Christian community do to incorporate and share poetry? Come up with some actionable ideas whether it's engaging with poetry in scripture or elsewhere.
- Make a plan to use and encounter poetry yourself in a way you hadn't before participating in this course. Whether it's buying a collection of poems, listening to Professor Van Engen's "Poetry for All" podcast, or some other way, challenge yourself to be drawn into poetry now that you've encountered it in this course.