Donne's Imagery: A Study In Creative Sources

Milton Rugoff

The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne: The epigrams. - Google Books Result

John Donne is famous for the sheer variety and ingenuity of the imagery he uses in his poetry. Few poets have used imagery so unpredictably and inventively as Donne did. Donne's poems rarely seem conventional (even when they are), partly because readers can never quite guess what startling or unusual image (or combination of images) Donne will use next. A good example of Donne's tendency to use a wide range of images can be seen in John Donne is famous for the sheer variety and ingenuity of the imagery he uses in his poetry. For an early study of Donne's imagery, see Milton Allan Rugoff, Donne's Imagery: A Study in Creative Sources (New York: Corporate, 1939).

Donne uses the imagery so we can get a visual picture of what love means to him. He uses the imagery because it's necessary to see a picture of the pain he lives with. Donne uses several aspects of imagery, including death to show his grief and Janeiro also does uses despair to display his pain. The image of death was used throughout the poem. Love so soon decays, meaning that love so quickly dies. If you cut a flower and do not put it in water it will quickly wither and die. Another image of death would be the plague. A plague is a widespread disease that causes thousands of people to die.

John Donne's poetry is a curious mix of contradictions. At once spiritual and metaphysical, it is also deeply embedded in the physicality of bodies: love as a physical, corporeal experience as well as a spiritual high. His style can often be startlingly plain ('For God's sake hold your tongue', one of the poems on this list begins), yet his imagery is frequently complex, his use of extended metaphors requiring some careful unpacking. Here we've condensed the complete poetical works of John Donne into ten of his best-known and most celebrated poems.