*Discuss some of the ways in which Duffy deals with the potential and limitations of imagination in three or more of her poems.*

Much of Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry contemplates the concept of imagination, considering both its potential and its limitations. ‘Dear Norman’, ‘Warming Her Pearls’ and ‘Miles Away’ are arguably most explorative of the journey of imagination, and the three poems are comparable in that each deals with an element of fantasy, to a greater or lesser extent. Through highly emotive language, symbolism and stance, Duffy’s poems convey a universal reflection of the blurred boundaries between imagination and reality, and the extent to which the mind can create the imaginary.

Duffy typically approaches poetry from the female perspective, and in doing so often explores femininity and sexuality. Through this use of perspective, ‘Dear Norman’, ‘Warming Her Pearls’ and ‘Miles Away’ are interlaced with an essence of lust and longing, as each explores the imaginary world of sexuality and desire which appears to exist only within their imagination; always slightly beyond the grasps of their reality. ‘Dear Norman’ approaches the concept from the viewpoint of a teenage girl, just beginning to explore her sexuality through the creation of an ideal suitor in the form of her paperboy. In her imagination, she gives this mundane paperboy the name of ‘Pablo’, which, with its exotic, foreign connotations, reinforces the sense of naivety and youth, as the girl exaggerates her imagining to conform to the stereotypical romantic ideal. She has Pablo transform into a ‘diver for pearls’, and this itself equates to the teenager’s initial exploration of sexuality, in that as a diver may explore unchartered waters, so she explores aspects of herself only newly awakened. The female perspective allows Duffy to assume an empowering, assertive tone in the narration, as the girl reflects the control she upholds over her imagination despite her inexperience in the world she is delving into, as she confirms, ‘I can do this.’ In the creation of an imagined fantasy which is limited by reality’s constraints, ‘Warming Her Pearls’ greatly resembles the tone of ‘Dear Norman’. Taken from the perspective of a female maid, the poem gives voice to the female lover restricted by the boundaries of her position. ‘Warming Her Pearls’ emphasises even further the depths to which imagination may go, the mistress becomes the sole object of her desire; as the maid works, ‘All day I think of her’, and this portrays the importance of the mistress in the maid’s own life. She too explores her sexuality, albeit with a more direct attitude, as the object of the maid’s desire is well known to her. As she lies awake fantasising about her mistress, she thinks of the pearls ‘cooling even now’, and ‘feel[s] their absence and I burn’. In this, with said pearls typically representing femininity, the ‘cooling’ conveys the maid’s sexually charged fantasy drawing to a close despite the burning desire she feels. This cyclical process, of both the heating and cooling of the pearls and of the maid’s passion, in which there is process yet never development, is comparative to the recurring boundaries of the narrator’s imagination in ‘Dear Norman’; the teenager must base her explorative imaginings upon whoever may cross her path, and her fantasy’s are cut short by the limitations of her imagination, much as the maid’s desire can in no way prosper, except for in her mind. ‘Miles Away’ may also be assumed to be written from the female perspective. Rather than sexually charged, the tone of the poem is one of sorrow and heartbreak. Nevertheless, it certainly explores desire from a female viewpoint, however this desire is more poignant in that it comes hand in hand with a feeling of loss. It appears that rather than having created an entire fantasy based only on fruitless yearning, the narrator has lost that which she so longs for. Physical distance replaces the idea of the boundaries of imagination, and the use of contrast in poem’s first line, ‘I want you and you are not here’ only heightens the sense of agonising distance between the narrator and her loved one. Yet despite the fact that it is distance which separates the two, the imagination can never replicate the real thing. In trying to say the name of her loved one; ‘it will not stay with me’, and in imagining their form, ‘I have got your mouth wrong’. Indeed it appears that she too is limited by her imagination, despite the fact that she aims to recreate flesh rather than imagine it. Thus, the females situation resembles that of ‘Warming Her Pearls’ and ‘Dear Norman’, in which the females attempt to hold onto their imagination; so the narrator of ‘Miles Away’ tries to maintain her grasp on the unreachable image of the object of her longing.

Both the potential and limitations of imagination may be further explored through Duffy’s varied use of emotive language and evocative symbolism, employed to heighten the sense of sexuality and longing which are both prominent themes of the specified poems. Her use of symbolism is similar within ‘Dear Norman’ and ‘Warming Her Pearls’ in the representation of the female form through the pearl. As pearls connote to purity and beauty, so they may also symbolise regeneration in that something worthless grows to become something of value. In ‘Dear Norman’ this concept of regeneration is particularly appropriate, in that the girl manipulates her imagination in order to transform a dull paperboy into an object of perfection. In her fantasy of Pablo, ‘Translucent on his palm, a pearl appears’, and the transparency of her desire emerges as she imagines that in seeing the pearl, Pablo ‘is reminded’ of the female qualities, and thus of her. Whilst ‘Warming Her Pearls’ takes a more evocative stance, the essence of the symbol remains the same. The pearls are the maid’s link to her mistress; this inanimate object is brought to life through the maid’s erotic desire and she thinks of them as the object which binds the two together. The maid ‘place[s] them round her cool white throat’, and gains access to this vulnerable region of her mistress’ body; the pearls allow the maid’s imagination to reach new depths as she engages in what is in her eyes intimate contact. In stanza four, Duffy makes reference to the presence of a ‘Full moon’, and here a realm of connotations becomes apparent. The moon controls the tides much as the mistress controls her maid, and so whilst the moon is strongest when full, so the mistress is too. Her pull upon the maid’s desires and obsessions is at its peak. Thus she begins to imagine her mistress ‘slipping naked into bed’; her imagination has reached its peak too, momentarily free from the restraints of reality. The love we witness within ‘Warming Her Pearls’ is undoubtedly an imagined, one-sided love; phrases such as ‘I dream’, ‘All day I think of her’ and ‘I feel their absence’ weave an sorrowful image of the painful adoration the maid endures, and of the limitations of her imagination in that she cannot make her mistress reciprocate her feelings using simply the tool of her fantasy. This concept is comparable to the poignant portrayal of love Duffy creates through her language in ‘Miles Away’. There is a sense that the narrator tries desperately to cling on to something she cannot help but lose, heightened by descriptions of ‘your name’ as ‘a pale ghost’ which ‘will not stay with me’. The image of her loved one appears to be fading into memory as time passes her by; whilst ‘cool night dissolves into the earth’, so she must move on with time as her imagination cannot take him with her. Hence, reality limits the potential of her imagination to treasure forever the image of her loved one.

Duffy’s works ‘Dear Norman’, ‘Warming Her Pearls’ and ‘Miles Away’ each approach the potential and limitations of imaginations from the female perspective, and whilst they are comparable in the recurring theme of longing and desire, each deal with these themes in contrasting ways. Nevertheless, the poems convey, through various techniques, the ability our imagination gives us to explore unknown territories of our mind and create parallel realities, or to recreate images that may exist to us only as memories; yet each contains the irrefutable idea that our imaginations are limited by reality.