Salome (pronounced ‘Sah-loh-may’) is a biblical character and is one of five in the collection *The World’s Wife*. It is worth considering why Duffy has chosen these particular women from the Bible, particularly as you might be asked about the biblical versus the classical characters in the examination.

*Salome*: from the New Testament, the book of Matthew, chapter 14. Salome danced for Herod on his birthday and he was so pleased by her performance that he promised to give her whatever she wished for. She was prompted by her mother, Herodias, and asked for the head of John the Baptist, on a plate. John the Baptist had been preaching about the coming of Jesus and had baptised Jesus (Matthew, chapter 3).

Many writers have re-told the story of ‘Salome’, including Oscar Wilde, in a play originally written in French.

The poem starts off in what might be termed a rather ‘male’ style, in that the tone is that of someone boasting about waking up the morning after the night before with an unknown stranger in the bed beside them. Immediately Duffy signals that this is *not* a one-off occurrence (‘I’d done it before’) and this might be seen as an ironic twist on the idea of the one-night stand scenario – lots of one night stands for her but for the men it is literally a never to be repeated experience as they are now dead. The parenthesis reflects how unimportant the event is to Salome: ‘(and doubtless I’ll do it again, / sooner or later)’. There is an inevitability about what has happened which has resonances of the ‘I just can’t help myself’ comments of men who have one-night stands.

Despite its gruesome subject the poem is humorous – ‘woke up with a head on the pillow beside me’ – although a certain amount of knowledge of the story of ‘Salome’ is required by the reader to recognise the black humour in the line, otherwise we might not realise the head is detached from the body!

The poem reveals a woman in control, as with many of the other poems in the collection. There is no doubt that Salome would go to bed with a handsome man – ‘Good looking, of course’ – and again the detailed description of his physical appearance mirrors the way in which some men might discuss a one-night stand. There is no emotion here, only the confirmation that she can ‘have’ whoever she wants.

It is only at the end of the poem that Salome makes reference to the severed head and we might get the impression that she has forgotten what happened, as if she is awakening from a drunken sleep; in the first stanza she certainly does not seem to realise why the man is so cold:

‘Colder than pewter.
Strange.’
In the second stanza the rather frugal meal Salome wishes for – ‘I knew I’d feel better / for tea, dry toast, no butter’ – contrasts vividly with the gory over-indulgence of her fantasies, which she has carried out for real.

The structure of the poem mimics a person gradually coming to full consciousness from a deep sleep: the first stanza is free verse, with long lines, questions and use of ellipsis, suggesting almost a stream of consciousness.

In the second stanza, there are much shorter lines and an up-tempo rhythm, which reflect her coming awake and recognising what will make her feel better. The half rhymes of butter/better and clatter/clutter, gradually change to full rhymes of clatter/patter/batter mirroring her growing wakefulness and then the final line of the stanza is like the recollection of a person who realises they are badly hungover and lead in to the resolution of the third stanza:

‘hungover and wrecked as I was from a night on the batter.
/ Never again!’

Salome’s attitude to the man is clearly shown in the three words she uses to describe him in the third stanza, ‘the blighter, / the beater or biter,’ and it is worth considering why Duffy has chosen these – to blight, to beat, to bite: what do they imply? Salome also says it was time to ‘turf him out’, so there will be no gentle wakening or swapping of phone numbers to meet up again. Duffy clearly shows that Salome has no emotional attachment to him.

It is only in the last stanza that there is any hint that Salome might have done something wrong: ‘I saw my eyes glitter.’ But does this imply wickedness or merely mischievousness?

Think about the irony of the phrase ‘and ain’t life a bitch’: the man is not alive and bitch always refers to the female, thus Salome is confirming that yes, life is female and women are central; men are peripheral and dead.

The end of the poem sounds like gossip, the punch line of a joke or boasting to friends:

‘and there, like I said – and ain’t life a bitch –
was his head on a platter.’

There is no emotion in these lines, except perhaps a triumphant note? There is no mention of the man being decapitated and the poem finishes just as the truth is revealed; does this impact on our opinions of Salome, as Duffy has portrayed her?