“AN ANCIENT GESTURE”
By Edna St. Vincent Millay

I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:
Penelope did this too.
And more than once: you can't keep weaving all day
And undoing it all through the night;
Your arms get tired, and the back of your neck gets tight;
And along towards morning, when you think it will never be light,
And your husband has been gone, and you don't know where, for years.
Suddenly you burst into tears;
There is simply nothing else to do.

And I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:
This is an ancient gesture, authentic, antique,
In the very best tradition, classic, Greek;
Ulysses did this too.
But only as a gesture,—a gesture which implied
To the assembled throng that he was much too moved to speak.
He learned it from Penelope...
Penelope, who really cried.
“Ancient Gesture” Text Dependent Questions

1. Does this poem make you feel more or less sympathetic to Penelope than the “Odyssey” did? Explain

2. (a) What is the “ancient gesture”?

(b) According to the speaker, what caused Penelope to employ this gesture?

(c) What might have caused the speaker to make a similar gesture?

3. (a) According to the speaker, who else made this ancient gesture?

(b) How did this gesture differ from Penelope’s?

(c) What do the different qualities of their gestures show about these characters?

4. (a) What questions about the speaker are left unanswered?

(b) What effect do these unanswered questions create?

5. What advice do you think Penelope would give to the speaker of this poem? Explain.

6. How are the expressions of emotions different in these two texts?

Write an extended response essay about the following question:

How do the depictions of grief in The Odyssey and “An Ancient Gesture” develop a universal theme? How does Millay use the story of Penelope and Odysseus to convey a modern theme?