Students in the Program in Structured Liberal Education are encouraged to think of one’s scholarship as an intellectual response not only with texts and thinking, but with being and beings in the world which claim one’s responsiveness. Reading and writing in this sense is always a solicitous and critical activity. Kristian Bailey’s essay on the Odyssey evinces with fineness and seriousness both the stakes and rewards of such an endeavor. “Empathy vs. Emptiness: An Investigation of Human and Divine Responses to Pain” looks at different responses to suffering by gods and humans in the Odyssey. Kristian argues that a certain responsiveness to the other’s suffering—one that goes as far as internalizing his pain—distinguishes human relations from human-divine relations. More provocatively, he argues that empathy for the other’s experience of pain engenders an ethos of protection and release from suffering. Kristian finds this ethos expressed most truly in instances of connubial sleep in the Odyssey. He writes, “In sleeping together, though both partners do not experience the same sub-consciousness, they share the experience of being released from their daily suffering in each other’s presence.” As Kristian points out, couples are described as sleeping “next to” or “beside” each other. And after their sorrow-waged reunion, “after Odysseus and Penelope / had made sweet love, they took turns / telling stories to each other.” Their conversation, this manner of being “next to” each other in the marriage bed, reflects a kind of understanding that is experienced only among humans: it turns the other’s suffering into an act of shared suffering. The beauty of Kristian’s essay is not only its carefully crafted prose, not even in the subtlety and insight of his close readings. It is the quiet imprudence of addressing an aspect of human experience that might have easily gone unmarked—like sleep itself—in a tale of such heroic proportions.

—Yoon Sook Cha
Empathy vs. Emptiness: An Investigation of Human and Divine Responses to Pain

Kristian Davis Bailey

Characters in *The Odyssey* have three basic responses to individuals who are in pain. The first is indifference, or a lack of any emotional response at all. Next is sympathy, which evokes an emotional response—pity—but that response only demonstrates a condescending sorrow for those who are in pain. And finally, there is empathy, an internalization of the other’s pain, which evokes an understanding and emotional response. The difference in emotional responses to pain, the difference between some emotional response and none at all, is an important distinction between human and divine-human relationships. The gods, while sometimes sympathetic, generally feel no emotions towards humans and are never empathetic. This distinction is seen around moments of connubial sleep, which eventually becomes the most intimate and passionate site of human interactions in the world of *The Odyssey*.¹

The act of human connubial sleep represents the ethos of Odysseus’ Greece. If home is the center of Greek life and the married couple sleeps in the center of the home, conjugal sleep represents a symbolic treasure of human experience. The description of Arete and Alcinous during sleep highlights this valued experience. We see a description of the sleeping couple after Odysseus leaves Calypso, in search of lodging and safe passage home: “Odysseus, / who had suffered much, fell asleep on the bed / under the echoing portico. But Alcinous lay down / in the innermost chamber of that lofty house, / and his lady shared his bed and slept beside him” (7.359-7.366). In saying “nothing is sweeter than your own country / and your own parents, not even living in a rich house— / not if it’s far from family

¹ Unless otherwise stated, sleeping together has no sexual connotations.
and home,” Odysseus identifies family and home as the greatest treasures of the Greek human experience (9.37-9.38). Since Odysseus is not yet reunited with his wife in his own connubial bed, his distance from the physical center of the home demonstrates his remoteness from the metaphorical sense of the Greek home, an object of paramount importance to the Greeks.

In this way, Arete and Alcinous provide a foil to Odysseus. The married couple is united and sleeps in the “innermost chamber,” while Odysseus sleeps alone “under the echoing portico.” The term “innermost chamber” carries connotations that are not present elsewhere in the house. The center is the best-protected area of the home, as the exterior rooms provide a barrier to the outside world. This barrier gives warmth and insulation to those within its borders. In sleeping together, though both partners do not experience the same sub-consciousness, they share the experience of being released from their daily suffering in each other’s presence. Lying together within this warm environment creates a state of intimacy that only humans can experience. And Odysseus, separated from his wife, cannot yet regain that sensation. The depiction of conjugal sleep as intimate recurs throughout the text: “So they slept there / on the palace porch, the hero Telemachus / and Nestor’s glorious son. But Menelaus slept / in the innermost chamber of that high house / next to Helen, Zeus’ brightness upon her” (4.310-4.326). Zeus, who remains awake while the humans sleep, recognizes something special between the sleeping spouses. His brightness shines upon Helen after she has been reunited with her husband after ten years of separation. Their reunion represents peace after a long and brutal war and the atmosphere of divine light brings a sacred and tranquil nature to conjugal sleep. Sleep also brings peace to Helen and Menelaus, who demonstrate tension in their conscious interactions. At the end of each day, with sleep as a respite, the couple must reconcile their grievances with each other, if only for a couple of hours. When humans sleep together, the text explicitly says the partners slept “beside” or “next to” one another. So, the sanctity lies not in the act of sexual consummation, but in another aspect of sleeping beside another human being: the relinquishment of one’s self-consciousness. This intimacy is absent from Odysseus and Calypso and from all other divine-human relationships in the story.

The gods do not even feel sympathy towards human suffering. We see this when Calypso does not understand Odysseus’ pain during his gravest moment: “[Calypso] found him sitting where the breakers rolled in. / His eyes were perpetually wet with tears now, / his life draining away in homesickness. / The nymph had long since ceased to please. / He still slept with her at night in her cavern, / an unwilling lover mated to her eager embrace” (5.148-5.152). Though Odysseus
is trapped on an island with Calypso, a goddess, he sits “where the breakers rolled in.” Odysseus is on the outermost extremity of the island and as close to the rest of humanity as is physically possible. And Odysseus’ place in the breakers suggests he is similar to the rocks and shoals that bear the weight of the breaking waves—solid and durable on the surface, but eroding piece by piece as time progresses and wave after wave thrashes against him. Since he spends “days sitting on the rocks by the breakers,” we see that Odysseus willingly subjects himself to this pounding. Such daily abuse serves to remind Odysseus that, like his strength, his mortality and that of his loved ones are also slowly eroding with time. The waves physically trap Odysseus on the island, as they are constantly and unrelentingly breaking upon the shore.

Similar to the pounding waves, Odysseus’ pain never ends. Odysseus’ captivity causes him grief, as “his eyes were perpetually wet with tears now.” This characterization of Odysseus, heretofore the great, cunning hero of Troy, as perpetually weeping shows the intensity of Odysseus’ grief. Part of this grief may stem from the fact that Odysseus lost his entire crew during his journey home. The larger portion, however, stems from a more dire cause: “his life [was] draining away in homesickness.” The grief is so deep that it drains the strength out of Greece’s greatest living hero. Though the reasons behind Odysseus’ longing to return home are unclear, we know home represents his heritage, his family, and his position as ruler of Ithaca. At some level, all of these spheres imply a connection to other humans, something Odysseus has not had in seven years. So, whatever his motives, Odysseus’ life is directly at stake in his reunion with mortal men.

Pain, which often provokes an emotional response from humans, produces no such reaction from Calypso. The act of sleeping with Calypso then becomes strictly physical and is not intimate on a psychological level. Even though he “[sleeps] with her at night in her cavern,” the pain caused by Odysseus’s separation from home is so strong that Calypso “had long since ceased to please him.” Though he might experience carnal pleasure, Odysseus gains nothing of emotional value from sleeping with Calypso. When, despite Odysseus’ unwillingness and emotional frailty, Calypso holds him in “her eager embrace,” we see that she does not understand Odysseus’ grief. Instead, Calypso continues to compel Odysseus to sleep with her; insensitivity is one aspect of Calypso’s misunderstanding. So, while Calypso is physically attached to Odysseus, their relationship is like the “hollow, salt-rimmed eyes,” through which he constantly stares out to sea and towards home, (5.157). The act of sleeping with a goddess is empty and meaningless. Emotional value is also absent when gods sleep with women. When the gods sleep with humans,
it is simply a physical act: “[Poseidon] unbound the sash that had kept [Tyro] virgin / and shed sleep upon her. And when the god / had finished his lovemaking, he took her hand / and called her name softly…with that he plunged into the surging sea” (11.248-11.251; 11.257). Poseidon not only violates the honor of a virgin human, but he also does so while she is asleep. Though Poseidon could be seen as sympathetic when he “[calls] her name softly,” there is no intimacy in the sex because it is not a mutual experience between the two, but “his lovemaking.” Significantly unlike human couples, Poseidon does not physically sleep next to Tyro after he has sex with her. And since Tyro is not even conscious during sex, the moment loses any sense of intimacy it could have held. Though sympathy is condescending, even that would be superior to the lack of emotional concern Poseidon demonstrates for human feelings.

The act of violating the conjugal bed comes to represent the deepest pain in Odysseus’ eyes. When Penelope implies their connubial bed was compromised, Odysseus:

Could bear no more, and he cried out to his wife: / ‘By God, woman, now you’ve cut deep. / Who moved my bed? It would be hard / for anyone, no matter how skilled, to move it. / A god could come down and move it easily, / but not a man alive, however young and strong / could ever pry it up... / But I do not know, woman, whether my bed is still firmly in place, or if / some other man has cut through the olive’s trunk. (23.189-23.194; 23.209-23.211)

Odysseus, who carefully guards his actions and words, even as Penelope weeps in front of him and the suitors disrespect him in his own home, cannot endure the possibility that his bed’s honor was violated. This outcry is driven by Odysseus’ pride—pride in the durability of his craftwork and in the durability of his marriage. When Odysseus says Penelope’s comment “cuts deep,” we see that this pride resonates in Odysseus’ heart, inside his own innermost chamber. The pain seems to cut deeper than any pain Odysseus experienced in the rest of the text. Though the conjugal bed usually represents a site of extreme safety and comfort, here it is depicted as a cause of extreme distress. The strength of the olive trunk bed can be compared to that of Odysseus’ heart, as both objects are “cut” into in this passage. Trees are deeply rooted objects, and to cut through the base of such a firm element represents a powerful and fatal wound. From the severity of the pain Odysseus experiences, we see that home and the sanctity of his connubial bed are embedded deep within Odysseus’ psyche. His psyche compliments the degree to which conjugal sleep is extolled in the wider world of The Odyssey.

With the conjugal bed as the centerpiece of Greek ethos, Odys-
seus and Penelope’s reunion on their bed highlights the special empathetic nature of connubial sleep. Though Odysseus cries throughout his journey, “tears [were brought] from deep within him” when his wife recognizes him and he finally reenters his home (23.239). These tears are unlike any others, as they come from “deep within him.” Throughout the text, sleep had been an event caused either directly by the gods or unexpectedly “fell upon” the individual, as happened to Odysseus on the Phaecian’s ship. However, when Penelope says, “But come to bed now, / and we’ll close our eyes in the pleasure of sleep,” sleep becomes an anticipated activity for Penelope and Odysseus, (23.260-23.261). It is clear that both characters are happy to sleep together when Homer says, “and they went with joy to their bed /and to their rituals of old” (23.302-23.303). Though the “rituals of old” include sex, they are followed by the aforementioned relinquishment of self-consciousness.

Here we see exactly what is sacred about sleeping “beside” or “next to” one’s spouse. Finally, after their separate ordeals of grief and pain, “after Odysseus and Penelope / had made sweet love, they took turns / telling stories to each other.” (23.306-23.308). Sex is described as “sweet” and as a shared experience for Penelope and Odysseus, unlike Poseidon’s affair with Tyro. Not only is this physical interaction better than sex between gods and humans, but it is also followed by an exchange of experiences and ideas. The ensuing conversation represents the emotional response to pain that is absent from the gods’ interactions with humans. Odysseus tells Penelope “of all the suffering / he had brought upon others, and of all the pain / he endured himself. She loved listening to him / and did not fall asleep until he had told the whole tale” (23.314-23.317). There is no mention of Penelope’s name in the first sentence, nor is there any of Odysseus’ in the second, which suggests that each spouse suspends his or her own consciousness to receive the other’s experience, in alternating turns. This relinquishment of self-consciousness is absent from divine-human relations, particularly Calypso and Odysseus’. Instead of selfishly considering their own needs, desires and worries, Penelope and Odysseus internalize the other’s pains. Though suffering is involved in the exchange, Penelope “loved listening to him.” This love connects sleeping together, an area of human relations, to the union of two experiences into one sense of understanding. This understanding is the counterpoint to Calypso and Odysseus’ experience. As Odysseus releases his war tales, pain from within his “innermost chamber,” his words touch Penelope’s heart. This moment has the opposite effect of “his life draining away in homesickness.” Reliving his journey becomes a release for Odysseus because he is able to look back upon the pain and uncertainty he experienced from the safety and security of the center of his home. And just as Odysseus’ life was
once at stake in his returning home, it is now revitalized by Penelope’s display of love. As Odysseus releases the suffering from his heart, the firmly planted conjugal bed becomes the site of deep-rooted understanding between him and his wife. This moment is so intimate that not even the audience has access to Odysseus and Penelope’s direct words within their “innermost chamber.” For anyone besides the married couple to have access to these words would violate the vulnerability of relinquishing one’s self-consciousness and the sanctity of two minds becoming one.

Love is an emotional response to Odysseus’ pain that is stronger than any response to suffering from another human or god in the text. Even Athena, who “had a soft spot in her heart for the hero,” never expresses love towards Odysseus, (7.45). This strong emotional response and understanding of pain represent a truly empathetic response. The conjugal bed is ultimately portrayed as a site of release, comfort and mutual understanding. The gods, though sympathetic to human needs at times, cannot and do not experience the same pain; they cannot empathize, for they do not know what it means to experience pain.