

Slow Motion, Time Lapse, and Learning
By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

“It shows him blowing it, and it then shows him succeeding. Why is that?”

The setting was my class in world literature. We were studying Homer’s *Odyssey*. One of the things I like about my lit students is that they ask lots of questions. We had finally arrived at the second to last chapter of *Odyssey*, where Odysseus is reunited with his wife Penelope after a long twenty years. Earlier in the story, Odysseus had been reunited with his twenty-year-old son, Telemachos. At the time of their reuniting, Homer shows Telemachos questioning his mother’s actions at the reunion. He doesn’t quite understand what his parents are up to. So Odysseus explains—carefully and respectfully. The next time Telemachos opens his mouth, his words are much more wise.

During our class discussion of this episode, one of my students wanted to know why Homer included Telemachos’ behavior in this scene. It’s an ingenious question because it gets at the heart of what Homer is accomplishing in this magnificent epic. Homer shows us people learning under pressure. Throughout the entire epic, people are learning. Homer shows us how they learn. He shows us the failures right along with the successes. He shows us people making mistakes. He shows them reflecting on their mistakes. He then shows them facing other situations where a person acts differently—with more intelligence and wisdom. Homer shows people as they learn from their mistakes and actually grow.

When I explained this to the class, I reminded the students of time-lapse photography. When I was a child, it used to fascinate me. In science class, we’d watch film of a flower growing and blooming—right before our eyes. It filled me with wonder. I then told the class that modern film accomplished the same kind of thing, but with slow motion. Consider something like “Road to Glory,” which features the first integrated Division One college basketball team. When we get to the end of the film and the underdogs put up the winning shot, the filmmakers will usually show the team executing in slow motion. What’s the effect of the slow motion? We become witnesses to the completion of development, growth, learning, and the achievement of something of great importance.

Homer’s portrayal of Telemachos learning from his mistakes is like the effect of time lapse photography on the one hand and slow motion on the other. It portrays development, growth, and learning so that it can sink in. To put it another way, when we read and reflect on this portion of *Odyssey*, the story enlarges our capacity to embody the kind of learning that Telemachos undergoes.

There’s more: One of the things that makes Homer remarkable is that he portrays what a family looks like when it is built on a solid foundation. To put it another way, Homer embodies the solid foundation of the family.

On the same day that we had this discussion in our World Lit class, I was walking near our gymnasium. We are in the process of building a new student center. In preparation, construction workers have dug a large hole around our gym. The hole has made it possible to see the foundation of the existing gym. The foundation is deep, solid, huge.

It reminded me of Homer. He wants us to understand the foundation of the family when it is deep, solid, and huge. What he shows us is people under pressure. They are learning from their mistakes. They spend time in reflection. They then implement the fruit of their reflection. That's what makes them heroes—worthy of our attention. They make mistakes. They slow down. They reflect. They imagine doing things differently. They actually do things differently. And they grow. They also learn. And when they learn, they become more fully human. They stand on the rock solid foundation of education.

Homer helps us to see that—in both slow motion and time lapse words.