

DEATH AT THE PALACE

The climax of the story is here, in Book 22. Although Odysseus is ready to reclaim his rightful kingdom, he must first confront more than a hundred hostile suitors. The first one he turns to is Antinous. All through the story, Antinous has been the meanest of the suitors and their ringleader. He hit Odysseus with a stool when the hero appeared in the hall as a beggar, and he ridiculed the disguised king by calling him a bleary vagabond, a pest, and a tramp.

Now shrugging off his rags the wildest fighter of the islands
leapt and stood on the broad doorsill, his own bow in his
hand.

He poured out at his feet a rain of arrows from the quiver
and spoke to the crowd:

“So much for that. Your clean-cut game is over.

1225 Now watch me hit a target that no man has hit before,
if I can make this shot. Help me, Apollo.”

He drew to his fist the cruel head of an arrow for Antinous
just as the young man leaned to lift his beautiful drinking
cup,


1230 embossed, two-handled, golden: the cup was in his fingers,
the wine was even at his lips, and did he dream of death?
How could he? In that revelry amid his throng of friends
who would imagine a single foe—though a strong foe
indeed—

could dare to bring death's pain on him and darkness on
his eyes?

1235 Odysseus' arrow hit him under the chin
and punched up to the feathers through his throat.

Backward and down he went, letting the wine cup fall
from his shocked hand. Like pipes his nostrils jetted
crimson runnels,^o a river of mortal red,
and one last kick upset his table

1240 knocking the bread and meat to soak in dusty blood.
Now as they craned to see their champion where he lay
the suitors jostled in uproar down the hall,
everyone on his feet. Wildly they turned and scanned
the walls in the long room for arms; but not a shield,

 1221–1303. As you read this action scene, imagine it as a film. After you finish reading, choose one part of the scene, and sketch it in your notebook. Make a list of the props you would need if you were filming the battle.

1226. Help me, Apollo: Odysseus prays to Apollo because this particular day is one of the god's feast days. Apollo is also the god of archery.

1238. runnels (run'əlz) n.: streams.

Vocabulary

revelry (rev'əl-rē) n.: merrymaking; festivity.

not a good ashen spear was there for a man to take and
1245 throw.
All they could do was yell in outrage at Odysseus:
“Foul! to shoot at a man! That was your last shot!”
“Your own throat will be slit for this!”
“Our finest lad is down!
You killed the best on Ithaca.”
“Buzzards will tear your eyes out!”

1250 For they imagined as they wished—that it was a wild shot,
an unintended killing—fools, not to comprehend
they were already in the grip of death.
But glaring under his brows Odysseus answered:
“You yellow dogs, you thought I’d never make it
1255 home from the land of Troy. You took my house to plunder,
twisted my maids to serve your beds. You dared
bid for my wife while I was still alive.
Contempt was all you had for the gods who rule wide
heaven,
contempt for what men say of you hereafter.
1260 Your last hour has come. You die in blood.”

As they all took this in, sickly green fear
pulled at their entrails, and their eyes flickered
looking for some hatch or hideaway from death.
Eurymachus alone could speak. He said:

1265 “If you are Odysseus of Ithaca come back,
all that you say these men have done is true.
Rash actions, many here, more in the countryside.
But here he lies, the man who caused them all.
Antinous was the ringleader, he whipped us on
1270 to do these things. He cared less for a marriage
than for the power Cronion^o has denied him
as king of Ithaca. For that
he tried to trap your son and would have killed him.
He is dead now and has his portion. Spare
1275 your own people. As for ourselves, we’ll make
restitution of wine and meat consumed,
and add, each one, a tithe of twenty oxen
with gifts of bronze and gold to warm your heart.
Meanwhile we cannot blame you for your anger.”



Suitor hiding behind a table: The return of Odysseus. Limestone relief from Turkey (380 B.C.).
Kunsthistorisches Museum,
Vienna, Austria.

1271. Cronion (krō'nē-ən): another name for Zeus, meaning “son of Cronus.”

1280 Odysseus glowered under his black brows
and said:

“Not for the whole treasure of your fathers,
all you enjoy, lands, flocks, or any gold
put up by others, would I hold my hand.
There will be killing till the score is paid.
1285 You forced yourselves upon this house. Fight your way out,
or run for it, if you think you’ll escape death.
I doubt one man of you skins by” . . .

*Telemachus joins his father in the fight. They are helped by the
swineherd and cowherd. Now the suitors, trapped in the hall with-
out weapons, are struck right and left by arrows, and many of them
lie dying on the floor.*

At this moment that unmanning thundercloud,
the aegis, Athena’s shield,
took form aloft in the great hall.

1290 And the suitors mad with fear
at her great sign stampeded like stung cattle by a river
when the dread shimmering gadfly strikes in summer,
in the flowering season, in the long-drawn days.
After them the attackers wheeled, as terrible as falcons
from eyries^o in the mountains veering over and diving
1295 down
with talons wide unsheathed on flights of birds,
who cower down the sky in chutes and bursts along the
valley—
but the pouncing falcons grip their prey, no frantic wing
avails,
and farmers love to watch those beakèd hunters.
1300 So these now fell upon the suitors in that hall,
turning, turning to strike and strike again,
while torn men moaned at death, and blood ran smoking
over the whole floor. . . .


(from Book 22)



Ulysses Slaying the Suitors (detail)
(1802) by Henry Fuseli.

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1295. eyries (er'ez) *n.*: nests built in
high places.

 1221–1303. How does this
bloody episode relate to the epic's
theme about the value of hospital-
ity and about what happens to
people who mock divine laws?

Vocabulary

glowered (glou'ərd) *v.*: glared; stared angrily.

avails (ə·vālz') *v.*: is of use; helps.