



THE DEATH OF HECTOR

GUIDE FOR READING

FOCUS This excerpt from Book 22 describes a battle to the death between Achilles and Hector. As you read, evaluate Hector's chance of winning the battle.

After Hector returns to battle, the Trojans gain the advantage. They drive the Greeks back to their ships and seem to have victory within reach. Greek leaders try to persuade Achilles to rejoin the fighting, offering many gifts. The proud Achilles still refuses to fight, though he does agree to keep his ships at Troy. After more fighting—and the fall of many Greek heroes—Achilles' best friend, Patroclus, appeals to him once more. Achilles refuses again, but he does agree to allow Patroclus to enter the battle. Wearing Achilles' armor and leading his troops, Patroclus succeeds in pushing the Trojans back. But Hector kills the brave Patroclus with the help of Apollo. He takes Achilles' armor from the corpse and wears it himself.

Enraged and grief-stricken, Achilles decides to avenge the death of his friend. When Achilles tells his mother of his decision, she tearfully informs him that he is doomed to an early death, for once he kills Hector, his own death will follow. Achilles accepts his fate and enters the battle, wearing magnificent new armor made by the smith of the gods. In relentless pursuit of Hector, Achilles slaughters every Trojan in his path.

As Book 22 opens, the Trojan warriors have fled to the safety of the city—all except Hector. Achilles chases Hector around the walls of Troy until the gods decide to intervene.

So he wavered, waiting there, but Achilles was closing on him now like the god of war, the fighter's helmet flashing, over his right shoulder shaking the Pelian ash spear,

WORDS TO KNOW

waver (wā'vər) *v.* to have difficulty in making a decision

4 Pelian (pē'lē-ən): made of wood from Mount Pelion in Greece.

5 that terror, and the bronze around his body flared
 like a raging fire or the rising, blazing sun.
 Hector looked up, saw him, started to tremble,
 nerve gone, he could hold his ground no longer,
 he left the gates behind and away he fled in fear—
 10 and Achilles went for him, fast, sure of his speed
 as the wild mountain hawk, the quickest thing on wings,
 launching smoothly, swooping down on a cringing dove
 and the dove flits out from under, the hawk screaming
 over the quarry, plunging over and over, his fury
 15 driving him down to beak and tear his kill—
 so Achilles flew at him, breakneck on in fury
 with Hector fleeing along the walls of Troy,
 fast as his legs would go. On and on they raced,
 passing the lookout point, passing the wild fig tree
 20 tossed by the wind, always out from under the ramparts
 down the wagon trail they careered until they reached
 the clear running springs where whirling Scamander
 rises up from its double wellsprings bubbling strong—
 and one runs hot and the steam goes up around it,
 25 drifting thick as if fire burned at its core
 but the other even in summer gushes cold
 as hail or freezing snow or water chilled to ice . . .
 And here, close to the springs, lie washing-pools
 scooped out in the hollow rocks and broad and smooth
 30 where the wives of Troy and all their lovely daughters
 would wash their glistening robes in the old days,
 the days of peace before the sons of Achaea came . . .
 Past these they raced, one escaping, one in pursuit
 and the one who fled was great but the one pursuing
 35 greater, even greater—their pace mounting in speed
 since both men strove, not for a sacrificial beast
 or oxhide trophy, prizes runners fight for, no,
 they raced for the life of Hector breaker of horses.
 Like powerful stallions sweeping round the post for trophies,
 40 galloping full stretch with some fine prize at stake,
 a tripod, say, or woman offered up at funeral games
 for some brave hero fallen—so the two of them
 whirled three times around the city of Priam,
 sprinting at top speed while all the gods gazed down,
 45 and the father of men and gods broke forth among them
 now:
 “Unbearable—a man I love, hunted round his own city walls

21 careered: rushed.

22 Scamander (skə-măn'dər): the chief river of the plain below Troy.

41 tripod (trī'pɒd'): a three-legged cooking kettle. (Since all metal was very valuable in ancient Greece, tripods were often given as prizes in athletic contests.)

and right before my eyes. My heart grieves for Hector.
Hector who burned so many oxen in my honor, rich cuts,
now on the rugged crests of Ida, now on Ilium's heights.

50 But now, look, brilliant Achilles courses him round
the city of Priam in all his savage, lethal speed.
Come, you immortals, think this through. Decide.
Either we pluck the man from death and save his life
or strike him down at last, here at Achilles' hands—
55 for all his fighting heart.”

But immortal Athena,
her gray eyes wide, protested strongly: “Father!
Lord of the lightning, king of the black cloud,
what are you saying? A man, a mere mortal,
his doom sealed long ago? You'd set him free
60 from all the pains of death?”

Do as you please—
but none of the deathless gods will ever praise you.”

And Zeus who marshals the thunderheads replied,
“Courage, Athena, third-born of the gods, dear child.
Nothing I said was meant in earnest, trust me,
65 I mean you all the good will in the world. Go.
Do as your own impulse bids you. Hold back no more.”

So he launched Athena already poised for action—
down the goddess swept from Olympus' craggy peaks.

PAUSE & REFLECT Zeus feels sorry for Hector and even wonders whether the gods should save him. Do you think Hector has a fair chance to win the battle?

FOCUS Athena is coming down to earth to help Achilles. As you read, notice how she assists Achilles.

And swift Achilles kept on coursing Hector, nonstop
70 as a hound in the mountains starts a fawn from its lair,
hunting him down the gorges, down the narrow glens
and the fawn goes to ground, hiding deep in brush
but the hound comes racing fast, nosing him out
until he lands his kill. So Hector could never throw
75 Achilles off his trail, the swift racer Achilles—
time and again he'd make a dash for the Dardan Gates,
trying to rush beneath the rock-built ramparts, hoping

49 **Ida** (ī'də): a mountain range near Troy; **Ilium's** (ī'ē-əmz): Troy's.

50 **courses**: chases; hunts.

70 **starts**: frightens; **lair**: hiding place.

76 **Dardan Gates**: a gateway in Troy's wall.

men on the heights might save him, somehow, raining
 spears
 but time and again Achilles would intercept him quickly,
 80 heading him off, forcing him out across the plain
 and always sprinting along the city side himself—
 endless as in a dream . . .
 when a man can't catch another fleeing on ahead
 and he can never escape nor his rival overtake him—
 85 so the one could never run the other down in his speed
 nor the other spring away. And how could Hector have fled
 the fates of death so long? How unless one last time,
 one final time Apollo had swept in close beside him,
 driving strength in his legs and knees to race the wind?
 90 And brilliant Achilles shook his head at the armies,
 never letting them hurl their sharp spears at Hector—
 someone might snatch the glory, Achilles come in second.
 But once they reached the springs for the fourth time,
 then Father Zeus held out his sacred golden scales:
 95 in them he placed two fates of death that lays men low—
 one for Achilles, one for Hector breaker of horses—
 and gripping the beam mid-haft the Father raised it high
 and down went Hector's day of doom, dragging him down
 to the strong House of Death—and god Apollo left him.
 100 Athena rushed to Achilles, her bright eyes gleaming,
 standing shoulder-to-shoulder, winging orders now:
 “At last our hopes run high, my brilliant Achilles—
 Father Zeus must love you—
 we'll sweep great glory back to Achaea's fleet,
 105 we'll kill this Hector, mad as he is for battle!
 No way for him to escape us now, no longer—
 not even if Phoebus the distant deadly Archer
 goes through torments, pleading for Hector's life,
 groveling over and over before our storming Father Zeus.
 110 But you, you hold your ground and catch your breath
 while I run Hector down and persuade the man
 to fight you face-to-face.”

So Athena commanded
 and he obeyed, rejoicing at heart—Achilles stopped,
 leaning against his ashen spearshaft barbed in bronze.
 115 And Athena left him there, caught up with Hector at once,
 and taking the build and vibrant voice of Deiphobus
 stood shoulder-to-shoulder with him, winging orders:
 “Dear brother, how brutally swift Achilles hunts you—

94 sacred golden scales: the balance used by Zeus to decide people's fates.

97 mid-haft: by the handle in the middle.

109 groveling (grŏv'ə-lĭng): throwing himself to the ground.

116 Deiphobus (dē-ĭf'ə-bəs): a son of Priam.



Pallas de Velletri, attributed to Kresilas. Marble, 305 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photograph copyright © Herve Lewandowski. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York.

120 coursing you round the city of Priam in all his lethal speed!
Come, let us stand our ground together—beat him back.”

“Deiphobus!”—Hector, his helmet flashing, called out to her—

125 “dearest of all my brothers, all these warring years,
of all the sons that Priam and Hecuba produced!
Now I’m determined to praise you all the more,
you who dared—seeing me in these straits—
to venture out from the walls, all for *my* sake,
while the others stay inside and cling to safety.”

125 these straits: this distress.

130 The goddess answered quickly, her eyes blazing,
“True, dear brother—how your father and mother both
implored me, time and again, clutching my knees,
and the comrades round me begging me to stay!
Such was the fear that broke them, man for man,
but the heart within me broke with grief for you.
Now headlong on and fight! No letup, no lance spared!

135 So now, now we'll *see* if Achilles kills us both
and hauls our bloody armor back to the beaked ships
or he goes down in pain beneath your spear."

Athena luring him on with all her immortal cunning—
and now, at last, as the two came closing for the kill
140 it was tall Hector, helmet flashing, who led off:
"No more running from you in fear, Achilles!
Not as before. Three times I fled around
the great city of Priam—I lacked courage then
to stand your onslaught. Now my spirit stirs me
145 to meet you face-to-face. Now kill or be killed!
Come, we'll swear to the gods, the highest witnesses—
the gods will oversee our binding pacts. I swear
I will never mutilate you—merciless as you are—
if Zeus allows me to last it out and tear your life away.
150 But once I've stripped your glorious armor, Achilles,
I will give your body back to your loyal comrades.
Swear you'll do the same."

148 mutilate you: hack up your body.

A swift dark glance
and the headstrong runner answered, "Hector, stop!
You unforgivable, you . . . don't talk to me of pacts.
155 There are no binding oaths between men and lions—
wolves and lambs can enjoy no meeting of the minds—
they are all bent on hating each other to the death.
So with you and me. No love between us. No truce
till one or the other falls and gluts with blood
160 Ares who hacks at men behind his rawhide shield.
Come, call up whatever courage you can muster.
Life or death—now prove yourself a spearman,
a daring man of war! No more escape for you—
Athena will kill you with my spear in just a moment.
165 Now you'll pay at a stroke for all my comrades' grief,
all you killed in the fury of your spear!"

159 gluts: satisfies.

160 Ares (âr'ēz): the god of war.

PAUSE & REFLECT How does Athena help Achilles?

FOCUS Although Hector knows that he is doomed to die, he will stand and fight. As you read, look for the ways in which Achilles insults Hector, both with words and with actions.

With that,
shaft poised, he hurled and his spear's long shadow flew
but seeing it coming glorious Hector ducked away,
crouching down, watching the bronze tip fly past
170 and stab the earth—but Athena snatched it up
and passed it back to Achilles
and Hector the gallant captain never saw her.
He sounded out a challenge to Peleus' princely son:
"You missed, look—the great godlike Achilles!
175 So you knew nothing at all from Zeus about my death—
and yet how sure you were! All bluff, cunning with words,
that's all you are—trying to make me fear you,
lose my nerve, forget my fighting strength.
Well, you'll never plant your lance in my back
180 as I flee *you* in fear—plunge it through my chest
as I come charging in, if a god gives you the chance!
But now it's for you to dodge *my* brazen spear—
I wish you'd bury it in your body to the hilt.
How much lighter the war would be for Trojans then
185 if you, their greatest scourge, were dead and gone!"

185 scourge (skûrj): source of misery.

Shaft poised, he hurled and his spear's long shadow flew
and it struck Achilles' shield—a dead-center hit—
but off and away it glanced and Hector seethed,
his hurtling spear, his whole arm's power poured
190 in a wasted shot. He stood there, cast down . . .
he had no spear in reserve. So Hector shouted out
to Deiphobus bearing his white shield—with a ringing shout
he called for a heavy lance—
but the man was nowhere near him,
vanished—

188 glanced: bounced.

yes and Hector knew the truth in his heart
195 and the fighter cried aloud, "My time has come!
At last the gods have called me down to death.
I thought he was at my side, the hero Deiphobus—
he's safe inside the walls, Athena's tricked me blind.
And now death, grim death is looming up beside me,
200 no longer far away. No way to escape it now. This,

this was their pleasure after all, sealed long ago—
Zeus and the son of Zeus, the distant deadly Archer—
though often before now they rushed to my defense.
So now I meet my doom. Well let me die—
205 but not without struggle, not without glory, no,
in some great clash of arms that even men to come
will hear of down the years!”

And on that resolve
he drew the whetted sword that hung at his side,
tempered, massive, and gathering all his force
210 he swooped like a soaring eagle
launching down from the dark clouds to earth
to snatch some helpless lamb or trembling hare.
So Hector swooped now, swinging his whetted sword
and Achilles charged too, bursting with rage, barbaric,
215 guarding his chest with the well-wrought blazoned shield,
head tossing his gleaming helmet, four horns strong

208 whetted: sharpened.

209 tempered: hardened
by heating.

215 well-wrought: skillfully made.



Greek soldiers arming themselves. Copyright © Peter Connolly.

and the golden plumes shook that the god of fire
drove in bristling thick along its ridge.
Bright as that star amid the stars in the night sky,
220 star of the evening, brightest star that rides the heavens,
so fire flared from the sharp point of the spear Achilles
brandished high in his right hand, bent on Hector's death,
scanning his splendid body—where to pierce it best?
The rest of his flesh seemed all encased in armor,
225 burnished, brazen—*Achilles'* armor that Hector stripped
from strong Patroclus when he killed him—true,
but one spot lay exposed,
where collarbones lift the neckbone off the shoulders,
the open throat, where the end of life comes quickest—
there
230 as Hector charged in fury brilliant Achilles drove his spear
and the point went stabbing clean through the tender neck
but the heavy bronze weapon failed to slash the windpipe—
Hector could still gasp out some words, some last reply . . .
he crashed in the dust—

godlike Achilles gloried over him:
235 “Hector—surely you thought when you stripped Patroclus’
armor
that you, you would be safe! Never a fear of me—
far from the fighting as I was—you fool!
Left behind there, down by the beaked ships
his great avenger waited, a greater man by far—
240 that man was I, and I smashed your strength! And you—
the dogs and birds will maul you, shame your corpse
while Achaeans bury my dear friend in glory!”

Struggling for breath, Hector, his helmet flashing,
said, “I beg you, beg you by your life, your parents—
245 don’t let the dogs devour me by the Argive ships!
Wait, take the princely ransom of bronze and gold,
the gifts my father and noble mother will give you—
but give my body to friends to carry home again,
so Trojan men and Trojan women can do me honor
250 with fitting rites of fire once I am dead.”

Staring grimly, the proud runner Achilles answered,
“Beg no more, you fawning dog—begging me by my parents!
Would to god my rage, my fury would drive me now
to hack your flesh away and eat you raw—

217 the god of fire: Hephaestus, who made Achilles’ armor and shield.

222 brandished: waved.

241 maul: mangle.

252 fawning: cringing.

255 such agonies you have caused me! Ransom?
No man alive could keep the dog-packs off you,
not if they haul in ten, twenty times that ransom
and pile it here before me and promise fortunes more—
no, not even if Dardan Priam should offer to weigh out
260 your bulk in gold! Not even then will your noble mother
lay you on your deathbed, mourn the son she bore . . .
The dogs and birds will rend you—blood and bone!”

259 Dardan: descended from Dardanus, ancestor of the Trojan kings.

262 rend: tear apart.

At the point of death, Hector, his helmet flashing,
said, “I know you well—I see my fate before me.
265 Never a chance that I could win you over . . .
Iron inside your chest, that heart of yours.
But now beware, or my curse will draw god’s wrath
upon your head, that day when Paris and lord Apollo—
for all your fighting heart—destroy you at the Scaean Gates!”

270 Death cut him short. The end closed in around him.
Flying free of his limbs
his soul went winging down to the House of Death,
wailing his fate, leaving his manhood far behind,
his young and supple strength. But brilliant Achilles
275 taunted Hector’s body, dead as he was, “Die, die!
For my own death, I’ll meet it freely—whenever Zeus
and the other deathless gods would like to bring it on!”

With that he wrenched his bronze spear from the corpse,
laid it aside and ripped the bloody armor off the back.
280 And the other sons of Achaea, running up around him,
crowded closer, all of them gazing wonder-struck
at the build and marvelous, *lithe* beauty of Hector.
And not a man came forward who did not stab his body,
glancing toward a comrade, laughing: “Ah, look here—
285 how much softer he is to handle now, this Hector,
than when he gutted our ships with roaring fire!”

Standing over him, so they’d gloat and stab his body.
But once he had stripped the corpse the proud runner Achilles
took his stand in the midst of all the Argive troops
290 and urged them on with a flight of winging orders:
“Friends—lords of the Argives, O my captains!
Now that the gods have let me kill this man

WORDS TO KNOW

lithe (*līth*) *adj.* limber and graceful

who caused us agonies, loss on crushing loss—
more than the rest of all their men combined—
295 come, let us ring their walls in armor, test them,
see what recourse the Trojans still may have in mind.
Will they abandon the city heights with this man fallen?
Or brace for a last, dying stand though Hector's gone?
But wait—what am I saying? Why this deep debate?
300 Down by the ships a body lies unwept, unburied—
Patroclus . . . I will never forget him,
not as long as I'm still among the living
and my springing knees will lift and drive me on.
Though the dead forget their dead in the House of Death,
305 I will remember, even there, my dear companion.

Now,

come, you sons of Achaea, raise a song of triumph!
Down to the ships we march and bear this corpse on high—
we have won ourselves great glory. We have brought
magnificent Hector down, that man the Trojans
310 glorified in their city like a god!”

So he triumphed
and now he was bent on outrage, on shaming noble Hector.
Piercing the tendons, ankle to heel behind both feet,
he knotted straps of rawhide through them both,
lashed them to his chariot, left the head to drag
315 and mounting the car, hoisting the famous arms aboard,
he whipped his team to a run and breakneck on they flew,
holding nothing back. And a thick cloud of dust rose up
from the man they dragged, his dark hair swirling round
that head so handsome once, all tumbled low in the dust—
320 since Zeus had given him over to his enemies now
to be defiled in the land of his own fathers.

So his whole head was dragged down in the dust.
And now his mother began to tear her hair . . .
she flung her shining veil to the ground and raised
325 a high, shattering scream, looking down at her son.
Pitifully his loving father groaned and round the king
his people cried with grief and wailing seized the city—
for all the world as if all Troy were torched and smoldering
down from the looming brows of the citadel to her roots.
330 Priam's people could hardly hold the old man back,
frantic, mad to go rushing out the Dardan Gates.

329 looming brows of the citadel
(s'ɪt'ə-dəl): jutting battlements of
the stronghold.

WORDS TO KNOW

recourse (rē'kôrs') *n.* something turned to for help or protection
defile (dĭ-fil') *v.* to treat in a shameful way; destroy the beauty or honor of

He begged them all, groveling in the filth,
 crying out to them, calling each man by name,
 “Let go, my friends! Much as you care for me,
 335 let me hurry out of the city, make my way,
 all on my own, to Achaea’s waiting ships!
 I must implore that terrible, violent man . . .
 Perhaps—who knows?—he may respect my age,
 may pity an old man. He has a father too,
 340 as old as I am—Peleus sired him once,
 Peleus reared him to be the scourge of Troy
 but most of all to me—he made my life a hell.
 So many sons he slaughtered, just coming into bloom . . .
 but grieving for all the rest, one breaks my heart the most
 345 and stabbing grief for him will take me down to Death—
 my Hector—would to god he had perished in my arms!
 Then his mother who bore him—oh so doomed,
 she and I could glut ourselves with grief.”

Thinking Through the Literature

1. How does Achilles insult Hector with words and with actions?
2. What qualities of Hector’s **character** stand out in the excerpt from Book 22?

THINK ABOUT {

- how Hector runs away from Achilles
- what persuades him to stand and fight
- how he faces his own certain death

3. Consider the roles played by Athena, Zeus, and Apollo in the excerpt from Book 22. To what extent do the gods seem to control human life? Support your conclusion with evidence from the text.

THINK ABOUT {

- the passage in which Zeus weighs the fates of Hector and Achilles (lines 93–99)
- Athena’s words and actions
- Apollo’s helping Hector to run away from Achilles (lines 86–89)

4. Do you think Achilles is justified in his treatment of Hector’s corpse? Support your opinion with evidence from the text.
5. Review the reactions of Priam and Hecuba to Achilles’ treatment of their son’s corpse (lines 323–348). Why do you think Homer included a description of their grief?