

Nero was a perfect victim of his own character and deeds, and his death scene found itself fittingly orchestrated by the ancient moral principle of "Retribution". It is not often that history gives us clear lessons in the fall of the wicked, though, in modern times, such prominent falls as the ruin and suicide of Adolph Hitler afford the moralist some comfort. Hitler, however, at his demise took a grim and twisted delight in bringing down his own people; Nero went to Hades alone, bereft of the company of the Roman people generally, and accompanied only by the ghosts of his murdered victims.

Nero, throughout his life, had made sure that all the important supports of a good emperor should be removed. He literally destroyed himself in a rather chaotic way. In the first place, he wrought great ruin on his own family, bringing about the deaths of two wives, a brother, an aunt, and even his mother, his most notorious killing by far. He proved himself disloyal and lethal to advisers of any worth, encompassing the destruction of his tutor, Seneca, and his arbiter of elegance, Petronius. As for the Roman Senate, a body which he treated with respect and caution in his early years, towards the end of his reign he persecuted it with false charges which ended in the death of senators and the confiscation of their property. Even the army, which was the most important support of Roman emperors, was alienated in numerous ways. First, Nero never interested himself personally in the army, nor visited its camps and garrisons. Second, Nero, toward the end of his reign, had three important generals murdered on flimsy charges. Third, Nero forfeited the army's respect by his silly behavior in appearing on stage as a public entertainer, even going on a concert tour of Greece. Finally, Nero lost the favour of the Roman mob by his treatment of his first wife, Octavia; by the destruction of Rome in 64 AD in the great fire which was blamed on Nero; and by the economic problems brought upon the state by Nero's careless extravagance.

By early in 68 AD Nero's position was so unstable that the lackey whom he had left in Rome, while he cavorted through Greece, had had to come personally to fetch the wayward minstrel home. Basing himself in Naples, Nero in March finally learned of a military revolt in France led by a governor who wished to rid Rome of "a cruel and unworthy tyrant, not even a good lyre-player (the most hurtful gibe of all)". This French rebel was crushed by a loyal commander, but not before the governor of Spain had been implicated in his treason. This secondary threat was to bring Nero down, so weak was his position and so dithering had his behavior become.

Roman historians loved to portray great drama, and expanded upon such calamities as the cruel reversal of fortune in human affairs. What fine material is here in the last days of Nero, an emperor increasingly isolated in his palace, making ridiculous and unrealistic plans as his world collapsed around him: recruit a special legion of exceptionally tall guards; massacre the senate; offer to retire peacefully to the province of Egypt or even retire to the private life of a working musician. All these schemes, and more, assailed the bewildered monarch.

On June 9th, 68 AD the nervous Nero awoke to discover that the praetorians guarding him had deserted. Later that morning, the Senate declared him a public enemy. Nero's only followers were now a few of his liberated slaves. Disguised in a slave's tattered robe, he was forced to seek refuge in a suburban house owned by another former slave. Narrowly escaping his pursuers, he finally made his way to a run-down room on the property of his freedman, Phaon. There he took a short rest on a slave's cot, and quenched his hunger and thirst with warm water and stale bread. A man who once commanded the civilized world, who once drank Falernian wine, who only wore the same clothes once, who dined on peacock's tongues and honey cakes, and slept on soft couches strewn with purple and gold blankets while dozens of servants waited on him hand and foot, had now come to his last grim hour. Assisted by his loyal slave, Epaphroditus, he stabbed himself in the throat, declaiming to posterity, "What an artist the world loses in my death". He was on his last breath when the soldiers sent to arrest him laid hands upon him, all too late. He had escaped to face his victims in the house of Hades.