

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



Episode #573
Nero | Rome's Ultimate Villain?
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Transcript

[00:00:05] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:20] I'm Alastair Budge, and today it's part two of our three-part mini-series on "[Tyrants](#)¹ Of The Roman Empire".

[00:00:29] In case you missed it, in part one we talked about Caligula. Next time, in part three, we'll talk about Commodus.

[00:00:37] And today it's Nero, a man who has been called the [antichrist](#)², remembered by history for [brutality](#)³, [depravity](#)⁴ and almost [unmatched](#)⁵ [sadism](#)⁶.

[00:00:50] You don't have to have listened to part one, on Caligula, to enjoy this one, but it will make more sense if you have, and rather than go over stuff again, I'll assume

¹ cruel and unfair rulers

² a figure seen as the enemy of Christ or pure evil

³ extreme cruelty and violence

⁴ very bad, evil, or immoral behaviour

⁵ without equal

⁶ enjoying hurting or making others suffer

that you've listened to part one. So now is the time to press pause and go and listen to that one, in case you haven't done so already.

[00:01:08] Alright then, let's not waste a minute, especially as this is going to be quite a long one, and find out about Emperor Nero.

[00:01:17] As you may know, there is the [stereotype](#)⁷ of the Italian “mother's boy”, a boy, a man even, who has a particularly close [bond](#)⁸ with his mother, perhaps even living with her until well into his adult years.

[00:01:34] There's a word for this, “mammone”, and, like many [stereotypes](#)⁹, it has some [basis](#)¹⁰ in fact.

[00:01:43] I did an ERASMUS exchange at the University of Naples, and can certainly say that my male Italian friends would be constantly calling their mothers, updating them on where they were going that evening or what they had had for lunch.

⁷ a widely held but fixed and simple idea people have about a group of people, often untrue

⁸ a strong connection or relationship

⁹ widely held but fixed and simple ideas people have about a group of people, often untrue

¹⁰ starting point or base

[00:01:58] Occasionally, the [intensity¹¹](#) of this mother-son relationship did drive something of a [wedge¹²](#) between these young men and their girlfriends.

[00:02:09] And even going back to Ancient Rome, we can see that this is not a modern phenomenon.

[00:02:17] In AD 58, a young man was [taunted¹³](#) by his new lover over his relationship with his mother.

[00:02:25] The man invited his mother to a feast at Baiae, an ancient Roman town just across the bay of Naples.

[00:02:34] The mother came to the feast, and on her return her son offered her his boat, as hers had been damaged on the journey over.

[00:02:45] This wasn't a [kindly¹⁴](#) gesture, and the mother knew it.

¹¹ strength or power

¹² something that pushed them apart

¹³ insulted or made fun of

¹⁴ kind, warm-hearted, or gentle

[00:02:50] The son, the then 21-year-old Emperor Nero, had ordered for a specially modified boat to be built that would sink¹⁵ at a predetermined time, killing everyone onboard.

[00:03:06] His mother, Agrippina the Younger, had got wind of¹⁶ the plan, but she had little choice but to go ahead with it.

[00:03:15] She boarded the ship, knowing her only son was sending her to her death.

[00:03:22] Sure enough, as the ship sailed across the bay, it started to disintegrate¹⁷.

[00:03:28] Pieces of wood broke off, and the vessel¹⁸ started to sink.

[00:03:34] What Nero hadn't bargained for¹⁹ was that his mother was a strong swimmer.

¹⁵ go down below the surface of water

¹⁶ began to suspect what was happening or heard about it

¹⁷ fall apart into small pieces

¹⁸ ship or large boat

¹⁹ expected or planned for

[00:03:41] She managed to swim to [shore](#)²⁰, and she was met by cheers and well-wishers, [rejoicing](#)²¹ with relief that the emperor's mother had survived this "[tragic](#)²² accident".

[00:03:54] This relief wouldn't last for long.

[00:03:57] When Nero [got wind](#)²³ that his [plot](#)²⁴ had failed, he [hatched](#)²⁵ another.

[00:04:03] He sent armed men to his mother's villa, instructing them to [dispatch](#)²⁶ her, once and for all.

²⁰ the land next to the sea

²¹ expressing great happiness and celebrating

²² very sad and painful

²³ heard about it

²⁴ a secret plan

²⁵ created or planned

²⁶ deal with or finish

[00:04:12] They surrounded her bed, and when she realised that her [fate](#)²⁷ was [inevitable](#)²⁸, she pointed at her [womb](#)²⁹, her belly, telling the men to “strike here, because that is where the monster came from”.

[00:04:27] It is an impressive story, and has gone down in the history books as just one example of the [callous](#)³⁰ [brutality](#) of Nero, a man whose very name has become a [byword](#)³¹ for cruelty.

[00:04:43] It is also, perhaps, not true.

[00:04:47] Several modern historians have tried to revisit the myth and reputation of Nero, with some concluding that he was probably not quite as bad as most people think, and others simply pointing out that the accounts we have of his life and his actions, like those of Caligula are highly [biased](#)³², so we should not [blindly](#)³³ accept

²⁷ end or destiny

²⁸ sure to happen, unavoidable

²⁹ the place inside her where her baby had grown

³⁰ showing no care about other people's feelings or suffering

³¹ a word or name used as an example of it

³² unfairly supporting one side more than another

³³ without thinking or without question

everything that is written about him as true, but rather as the historical record of men with an [agenda](#)³⁴.

[00:05:20] Now, to understand Nero, like we did last episode, we must start before his birth.

[00:05:28] Caligula, as you'll remember from last time, had no surviving children of his own.

[00:05:35] When he was [stabbed](#)³⁵ to death in that theatre corridor in AD 41, the title of emperor passed to his uncle Claudius, a man whom almost nobody expected to become emperor.

[00:05:49] Claudius had been hidden away for much of his life. He walked with a [limp](#)³⁶, spoke with a [stammer](#)³⁷, and had been [dismissed](#)³⁸ as [weak-minded](#)³⁹ by his own family. Yet the Praetorian Guard, who were keen to have someone [malleable](#)⁴⁰ on the

³⁴ a plan or aim, often secret

³⁵ hit with a knife

³⁶ with difficulty or hobble

³⁷ with pauses and repeated sounds

³⁸ rejected or not accepted

³⁹ not strong in thinking or decision making

⁴⁰ easy to influence or change

throne, found him cowering⁴¹ behind a curtain in the palace and declared him emperor.

[00:06:14] And Claudius actually turned out to be a more competent⁴² emperor than many expected.

[00:06:20] He expanded the empire into Britain, reformed aspects of the legal system, and generally kept the machine of empire ticking over⁴³.

[00:06:31] But for today's episode, and the story of Nero, Claudius matters not so much for his conquests as for his marriages.

[00:06:41] In particular, his final one.

[00:06:44] And it's here that we need to re-introduce Agrippina the Younger.

[00:06:49] She was the sister of Caligula, and was also the great-granddaughter of the first emperor, Augustus.

[00:06:57] She was the Roman equivalent of royalty, and she married a high-ranking Roman politician.

⁴¹ bending down in fear

⁴² efficient and capable

⁴³ working slowly but not stopping

[00:07:05] They had one biological child, Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, but his chances at becoming emperor looked [slim](#)⁴⁴ at best, as he wasn't directly in the line of succession.

[00:07:19] What's more, a couple of years into his [reign](#)⁴⁵ as emperor, Caligula had discovered that his sister was plotting to have him killed.

[00:07:28] He sent her into [exile](#)⁴⁶ on a remote Mediterranean island. And a couple of years later, her husband died.

[00:07:37] When Caligula was [deposed](#)⁴⁷ and Claudius made emperor, the new emperor [recalled](#)⁴⁸ Agrippina from exile.

[00:07:45] She re-emerged in public life, back in Rome, but she was a [widow](#)⁴⁹ with no connections.

⁴⁴ thin or very small

⁴⁵ the period of his rule

⁴⁶ being forced to live outside her country

⁴⁷ removed from power

⁴⁸ officially asked her to return

⁴⁹ a woman whose husband had died

[00:07:54] She was, however, [ruthlessly](#)⁵⁰ ambitious, and incredibly [capable](#)⁵¹.

[00:08:00] To cut a long story short, through a series of marriages, [alliances](#)⁵², and deaths that some have claimed were murder, Agrippina ended up married to her uncle, emperor Claudius.

[00:08:15] Claudius had another son from his previous marriage, Britannicus, but the boy was a few years younger than Agrippina's son, Lucius.

[00:08:26] Agrippina managed to [persuade](#)⁵³ Claudius to officially [adopt](#)⁵⁴ Lucius, making the two boys the [ageing](#)⁵⁵ Claudius's [heirs](#)⁵⁶.

[00:08:37] And to [cement](#)⁵⁷ his position, she arranged for Lucius, at the age of sixteen, to marry Claudius' daughter, Octavia.

⁵⁰ in a cruel and harsh way

⁵¹ able or effective

⁵² agreements with others to support or help each other

⁵³ make him agree to do it

⁵⁴ take him as his own

⁵⁵ becoming old

⁵⁶ people who would receive money, power, or property after his death

⁵⁷ make it stronger or more certain

[00:08:47] It was an extraordinary piece of dynastic chess, 10 out of 10 political [manoeuvring](#)⁵⁸.

[00:08:54] In less than ten years, Agrippina had gone from [outcast](#)⁵⁹ to the very centre of Roman power, and had placed her son in the best possible position.

[00:09:07] This son, Lucius, would later be known as Nero.

[00:09:12] And then, in AD 54, after one of his famous banquets, Claudius died.

[00:09:19] Poisoned mushrooms, according to one story, although whether Agrippina [had a hand in](#)⁶⁰ that, or they were simply bad mushrooms, we can't be sure.

[00:09:30] What we do know is that the timing was perfect for Nero.

[00:09:35] Britannicus, Claudius' biological son, was still too young to rule.

[00:09:41] Nero, by contrast, was seventeen, married to Claudius' daughter, and already [adopted](#)⁶¹ as his [heir](#)⁶².

⁵⁸ careful and secret planning

⁵⁹ someone who was not accepted by others

⁶⁰ helped to make it happen

⁶¹ taken as his own

⁶² the person who would receive money, power, or property after his death

[00:09:51] Agrippina had the Praetorian Guard on side, and the Senate fell quickly into line.

[00:09:58] At just seventeen years old, the boy Lucius became emperor Nero of Rome.

[00:10:05] Now, a seventeen-year-old emperor with no military experience and no political record might sound like a recipe for disaster.

[00:10:14] And in the long run, it was. But at the very beginning, things looked more promising.

[00:10:21] Nero's [accession](#)⁶³ was greeted with widespread joy.

[00:10:25] The memory of Caligula's madness was still fresh, and Claudius, though perfectly [competent](#), had been seen as [dull](#)⁶⁴ and dominated by his wives and freedmen.

[00:10:37] Nero, by contrast, was young, handsome, descended from Augustus, and backed by a powerful group of well-known advisers.

⁶³ the act of becoming emperor

⁶⁴ boring, not interesting

[00:10:49] On one side was his mother, Agrippina, who had [schemed](#)⁶⁵ and fought her way to this moment, and who seems to have [intended](#)⁶⁶ to rule through her son.

[00:11:01] On the other side were two men who would become [household names](#)⁶⁷ in Roman history: Seneca, the Stoic philosopher, and Burrus, the commander of the Praetorian Guard.

[00:11:14] And for the first few years of Nero's reign this [trio](#)⁶⁸ effectively governed the empire.

[00:11:22] And they did it...pretty well. This was a period that later writers would [nostalgically](#)⁶⁹ call the quinquennium Neronis, the "five good years of Nero".

⁶⁵ secretly made plans

⁶⁶ planned or meant

⁶⁷ well known

⁶⁸ group of three people

⁶⁹ in a way that expressed a mixed feeling of pleasure and sadness

[00:11:35] Nero cut taxes, [eased](#)⁷⁰ the financial [burdens](#)⁷¹ on the provinces, and even banned secret trials, a clear rejection of the [paranoia](#)⁷² that had [characterised](#)⁷³ the rule of Tiberius and, of course, his own uncle Caligula.

[00:11:51] He insisted that no one could be condemned without the Senate's approval, and he declared that he wanted to end the practice of capital punishment.

[00:12:01] This sounded almost like the voice of a philosopher-king, and that wasn't [far](#) [off](#)⁷⁴.

[00:12:09] His tutor, Seneca, had filled his head with Stoic ideals, [lofty](#)⁷⁵ talk about [clemency](#)⁷⁶, [virtue](#)⁷⁷, and good governance.

⁷⁰ made them less hard or less painful

⁷¹ heavy problems or responsibilities

⁷² an unreasonable fear that people wanted to harm them

⁷³ been typical or characteristic of

⁷⁴ far from the truth

⁷⁵ very high or noble

⁷⁶ kindness shown when someone could be punished

⁷⁷ good quality, such as honesty or kindness

[00:12:19] And it seemed that Nero was putting them into practice. [Things were looking up](#)⁷⁸.

[00:12:26] And he wasn't only popular with the [elite](#)⁷⁹; the Roman people also adored him.

[00:12:33] He gave them games and spectacles, but also a sense of relief. After years of instability, they had a young emperor who appeared gentle, approachable, even [merciful](#)⁸⁰.

[00:12:48] Statues of him went up all across the empire, coins [bore](#)⁸¹ his handsome young face, and poets praised him as the [dawn](#)⁸² of a new golden age.

[00:13:00] But even in these golden years, there were hints of what was to come.

[00:13:06] Nero's true passions were not in the Senate chamber or on the battlefield, but on the stage and in the circus.

⁷⁸ things were starting to seem better

⁷⁹ the richest, most powerful people

⁸⁰ showing kindness when he could punish

⁸¹ carried or showed

⁸² the beginning

[00:13:15] He wrote poetry, practised singing and acting, and even took lessons in chariot racing. By all accounts, he was quite good at these [pursuits](#)⁸³, and took them pretty seriously.

[00:13:29] But to Rome's [elite](#), this was [scandalous](#)⁸⁴; emperors were supposed to command armies, not play music or rehearse tragedies. Actors and musicians, after all, were at the bottom of society, in the same category as gladiators and [prostitutes](#)⁸⁵.

[00:13:50] Still, the public [lapped it up](#)⁸⁶.

[00:13:53] Here was an emperor who [mingled with](#)⁸⁷ the people, who enjoyed the same entertainments they did, who seemed almost one of them.

[00:14:03] And what's more, one who seemed to be running Rome pretty effectively.

[00:14:08] But behind the scenes, things were not so calm.

⁸³ hobbies or activities he enjoyed

⁸⁴ shocking because it seemed wrong

⁸⁵ people who had sex for money

⁸⁶ enjoyed it very much

⁸⁷ mixed socially with

[00:14:12] His mother, Agrippina, was growing [restless](#)⁸⁸. She believed Nero owed everything to her: his throne, his marriage, his very survival.

[00:14:22] She expected to share power, to be listened to, to be obeyed.

[00:14:28] But she found herself increasingly [sidelined](#)⁸⁹ by the men in Nero's life: Seneca and Burrus. She pushed back, demanding more influence, reminding Nero of everything that she had done for him.

[00:14:44] And this [tension](#)⁹⁰ between mother and son soon escalated.

[00:14:48] A particular [flashpoint](#)⁹¹ came over a love affair.

[00:14:52] Nero was married at the time, but shortly after he became emperor, he became [infatuated](#)⁹² with a former slave named Claudia Acte.

[00:15:03] Agrippina was [horrified](#)⁹³.

⁸⁸ unable to stay still, always wanting change

⁸⁹ pushed out of importance or ignored

⁹⁰ nervous or unfriendly feeling between them

⁹¹ a situation where violence or anger could suddenly happen

⁹² having a very strong but silly love for her

⁹³ very shocked and upset

[00:15:06] To her, it was not just a disgrace, the emperor of Rome [lowering himself](#)⁹⁴ to [consort with](#)⁹⁵ a freedwoman, but a threat to her own position.

[00:15:18] If Acte gained influence, Agrippina's [grip](#)⁹⁶ on her son would weaken even further.

[00:15:25] According to the historian Tacitus, Agrippina's fury was such that she even tried to intimidate Nero by reminding him that Britannicus, the biological son of Claudius, was still alive, was soon [coming of age](#)⁹⁷, and might one day [stake his claim](#)⁹⁸.

[00:15:44] That was a dangerous card to play.

[00:15:47] Dangerous for Britannicus, at least.

⁹⁴ doing something below his social position

⁹⁵ spend time with someone of lower status

⁹⁶ strong control or power

⁹⁷ becoming an adult

⁹⁸ ask for or demand what he thought was his

[00:15:50] In AD 55, the young boy was at a [banquet](#)⁹⁹ with the imperial family when he suddenly collapsed, [gasping](#)¹⁰⁰ for air.

[00:15:59] He died on the spot.

[00:16:03] Tacitus says he was poisoned on Nero's orders, just days before he was due to put on the toga virilis and formally become an adult in the eyes of Rome.

[00:16:15] Now, whether Britannicus truly [posed](#)¹⁰¹ a threat or not, he was gone.

[00:16:21] And with his death, one more rival was removed.

[00:16:26] Whether it was because he now felt more secure in his position and didn't need her anymore, or whether it was because he felt she had [overstepped the mark](#)¹⁰², we can only [hypothesise](#)¹⁰³, but Agrippina's influence over her son continued to decline.

⁹⁹ a large, formal meal for many people

¹⁰⁰ breathing with difficulty, being desperate to obtain it

¹⁰¹ presented or constituted

¹⁰² gone too far and behaved wrongly

¹⁰³ suggest an idea as an explanation

[00:16:43] She no longer sat beside him at public ceremonies. Her face was removed from the front of Roman coins and [relegated](#)¹⁰⁴ to the back, then it was removed altogether.

[00:16:56] And she was [banished](#)¹⁰⁵ from the palace. Her power was [ebbing away](#)¹⁰⁶, and she knew it.

[00:17:04] Tacitus paints a vivid picture of her trying to do everything she could to [claw it back](#)¹⁰⁷, from [scolding](#)¹⁰⁸ her son, attempting to win over the Praetorian Guard, even, at one point, [hinting](#)¹⁰⁹ that she might [champion](#)¹¹⁰ someone else.

[00:17:20] But each move only pushed Nero further away.

[00:17:25] By the time we reach the year AD 58, Nero was openly [defying](#)¹¹¹ her.

¹⁰⁴ moved to a lower position or importance

¹⁰⁵ forced to leave it

¹⁰⁶ slowly disappearing

¹⁰⁷ get it back with difficulty

¹⁰⁸ telling him off or speaking to him angrily

¹⁰⁹ suggesting it without saying it directly

¹¹⁰ promote or support

¹¹¹ refusing to obey or respect

[00:17:32] He was emperor in his own right now, and the struggle between mother and son was heading towards its bloody conclusion, the one we began this episode with, in Baiae, with sinking boats, [daggers](#)¹¹², and a mother [urging](#)¹¹³ her [assassins](#)¹¹⁴ to stab her in the [womb](#).

[00:17:51] After Agrippina's death, Nero was finally free of his mother's shadow.

[00:17:57] But if he thought this would win him peace of mind, and room to breathe, he was mistaken.

[00:18:05] His mother's death was publicly reported as [suicide](#)¹¹⁵, self-destruction after the discovery of her supposed [plot](#) to [overthrow](#)¹¹⁶ her son.

[00:18:15] But few in Rome [bought](#)¹¹⁷ this story.

[00:18:19] It was widely accepted that she had been killed on the emperor's orders.

¹¹² long knives used as weapons

¹¹³ strongly advising or pushing them to do it

¹¹⁴ people paid to kill her

¹¹⁵ killing herself

¹¹⁶ remove him from power by force

¹¹⁷ believed

[00:18:25] Now, this wouldn't of course have been the first time an emperor had killed someone who was inconvenient; Ancient Rome was all about [knocking off¹¹⁸](#) your political rivals, current, past or future, and it wasn't particularly [frowned upon¹¹⁹](#).

[00:18:41] But the difference was that killing your own mother was a step too far, even for the sometimes [bloodthirsty¹²⁰](#) ancient Romans.

[00:18:51] The [Senate¹²¹](#) congratulated him, of course.

[00:18:54] The Praetorian Guard swore their loyalty. [Flattery¹²²](#) was part of the job description when dealing with emperors. Yet whispers spread across Rome: the young emperor had crossed a line.

[00:19:10] And after Agrippina's murder, something [flipped¹²³](#) in Nero, or at least his behaviour became even more [erratic¹²⁴](#) and unusual.

¹¹⁸ killing (informal)

¹¹⁹ not approved of

¹²⁰ enjoying killing and violence

¹²¹ the council or group of powerful men in ancient Rome

¹²² saying nice things, often not true, to please them

¹²³ suddenly changed

¹²⁴ unpredictable, changing often without reason

[00:19:22] He became even more obsessed with performance.

[00:19:26] He had always been a **keen**¹²⁵ singer, actor, and poet, but became **utterly**¹²⁶ **addicted to**¹²⁷ the crowd.

[00:19:34] At first, he **confined himself**¹²⁸ to small audiences, singing or **reciting**¹²⁹ verses at private gatherings. But soon he wanted more. He wanted to be seen, to be heard, to be cheered by the people.

[00:19:51] The historian Suetonius tells us he would lock audiences in the theatre until he had finished his performances, no matter how long they **dragged on**¹³⁰.

[00:20:02] For Rome's **elite**, this was **humiliating**¹³¹.

[00:20:05] To perform on stage was the lowest of the low, an activity for slaves and actors, not emperors.

¹²⁵ very eager or interested

¹²⁶ completely

¹²⁷ unable to stop enjoying it

¹²⁸ kept or limited himself

¹²⁹ saying aloud from memory

¹³⁰ continued (for too long)

¹³¹ making them feel very ashamed or foolish

[00:20:14] And while this was all going on, costs of his various [extravagances](#)¹³² continued to [mount](#)¹³³.

[00:20:21] Nero [lavished](#)¹³⁴ money on games, spectacles, and extensive building projects.

[00:20:28] He built a new wooden amphitheatre for shows, and he spent huge [sums](#)¹³⁵ on plays, music, and chariot races. The treasury, which had been healthy under the [fiscally](#)¹³⁶ conservative Claudius, began to [creak](#)¹³⁷ under the weight of his successor's [indulgence](#)¹³⁸.

[00:20:48] And in July of AD 64, the city—and the empire—would face disaster.

[00:20:57] 10 years into his rule, a huge fire broke out in the city of Rome.

¹³² things that cost too much or were unnecessary luxuries

¹³³ go up, increase

¹³⁴ gave a lot of

¹³⁵ amounts of money

¹³⁶ related to money or finance

¹³⁷ show weakness

¹³⁸ allowing himself pleasure or luxury

[00:21:04] Fires were not uncommon in the crowded, wooden **tenements**¹³⁹ of the capital, but this one was different. It **raged**¹⁴⁰ for six days and seven nights, destroying **vast**¹⁴¹ **swathes**¹⁴² of the city.

[00:21:19] When at last it seemed to be under control, it **flared up**¹⁴³ again, lasting another three days.

[00:21:26] There is no reliable record of how many people died, but what is certain is that by the end, most of Rome lay **in ruins**¹⁴⁴. Entire districts were gone, temples and public buildings reduced to **ash**¹⁴⁵, and thousands of people left homeless.

[00:21:47] And where was Nero during all of this?

[00:21:50] Well, there is this popular idea that he was in Rome, looking over his burning capital, playing the **fiddle**¹⁴⁶, the violin.

¹³⁹ poor, crowded apartment buildings

¹⁴⁰ continued with great force or intensity

¹⁴¹ very large

¹⁴² large areas

¹⁴³ suddenly became worse or stronger

¹⁴⁴ fallen down or destroyed

¹⁴⁵ the grey powder left after burning

¹⁴⁶ a violin

[00:22:00] It might fit the characterisation of Nero, but it isn't true.

[00:22:05] For starters, the [fiddle](#) wasn't invented for another 1,500 years. If he did anything, it would have been to play the [lute](#)¹⁴⁷ or to sing, but there is no evidence that he did this.

[00:22:19] According to Tacitus, he was at his villa in Antium, by the coast, when the fire began.

[00:22:26] He rushed back to the city, opening up the Campus Martius, the imperial gardens, and even his own palace to [shelter](#)¹⁴⁸ those who had lost their homes.

[00:22:37] He also arranged for food supplies to be brought in to prevent [famine](#)¹⁴⁹.

[00:22:43] But this was not the story that spread.

[00:22:46] Suetonius and later sources tell us that Nero stood on a tower, [lyre](#)¹⁵⁰ in hand, watching Rome burn while singing about the fall of Troy.

¹⁴⁷ an old string instrument like a guitar

¹⁴⁸ protect or keep safe

¹⁴⁹ extreme scarcity or lack of food

¹⁵⁰ a string instrument used in ancient times

[00:22:57] Tacitus, who wrote closer to the time, is more careful: he says only that there were rumours¹⁵¹, and that people believed them.

[00:23:07] What does seem clear is that suspicion quickly turned on Nero.

[00:23:13] Some claimed he had ordered the fire to clear space for an ambitious¹⁵² new building project, the Domus Aurea, or “Golden House”, an enormous palace complex that would rise in the very heart of the destroyed city.

[00:23:28] This project did go ahead and it was breathtaking¹⁵³: artificial¹⁵⁴ lakes, porticos¹⁵⁵ stretching for hundreds of meters, halls glittering¹⁵⁶ with gold and jewels, and a colossal¹⁵⁷ statue of Nero. more than 30 metres high, standing like a god at the entrance.

¹⁵¹ untrue or uncertain stories passed between people

¹⁵² great and difficult

¹⁵³ very beautiful or amazing

¹⁵⁴ made by humans, not natural

¹⁵⁵ covered areas supported by columns at building entrances

¹⁵⁶ shining brightly

¹⁵⁷ extremely large

[00:23:49] But as to whether the fire was started on Nero's orders, most historians are pretty [skeptical](#)¹⁵⁸.

[00:23:57] Perhaps the fire was an unfortunate accident. Perhaps it was spread by [looters](#)¹⁵⁹.

[00:24:03] Or perhaps Nero's men did set it, whether on his orders or not.

[00:24:09] What mattered was that people believed he was responsible.

[00:24:14] To [deflect](#)¹⁶⁰ suspicion, Nero looked for [scapegoats](#)¹⁶¹.

[00:24:18] He turned to a small and [obscure](#)¹⁶² [sect](#)¹⁶³ in Rome: the Christians.

[00:24:24] They were accused of starting the fire, and [subjected to](#)¹⁶⁴ [brutal](#)¹⁶⁵ punishments.

¹⁵⁸ not sure it is true, doubtful

¹⁵⁹ people who stole during the disaster

¹⁶⁰ turn attention away from it

¹⁶¹ people blamed for something they had not done

¹⁶² not well known

¹⁶³ a small religious group

¹⁶⁴ made to suffer

¹⁶⁵ extremely cruel or violent

[00:24:30] Some were **torn apart**¹⁶⁶ by dogs, others were **crucified**¹⁶⁷, others burned alive to light Nero's gardens at night.

[00:24:39] **Grisly**¹⁶⁸ stuff indeed, especially because there is no evidence that Christians had anything to do with it.

[00:24:47] Unfortunately, this **scapegoating**¹⁶⁹ seemed to work, at least temporarily. The public had been given a **scalp**¹⁷⁰, and this had satisfied their immediate **thirst**¹⁷¹ for a **culprit**¹⁷².

[00:25:01] But still, Nero's authority was far from stable.

[00:25:06] And in the years after the Great Fire, his private life became just as notorious as his public one.

¹⁶⁶ destroyed or broken into pieces

¹⁶⁷ killed by being nailed to a cross

¹⁶⁸ very horrible and shocking

¹⁶⁹ blaming others unfairly

¹⁷⁰ the skin on the top of the head (something representing the defeat of an opponent)

¹⁷¹ strong desire for

¹⁷² a person responsible for the crime

[00:25:14] He had been married, since the age of sixteen, to Octavia, the daughter of Claudius. She was popular with the Roman people: [modest](#)¹⁷³, [dutiful](#)¹⁷⁴, the very picture of the traditional Roman [matron](#)¹⁷⁵.

[00:25:29] But Nero despised her. He accused her of [infertility](#)¹⁷⁶, [neglected](#)¹⁷⁷ her, and eventually, in AD 62, divorced her.

[00:25:42] Only days later, he married his mistress, Poppaea Sabina.

[00:25:47] She was [ambitious](#), [glamorous](#)¹⁷⁸, and had previously been married to Otho, a friend of Nero's who would later, briefly, be emperor himself.

[00:25:59] The Roman people did not take kindly to Octavia's dismissal.

[00:26:04] There were public protests demanding her return, and statues of her were [paraded](#)¹⁷⁹ through the streets.

¹⁷³ not too proud, simple

¹⁷⁴ doing what was expected or required

¹⁷⁵ a serious, older married woman

¹⁷⁶ not able to have children

¹⁷⁷ didn't give her proper care or attention

¹⁷⁸ attractive and exciting

¹⁷⁹ shown in public with pride

[00:26:12] Nero's response was ruthless¹⁸⁰: he charged her with adultery¹⁸¹, which she was almost certainly not guilty of, and had her executed¹⁸² in exile. There is even an account that her head was brought to Poppea, Nero's new wife, as proof.

[00:26:32] And if Poppea thought that Nero would be nicer to her, she would be sorely¹⁸³ mistaken.

[00:26:39] According to Tacitus, in AD 65, while she was pregnant, Nero grew so angry with her that he kicked her to death, reportedly aiming his blows¹⁸⁴ at her stomach to ensure he also killed their unborn child.

[00:26:57] And I'm sorry to say that it gets, if it can do, even worse. Or at least, no better.

[00:27:05] After Poppaea's death, Nero spotted a young boy, Sporus, in the streets of Rome. He decided that the young boy was the spitting image¹⁸⁵ of his dead, murdered,

¹⁸⁰ having or showing no pity or compassion

¹⁸¹ sex between her and someone she was not married to

¹⁸² killed as punishment

¹⁸³ very much, greatly

¹⁸⁴ hits

¹⁸⁵ someone who looked exactly like her

wife. He ordered for the boy to be brought to his palace, [castrated](#)¹⁸⁶, dressed up as his dead wife, and then married to Nero.

[00:27:29] Seriously [grisly](#) stuff indeed.

[00:27:33] By this time, there was widespread consensus that Nero was unfit to rule.

[00:27:39] The same year, AD 65, there was a [plot](#) to assassinate him, a [plot](#) involving an influential senator called Piso and even, reportedly, Nero's close advisor, Seneca.

[00:27:53] But the [conspiracy](#)¹⁸⁷ was [betrayed](#)¹⁸⁸ before it could be put into action. And the [repression](#)¹⁸⁹ that followed was [brutal](#). Dozens were executed or forced to [commit suicide](#)¹⁹⁰.

¹⁸⁶ had his sexual organs removed

¹⁸⁷ a secret plan by a group

¹⁸⁸ revealed or uncovered

¹⁸⁹ controlling people by force

¹⁹⁰ kill themselves

[00:28:07] Piso took his own life, and Seneca was ordered to open his [veins](#)¹⁹¹, dying in a bath while [dictating](#)¹⁹² calm philosophical [reflections](#)¹⁹³ to his students, the very image of Stoic [resignation](#)¹⁹⁴.

[00:28:21] The [conspiracy](#) and its bloody [suppression](#)¹⁹⁵ marked a turning point. Nero no longer pretended to govern with [restraint](#)¹⁹⁶.

[00:28:30] He ruled through fear, with spies and informers everywhere, and trials for treason filling the [Senate](#)'s time.

[00:28:38] And at the same time, he leaned further into his passions: performance, theatre, and spectacle.

[00:28:45] In AD 66 he travelled to Greece, competing in chariot races, singing, and acting in public contests. The judges, of course, awarded him victory in every event, but

¹⁹¹ the tubes in his body that carried blood

¹⁹² saying words for them to write down

¹⁹³ serious thoughts or ideas

¹⁹⁴ accepting something bad you cannot change

¹⁹⁵ stopping it by force

¹⁹⁶ control of emotions or actions

the sight of the emperor of Rome **prancing**¹⁹⁷ on stage further **enraged**¹⁹⁸ the **aristocracy**¹⁹⁹.

[00:29:06] And when Nero returned from Greece, crowned with **laurels**²⁰⁰ and declaring he had won over 1,800 prizes, his popularity in Rome was lower than ever.

[00:29:18] By the late 60s AD, Nero's grip on power was **crumbling**²⁰¹.

[00:29:23] The provinces were restless.

[00:29:26] The final **blow**²⁰² came in AD 68.

[00:29:29] Nero ordered one of his governors, Gaius Julius Vindex, to raise taxes.

[00:29:36] Vindex, the governor of Gaul, not only refused, but rose up in revolt, declaring Nero unfit to rule.

[00:29:45] He was soon joined by Servius Sulpicius Galba, a governor in Spain, who positioned himself as a defender of Rome's liberty.

¹⁹⁷ moving like dancing in a proud way

¹⁹⁸ made them very angry

¹⁹⁹ the highest social class, usually noble families

²⁰⁰ honours or awards he had won

²⁰¹ breaking apart or falling to pieces

²⁰² a sudden bad event

[00:29:55] At first, Nero tried to **rally**²⁰³ support.

[00:29:59] He even talked of leading an army himself.

[00:30:02] But when news reached Rome that even the Praetorian Guard had deserted him, he **panicked**²⁰⁴. The **Senate** declared him a public enemy, and orders were given for his arrest.

[00:30:16] Nero fled the city with a small group of freedmen.

[00:30:21] According to Suetonius, he **wandered**²⁰⁵ **aimlessly**²⁰⁶, **begging**²⁰⁷ one of them to find a quiet place where he could hide. At last he took refuge in a villa outside Rome.

[00:30:33] There, hearing the sound of horsemen approaching, he realised it was over.

²⁰³ gather people together for

²⁰⁴ felt sudden fear and could not think clearly

²⁰⁵ walked without a direction

²⁰⁶ without purpose or plan

²⁰⁷ asking strongly for help

[00:30:40] Suetonius tells us he hesitated, [begging](#) his slaves to kill him. They refused. Finally, realising that there was no escape from here, he drove a [dagger](#)²⁰⁸ into his own [throat](#)²⁰⁹.

[00:30:55] His last words, supposedly, were “Qualis artifex pereo” — “What an artist dies in me.”

[00:31:03] It was June AD 68. Nero was thirty years old, and with his death the Julio-Claudian dynasty, the line of Augustus, ended.

[00:31:16] As for his legacy, Nero has become a [byword](#) for [excess](#)²¹⁰ and [cruelty](#)²¹¹: the emperor who killed his mother, murdered his wife, [persecuted](#)²¹² Christians, and played music while Rome burned.

[00:31:30] But as with Caligula, so much of what we “know” about him comes from [hostile](#)²¹³ sources, written years after his death.

²⁰⁸ a short, sharp knife used as a weapon

²⁰⁹ the front part of the neck

²¹⁰ having too much of something, lack of moderation

²¹¹ being very unkind or causing pain

²¹² treated very badly

²¹³ unfriendly, aggressive

[00:31:40] Tacitus, Suetonius, Cassius Dio, they all had their own [agendas](#)²¹⁴, and wanted to present Nero in the worst possible way, so as to present the emperors that came after him in a more positive light.

[00:31:55] So, Nero, was he Rome's ultimate villain, or a young man who was never fit for power?

[00:32:03] It seems that the answer is "a bit of both". If the ancient historians are to be [taken at face value](#)²¹⁵, he did [monstrous](#)²¹⁶ things, but we must remember that it was very convenient for him to be [cast](#)²¹⁷ as a monster and a [tyrant](#)²¹⁸.

[00:32:20] And, he was hardly the first.

[00:32:23] In Caligula we saw how [rumour](#)²¹⁹, [scandal](#)²²⁰, and fear turned an emperor into a monster in the public imagination.

²¹⁴ secret aims or plans

²¹⁵ accepted as true without questioning

²¹⁶ very cruel or evil

²¹⁷ presented or shaped

²¹⁸ a cruel and unfair ruler

²¹⁹ a story that may not be true, spread among people

²²⁰ an event that shocked people because it seemed wrong

[00:32:31] With Nero, we saw it again: a young man who began his [reign](#) with promises of [clemency](#) and good government, yet is remembered forever as a [sadistic²²¹ tyrant](#).

[00:32:43] In our next and final episode in this mini-series, we will turn to Commodus, the son of Marcus Aurelius.

[00:32:51] Unlike Caligula or Nero, he [inherited²²²](#) a [stable²²³](#) empire, ruled by his philosopher-emperor father.

[00:32:58] But Commodus would [squander²²⁴](#) that legacy, descending into [megalomania²²⁵](#), gladiatorial fantasies, and a cruelty that shocked even a [jaded²²⁶](#) Roman world.

[00:33:10] And that, my friends, is what we have waiting for us next time.

[00:33:16] OK, then, that is it for today's episode on Nero.

[00:33:20] I hope it's been an interesting one and that you've learnt something new.

²²¹ enjoying hurting or making others suffer

²²² received from someone after they died

²²³ not likely to change or fall, steady

²²⁴ waste

²²⁵ a mental state where he believed he was very powerful and important

²²⁶ tired after having too much of it

[00:33:24] As a final reminder in case it hadn't [sunk in](#)²²⁷ yet, this was part two of a three-part mini-series.

[00:33:30] The first one was on Caligula, and next up we are going to meet an emperor with even fewer [redeeming](#)²²⁸ qualities, Commodus.

[00:33:38] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:33:42] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

²²⁷ become fully understood or realised

²²⁸ making something bad a little better

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Tyrants	cruel and unfair rulers
Antichrist	a figure seen as the enemy of Christ or pure evil
Brutality	extreme cruelty and violence
Depravity	very bad, evil, or immoral behaviour
Unmatched	without equal
Sadism	enjoying hurting or making others suffer
Stereotype	a widely held but fixed and simple idea people have about a group of people, often untrue
Bond	a strong connection or relationship
Stereotypes	widely held but fixed and simple ideas people have about a group of people, often untrue
Basis	starting point or base
Intensity	strength or power
Wedge	something that pushed them apart

Taunted	insulted or made fun of
Kindly	kind, warm-hearted, or gentle
Sink	go down below the surface of water
Got wind of	began to suspect what was happening or heard about it
Disintegrate	fall apart into small pieces
Vessel	ship or large boat
Bargained for	expected or planned for
Shore	the land next to the sea
Rejoicing	expressing great happiness and celebrating
Tragic	very sad and painful
Got wind	heard about it
Plot	a secret plan
Hatched	created or planned
Dispatch	deal with or finish
Fate	end or destiny

Inevitable	sure to happen, unavoidable
Womb	the place inside her where her baby had grown
Callous	showing no care about other people's feelings or suffering
Byword	a word or name used as an example of it
Biased	unfairly supporting one side more than another
Blindly	without thinking or without question
Agenda	a plan or aim, often secret
Stabbed	hit with a knife
Limp	with difficulty or hobble
Stammer	with pauses and repeated sounds
Dismissed	rejected or not accepted
Weak-minded	not strong in thinking or decision making
Malleable	easy to influence or change
Cowering	bending down in fear
Competent	efficient and capable

Ticking over	working slowly but not stopping
Slim	thin or very small
Reign	the period of his rule
Exile	being forced to live outside her country
Deposed	removed from power
Recalled	officially asked her to return
Widow	a woman whose husband had died
Ruthlessly	in a cruel and harsh way
Capable	able or effective
Alliances	agreements with others to support or help each other
Persuade	make him agree to do it
Adopt	take him as his own
Ageing	becoming old
Heirs	people who would receive money, power, or property after his death
Cement	make it stronger or more certain

Manoeuvring	careful and secret planning
Outcast	someone who was not accepted by others
Had a hand in	helped to make it happen
Adopted	taken as his own
Heir	the person who would receive money, power, or property after his death
Accession	the act of becoming emperor
Dull	boring, not interesting
Schemed	secretly made plans
Intended	planned or meant
Household names	well known
Trio	group of three people
Nostalgically	in a way that expressed a mixed feeling of pleasure and sadness
Eased	made them less hard or less painful
Burdens	heavy problems or responsibilities
Paranoia	an unreasonable fear that people wanted to harm them

Characterised	been typical or characteristic of
Far off	far from the truth
Lofty	very high or noble
Clemency	kindness shown when someone could be punished
Virtue	good quality, such as honesty or kindness
Things were looking up	things were starting to seem better
Elite	the richest, most powerful people
Merciful	showing kindness when he could punish
Bore	carried or showed
Dawn	the beginning
Pursuits	hobbies or activities he enjoyed
Scandalous	shocking because it seemed wrong
Prostitutes	people who had sex for money
Lapped it up	enjoyed it very much
Mingled with	mixed socially with

Restless	unable to stay still, always wanting change
Sidelined	pushed out of importance or ignored
Tension	nervous or unfriendly feeling between them
Flashpoint	a situation where violence or anger could suddenly happen
Infatuated	having a very strong but silly love for her
Horrificed	very shocked and upset
Lowering himself	doing something below his social position
Consort with	spend time with someone of lower status
Grip	strong control or power
Coming of age	becoming an adult
Stake his claim	ask for or demand what he thought was his
Banquet	a large, formal meal for many people
Gasping	breathing with difficulty, being desperate to obtain it
Posed	presented or constituted
Overstepped the mark	gone too far and behaved wrongly

Hypothesise	suggest an idea as an explanation
Relegated	moved to a lower position or importance
Banished	forced to leave it
Ebbing away	slowly disappearing
Claw it back	get it back with difficulty
Scolding	telling him off or speaking to him angrily
Hinting	suggesting it without saying it directly
Champion	promote or support
Defying	refusing to obey or respect
Daggers	long knives used as weapons
Urging	strongly advising or pushing them to do it
Assassins	people paid to kill her
Suicide	killing herself
Overthrow	remove him from power by force
Bought	believed

Knocking off	killing (informal)
Frowned upon	not approved of
Bloodthirsty	enjoying killing and violence
Senate	the council or group of powerful men in ancient Rome
Flattery	saying nice things, often not true, to please them
Flipped	suddenly changed
Erratic	unpredictable, changing often without reason
Keen	very eager or interested
Utterly	completely
Addicted to	unable to stop enjoying it
Confined himself	kept or limited himself
Reciting	saying aloud from memory
Dragged on	continued (for too long)
Humiliating	making them feel very ashamed or foolish
Extravagancies	things that cost too much or were unnecessary luxuries

Mount	go up, increase
Lavished	gave a lot of
Sums	amounts of money
Fiscally	related to money or finance
Creak	show weakness
Indulgence	allowing himself pleasure or luxury
Tenements	poor, crowded apartment buildings
Raged	continued with great force or intensity
Vast	very large
Swathes	large areas
Flared up	suddenly became worse or stronger
In ruins	fallen down or destroyed
Ash	the grey powder left after burning
Fiddle	a violin
Lute	an old string instrument like a guitar

Shelter	protect or keep safe
Famine	extreme scarcity or lack of food
Lyre	a string instrument used in ancient times
Rumours	untrue or uncertain stories passed between people
Ambitious	great and difficult or having a strong desire and determination to succeed
Breathtaking	very beautiful or amazing
Artificial	made by humans, not natural
Porticos	covered areas supported by columns at building entrances
Glittering	shining brightly
Colossal	extremely large
Skeptical	not sure it is true, doubtful
Looters	people who stole during the disaster
Deflect	turn attention away from it
Scapegoats	people blamed for something they had not done
Obscure	not well known

Sect	a small religious group
Subjected to	made to suffer
Brutal	extremely cruel or violent
Torn apart	destroyed or broken into pieces
Crucified	killed by being nailed to a cross
Grisly	very horrible and shocking
Scapegoating	blaming others unfairly
Scalp	the skin on the top of the head (something representing the defeat of an opponent)
Thirst	strong desire for
Culprit	a person responsible for the crime
Modest	not too proud, simple
Dutiful	doing what was expected or required
Matron	a serious, older married woman
Infertility	not able to have children
Neglected	didn't give her proper care or attention

Glamorous	attractive and exciting
Paraded	shown in public with pride
Ruthless	having or showing no pity or compassion
Adultery	sex between her and someone she was not married to
Executed	killed as punishment
Sorely	very much, greatly
Blows	hits
Spitting image	someone who looked exactly like her
Castrated	had his sexual organs removed
Conspiracy	a secret plan by a group
Betrayed	revealed or uncovered
Repression	controlling people by force
Commit suicide	kill themselves
Veins	the tubes in his body that carried blood
Dictating	saying words for them to write down

Reflections	serious thoughts or ideas
Resignation	accepting something bad you cannot change
Suppression	stopping it by force
Restraint	control of emotions or actions
Prancing	moving like dancing in a proud way
Enraged	made them very angry
Aristocracy	the highest social class, usually noble families
Laurels	honours or awards he had won
Crumbling	breaking apart or falling to pieces
Blow	a sudden bad event
Rally	gather people together for
Panicked	felt sudden fear and could not think clearly
Wandered	walked without a direction
Aimlessly	without purpose or plan
Begging	asking strongly for help

Dagger	a short, sharp knife used as a weapon
Throat	the front part of the neck
Excess	having too much of something, lack of moderation
Cruelty	being very unkind or causing pain
Persecuted	treated very badly
Hostile	unfriendly, aggressive
Agendas	secret aims or plans
Taken at face value	accepted as true without questioning
Monstrous	very cruel or evil
Cast	presented or shaped
Tyrant	a cruel and unfair ruler
Rumour	a story that may not be true, spread among people
Scandal	an event that shocked people because it seemed wrong
Sadistic	enjoying hurting or making others suffer
Inherited	received from someone after they died

Stable	not likely to change or fall, steady
Squander	waste
Megalomania	a mental state where he believed he was very powerful and important
Jaded	tired after having too much of it
Sunk in	become fully understood or realised
Redeeming	making something bad a little better

Language spotlight

1. Got wind of

- **Meaning:** heard about something secret or unofficially
- **Synonyms:** heard, found out, discovered
- **Antonyms:** kept in the dark, unaware, ignorant
- **Examples:**
 - The boss **got wind of** the plan to leave early and wasn't happy.
 - She **got wind of** the surprise party, so it wasn't a surprise anymore.

2. Overstepped the mark

- **Meaning:** went too far and behaved in a way that was not acceptable
- **Synonyms:** crossed the line, went too far
- **Antonyms:** stayed within limits, behaved properly
- **Examples:**
 - His joke about her family really **overstepped the mark**.

- The player **overstepped the mark** when he insulted the referee.

3. Stake his claim

- **Meaning:** strongly say that something should be yours or that you deserve it
- **Synonyms:** assert, demand, declare rights
- **Antonyms:** give up, surrender, let go
- **Examples:**
 - The young prince tried to **stake his claim** to the throne.
 - She **staked her claim** to the last piece of cake before anyone else could.

4. Claw it back

- **Meaning:** work very hard to win or recover something after losing it
- **Synonyms:** recover, regain, win back
- **Antonyms:** lose, give up, forfeit
- **Examples:**
 - The team was losing 3–0 but managed to **claw it back** to 3–3.

- After losing his reputation, he tried to **claw it back** through hard work.

5. Taken at face value

- **Meaning:** accepted as true without questioning or doubting it
- **Synonyms:** accepted, believed, trusted
- **Antonyms:** doubted, questioned, challenged
- **Examples:**
 - His story shouldn't be **taken at face value**; check the facts first.
 - She always **takes things at face value**, which makes her too trusting.

Quiz

Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions

1. How did Agrippina die?
 - a) Poisoned by Nero
 - b) In an accident at sea planned by Nero
 - c) Executed by the Senate
 - d) Stabbed on Nero's orders

2. What entertainment did Nero enjoy the most?
 - a) Gladiator fights
 - b) Horse racing
 - c) Poetry and theatre
 - d) Hunting

3. What major disaster struck Rome in AD 64?
 - a) A plague

b) An earthquake

c) A flood

d) The Great Fire of Rome

4. What did Nero build after the Great Fire?

a) The Domus Aurea (Golden House)

b) The Pantheon

c) The Colosseum

d) A new aqueduct

5. How did Nero die?

a) In battle

b) By suicide

c) Poisoned by Agrippina

d) Executed by the Senate

True or False

6. Nero's mother Agrippina helped him become emperor. (True/False)
7. In his early years, Nero was known for ruling more calmly and wisely.
(True/False)
8. Nero blamed the Christians for starting the Great Fire of Rome. (True/False)
9. Nero's death marked the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. (True/False)
10. Nero never married during his reign. (True/False)

Fill-in-the-Blank

11. He expanded the empire into Britain, reformed aspects of the legal system, and generally kept the machine of empire _____ over.
12. Poisoned mushrooms, according to one story, although whether Agrippina had a _____ in that, or they were simply bad mushrooms, we can't be sure.
13. She even tried to intimidate Nero by reminding him that Britannicus, the biological son of Claudius, was still alive, was soon _____ of age, and might one day _____ his claim.
14. And she was banished from the palace. Her power was ebbing _____, and she knew it.

15. He decided that the young boy was the _____ image of his dead, murdered, wife.

Vocabulary Practice

Choose the correct definition of the word or expression.

16. **Tyrant**

- a) A kind and fair ruler
- b) A cruel and unfair ruler
- c) A religious leader
- d) A Roman senator

17. **Paranoia**

- a) A fear that people are trying to harm you
- b) A strong feeling of love
- c) A plan to win power
- d) A form of entertainment

18. **To exile**

- a) To celebrate someone
- b) To make someone rich
- c) To give someone land
- d) To force someone to live outside their country

19. **Scapegoat**

- a) A leader of the army
- b) Someone blamed for something they didn't do
- c) A type of Roman building
- d) A cruel punishment

20. **Lavished**

- a) Gave a lot of something generously
- b) Destroyed completely
- c) Refused to share

d) Borrowed from others

Answers

1. d) Stabbed on Nero's orders
2. c) Poetry and theatre
3. d) The Great Fire of Rome
4. a) The Domus Aurea (Golden House)
5. b) By suicide
6. True
7. True
8. True
9. True
10. False
11. ticking
12. hand
13. coming, stake
14. away
15. spitting
16. b) A cruel and unfair ruler
17. a) A fear that people are trying to harm you
18. d) To force someone to live outside their country
19. b) Someone blamed for something they didn't do
20. a) Gave a lot of something generously