

It might be interesting to imagine the dilemma of a Roman court if it was given the opportunity to indict Nero, Emperor from 54-68 AD, on just one of his many crimes while he still ruled. To select just one crime in a collection of atrocious, dastardly deeds would be an exercise of extreme difficulty. You would wish for a single, symbolic offense to tag this musical monster as the catastrophe he really was, something indicative of his overall evil nature. This very wealth of possible charges to bring forward for selection is at the heart of the problem. Let us examine some possibilities.

A. **Murdered his step-brother, the natural son of Claudius, young Prince Britannicus.**

This was one of Nero's first public crimes done in his first year, 54 AD, when Britannicus was only 13. There are any number of reasons you wouldn't choose this one. Firstly, when poisoning is alleged the very cause of death remains unclear since Britannicus may have died of who knows what—an embolism, a stroke? Also, even if Nero killed Britannicus, Nero could argue that this was a politically necessary killing in the interests of public peace since a civil war could have grown up around these two princes.

B. **Death of his Auntie—Domitia Lepida**

The objection to using this crime is that Nero's mother actually orchestrated the poor woman's downfall (Domitia had once been accused of committing incest with her brother and while looking after Nero as a child had given him to sundry low-lives to look after.) Nero merely testified (falsely) against her at her trial. Nero's mom wanted Domitia's rich husband for her own. She got him and his money.

C. **Murder of his mother, Agrippina, in 59 AD**

Nero's responsibility in this one is glaringly clear. The defense might argue though that murdering the murderous, icy, meddling Agrippina was only paying her back in her own coin. Perhaps the argument carries a gram of weight but most folk frown upon matricide—a crime so hideous that it summoned up the baying Furies to haunt the guilty to madness and death. Still—Agrippina was not a nice lady and was threatening to Nero.

D. **Murder of two wives, Octavia and Poppaea Sabina**

For these crimes one could drag up, for the first, arguments that a Henry the VIII would find congenial, and for the second, one might use the recently discredited "Drunk" defense (the unvirtuous Poppaea was pregnant at the time).

E. **A list of "lesser" offenses:**

- raped a vestal virgin
- started inflation - c. 10%
- sang while Rome burned in 64 AD
- made low class rogues and Greek slaves great powers in the state
- spent the state into insolvency with lavish spending (e.g. the new palace of the Golden House)
- trumped up false charges against senators to have their property confiscated and them put to death
- appeared on the public stage as a mere actor and musician

F. **In the year 66 AD, he had three senior army commanders put to death—because his anxieties were rising.**

Conclusion:

I think you can see where this all is leading. There is really no one crime that can be successfully used to embrace the rest. The judgement of history might seem to indicate that F, the murder of senior army commanders, finally brought the house down for Nero. Nero had already alienated the Senate, and by 66 AD he irrevocably antagonized the army. Only the city mob stood by him and they were a poor foundation for traditional Roman rule. Nero was indeed a monster, mostly in abandoning the traditional public virtues of duty, honesty, dignity, etc. He paraded himself like a fool before the public, pandering to their lowest tabloid taste while destroying the worthy men who served the state. Nero, in fact, eroded the very principles upon which all Roman rule rested. Rome had grown great because of men, usually of the senatorial class, adhering to old-fashioned public virtues (pietas [obligation], fides [honesty], clementia [mercy], gravitas [seriousness], frugalitas [frugality], etc.). Nero killed men who displayed these qualities and knew little of these ancestral ways himself. His greatest crime was his entire life.