

Fallen Greatness – From Emperor to Captive

The shift of Napoleon's image in Britain, from one of contempt to general sympathy, began after Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo. This expression of sympathy intensified as onlookers tried to catch a glimpse of the captive Emperor in Plymouth harbour during his transfer to the ship which would take him to Elba, his first island of exile. Napoleon fans rented boats to near his ship in order to pay their respects, applaud, and "to bend and bow- to take off our [re. author: their] hats to him – and call him great". ¹

As Napoleon's person and life took on new meaning, British politicians put him to new political uses. Journalists and politicians were protesting loudly about the conditions and the very fact of his second imprisonment at St Helena. In captivity, the man that they had denounced as a tyrant would become a victim demonstrating the despotism of British ministers. Reformers believed the very hallmarks of English liberty were under fire. Habeas corpus*, trial by jury, freedom of the press, was not carried out. Some said that under British law, Napoleon should be tried or set free. A poem published in the weekly *Black Dwarf* (1817) called St Helena the "prison of the brave" and "the grave of England's honour". ²

On his lonely island Napoleon was no longer a threat and became instead a moral issue. Writers, poets, and painters highlighted the arbitrary nature and cruelty of his banishment. After Napoleon's death in 1821, there was an outpouring of popular songs and plays in which Napoleon was identified with freedom and the dawn of "liberty ...o'er the world" (from the song *A Dream of Napoleon*) and shown to be a poor victim of deception and persecution. It became commonplace for even British patriots to admire Napoleon – an opinion once voiced only by English radicals. The first Napoleon museum opened to the public in England in 1843, John Sainsbury had gathered a huge collection of Napoleon memorabilia -everything from a dark lock of Napoleon's hair, medals and letters - to the bottle of wine he allegedly drank the day after Waterloo.

How can you explain England's fascination with Napoleon after so many years of hate and fear? Do you think he should have been put on trial? What has been the fate of other despotic rulers who once governed, then were ousted from power? Can you give examples?

Use the following two poetry citations:

- James Henry Lewis, portrayed the fallen hero as, "There must stand, `midst nature's horrors, through all his wintry days, a mighty ruin of fallen greatness, to be the warning beacon to ambition". ³
- John Ruskin's 1838 poem describes Napoleon as, "A lonely figure gazing on the deep" wrestling with "memory"; a figure in "a dark quiet of despair". ³

Together with the stanza of Wordsworth's sonnet on the next page, you have three original text sources that comment on Napoleon's fall and its aftermath. Use these quotes together with your impressions and analysis of the painting by Haydon "Napoleon Musing at St. Helena", to help you prepare and write a last letter written in exile from Napoleon to his first wife Josephine de Beauharnais. Your letter should examine both the conditions of Bonaparte's political situation and an interpretation of his personal situation from Napoleon's point of view.

Vocabulary: *captive* – prisoner, *shift* – Wechsel, *contempt* – Verachtung, *sympathy* – Mitgefühl, *onlookers* – Zuschauer, *to catch a glimpse* – einen Blick erhaschen, *to bend and bow* – biegen und verbeugen, *captivity* – Gefangenschaft, *to denounce* – brandmarken, anprangern, denunzieren, *despotism* – Despotismus, Willkürherrschaft, Gewaltherrschaft, *hallmarks* – Markenzeichen, *trial by jury* – Schwurgerichtsverfahren, *to try s.o.* – jdn vor Gericht stellen, *grave* – Grab, *arbitrary nature* – willkürliche Art und Weise, *banishment* – Verbannung, *outpouring* – Erguss, *dawn* – Morgendämmerung, *deception* – Betrug, *persecution* – Verfolgung, *memorabilia* – Denkwürdigkeiten, *allegedly* – angeblich, *fate* – Schicksal, *to oust s.o from power* – jdn von der Macht verdrängen, *beacon* – Leuchtfeuer, *gaze* – Blick, *despair* – Verzweiflung, *aftermath* – Folgen.

**Habeas Corpus*: Legal instrument that safeguards individual freedom against unlawful state action.

¹Dorothy Wordsworth, Letter to Catherine Clarkson (15 Aug. 1815): in *Letters.. Wordsworth*, 2,part2. (Semmel 2004: 172). ² "Napoleon" ("by Jeffrey"): in *Black Dwarf*, 17.Dec.1817, 781-2. (Semmel: 2004: 203). ³ (Semmel 2004:232-233).

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Benjamin Robert Haydon, "Napoleon Musing at St. Helena" 1830 (National Portrait Gallery)

Haydon's painting inspired the sonnet by the English poet William Wordsworth 1831¹

***That unencumbered whole of blank and still,
Sky without cloud – ocean without a wave;
And the one Man that laboured to enslave
The World, sole-standing high on the bare hill –
Back turned, arms folded, the unapparent face
Tinged, we may fancy, in this dreary place
With light reflected from the invisible sun
Set like his fortunes.***

Vocabulary: *unencumbered* – unbelastet, *laboured* – gearbeitet (to labour – arbeiten), *to enslave* – versklaven, *unapparent* – nicht gezeigt, *tinged* – gefärbt, *fancy* – vorstellen, *dreary* – öde, *fortune* – Schicksal.

¹William Wordsworth, „To B.R. Haydon, on Seeing his Picture of Napoleon Buonaparte on the Island of St. Helena,“ in *Wordsworth Poems*, 2,:707.