



# English Learning for Curious Minds



**Member-only content  
Transcript & Key Vocabulary**

Thank you - your ongoing membership makes Leonardo English possible.  
If you have questions we'd love to hear from you: [hi@leonardoenglish.com](mailto:hi@leonardoenglish.com)

---

## Episode #089

# The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

### 15 Sep, 2020



[00:00:00] 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.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about the fantastic life of Caravaggio.

[00:00:29] He is widely considered to be one of the fathers of modern painting, and during his life was the most famous artist in Rome.

[00:00:39] But he was a troublemaker, both in his work and his life, and he pushed the boundaries of art and of the law.

[00:00:49] Not many artists, or even people, have lived such an adventurous life, so without further ado, let's get right into it.



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

[00:01:00] Not a huge amount is known about the early life of Caravaggio, but here's what is believed to be true.

[00:01:09] He was born in 1571, near Milan, in Northern Italy, to a relatively poor family.

[00:01:18] After a plague hit Milan, when he was only around 5 years old, his family escaped from Milan, to a town called Caravaggio, about 40km to the east.

[00:01:31] It was from this town that he took his name.

[00:01:34] At birth, Caravaggio wasn't his name, it was Michelangelo Merisi, but he took the name after the town where he grew up.

[00:01:43] Unfortunately, moving away from Milan wasn't enough to save his family from the plague.

[00:01:51] Within two years of being in the town of Caravaggio, his father, his [paternal](#)<sup>1</sup> grandparents and his uncle had all died, with his father and grandfather dying on the same day.

[00:02:06] And by his 21st birthday, his youngest brother and his mother had also died, leaving Caravaggio an [orphan](#)<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> on the father's side

<sup>2</sup> a child with no parents



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

[00:02:17] He left to seek his fortune in Milan, becoming an **apprentice**<sup>3</sup> to a Milanese painter called Simone Peterzano, and supporting himself through painting portraits.

[00:02:30] If you think of Milan now, you might think of a **chic**<sup>4</sup>, modern, fashionable Italian city.

[00:02:39] Milan in the late 16th century was very different.

[00:02:44] It was a dangerous city, full of violence and crime, and judging by his actions, the young Caravaggio was a perfect fit for this city of **sin**<sup>5</sup>.

[00:02:57] He had experienced tragic loss at a young age, and was really without any family, any roots, without anyone to judge him, and without anyone to put him on the right path.

[00:03:11] He was completely on his own, and he **swiftly**<sup>6</sup> got into a lot of trouble.

[00:03:17] It's not known exactly what Caravaggio did, but he got into some kind of fight that resulted in a police officer getting hurt, and he left for Rome. This will become

---

<sup>3</sup> someone who has agreed to work for a skilled person for a period of time

<sup>4</sup> stylish

<sup>5</sup> law-breaking, often against religious laws

<sup>6</sup> quickly



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

a bit of a theme in Caravaggio's life - things starting to go reasonably well, then him getting into trouble and having to [flee](#)<sup>7</sup>.

[00:03:40] So, some time around 1592, still in his very early 20s, Caravaggio arrived in Rome, with no name, no money, no nothing.

[00:03:53] He did [odd-jobs](#)<sup>8</sup> for painters, just managing to earn enough to feed himself and keep himself alive.

[00:04:02] He got a [big break](#)<sup>9</sup> when he caught the eye of a Roman Cardinal, a man called Francesco del Monte, who essentially [sponsored](#)<sup>10</sup> Caravaggio, giving him his own house, paying him a wage, and [commissioning](#)<sup>11</sup> art from Caravaggio.

[00:04:19] It was during this period that he started to develop his own, unique painting style.

[00:04:26] Now, we aren't going to talk in great detail about his actual art because you are listening to this and I can't actually show you the images, and also because this is

---

<sup>7</sup> escape by running away

<sup>8</sup> small jobs

<sup>9</sup> an event that gives you the chance to become successful in your job

<sup>10</sup> supported with payments

<sup>11</sup> formally choosing someone to do something



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

more about the story of his **turbulent**<sup>12</sup> life than his art, but the two are of course very closely linked.

[00:04:46] As you may know, Baroque art was mainly of religious scenes, and the religious figures in the paintings all looked relatively similar, and **idealised**<sup>13</sup>, not like 'real people'. That was the point, of course, they were **figures**<sup>14</sup> from the Bible, and naturally they shouldn't look like people off the street.

[00:05:08] But this wasn't what Caravaggio thought.

[00:05:12] He rejected this polished, perfect, **idealised** style that was used by artists like Raphael and Michelangelo.

[00:05:23] Caravaggio used real models from the streets of Rome, **beggars**<sup>15</sup>, prostitutes, street children, and painted them in a religious context as they really were, with all of their imperfections.

[00:05:38] There is a famous painting with **Cupid**<sup>16</sup> with dirty feet and broken fingernails, and also one where Caravaggio painted the Virgin Mary and used a famous prostitute as his model.

---

<sup>12</sup> full of changes and violence

<sup>13</sup> represented as perfect

<sup>14</sup> character

<sup>15</sup> poor people who ask others for money or food

<sup>16</sup> in Roman mythology, Cupid was the son of Venus, the Goddess of Love



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

[00:05:54] Frequently, when he presented these works to the patrons that had **commissioned** them, they were **appalled**<sup>17</sup> and asked him to redo them. You couldn't **depict**<sup>18</sup> the Madonna or Jesus like that, it was almost **blasphemous**<sup>19</sup>.

[00:06:12] From a stylistic point of view, the other main thing that Caravaggio was most famous for was his use of light, and if you look at his paintings, they are almost all dark, with deep shadows, and then a sudden, revealing light.

[00:06:30] Nobody did this before, as previously everything was **depicted** in shining light.

[00:06:38] But Caravaggio existed in the darkness, in his private life as well.

[00:06:44] By the time he was in Rome, he had developed a reputation for being a troublemaker, and he would go out looking for fights.

[00:06:55] Reportedly he would paint for 2 weeks, then spend the next 2 months wandering around Rome, with a sword by his side, looking for fights and arguments.

[00:07:07] And, unlike with some other artists, where they kept **meticulous**<sup>20</sup> diaries and notes, meaning that historians have a much easier time figuring out what they did,

---

<sup>17</sup> shocked and upset

<sup>18</sup> represent

<sup>19</sup> offensive to God or religion

<sup>20</sup> very careful



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

or what their character was, our knowledge of Caravaggio comes really just from two things. His paintings, and his criminal record.

[00:07:30] And his criminal record was pretty [lengthy](#)<sup>21</sup>.

[00:07:33] He would frequently [engage](#)<sup>22</sup> in [duels](#)<sup>23</sup>, when you challenge someone else to a fight, and seems to have been a very angry young man, looking to fight anyone, for any reason.

[00:07:46] He would carry a sword and a dagger, a little knife, everywhere, and reportedly he would occasionally carry a [pistol](#)<sup>24</sup>. Although this was illegal, Caravaggio would boast that if he was ever caught he would never get into trouble, because his patrons, the people who [commissioned](#) his paintings, were very powerful and they could protect him.

[00:08:11] His crimes include getting into a fight with a waiter, and throwing a plate of cooked artichokes in his face, making a hole in the ceiling of his studio, throwing

---

<sup>21</sup> very long

<sup>22</sup> participate (in)

<sup>23</sup> a formal, arranged fight

<sup>24</sup> a small gun



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

stones at his landlady, writing [satirical](#)<sup>25</sup> and very rude poems about another man's wife, and a whole [array](#)<sup>26</sup> of general bad behaviour.

[00:08:37] And although he was by this time a very successful painter, and by some people's standards the most [in demand](#)<sup>27</sup> painter in the whole of Rome, he would still live on the streets, gambling, drinking, visiting prostitutes, and living a very different life to the religious figures he would spend his days painting.

[00:09:01] Then in May 1606, when he was 35 years old, his bad-boy behaviour reached an entirely new, but not unexpected, level.

[00:09:14] He murdered a man.

[00:09:17] [Accounts differ](#)<sup>28</sup> over exactly what happened here, but he killed a man called Ranuccio Tomassoni.

[00:09:26] One theory goes that Caravaggio and Tomassoni had an argument over a woman, potentially a prostitute, or even Tomassoni's wife. Other theories say it could have been a gambling debt, or even an argument over a game of tennis.

---

<sup>25</sup> criticising of others in a funny, clever, way

<sup>26</sup> large group

<sup>27</sup> requested by many

<sup>28</sup> there are different versions (of a story)



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

[00:09:45] In any case, there was an argument, and Caravaggio and Tomassoni agreed to fight.

[00:09:52] As you did in those days, they arranged to meet at a specific time and place, with their supporters.

[00:10:00] It was during this fight that Caravaggio killed Tomassoni, reportedly trying to [castrate](#)<sup>29</sup> him, trying to chop off his testicles.

[00:10:11] That, of course, is horrible, and the reason that has been put forward for Caravaggio trying to do that is that it was a sign that the fight was over a woman. In those days if the fight had been caused by an insult to you personally, you might try to cut someone's face.

[00:10:33] If the fight had been over a woman, one person might try to cut off the other person's genitals.

[00:10:39] I know, gross, right?

[00:10:42] In any case, Caravaggio was a murderer, and even his high-powered patrons couldn't protect him.

---

<sup>29</sup> to remove the testicles of a male



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

[00:10:50] He fled Rome immediately, and was [exiled<sup>30</sup>](#) from the city. There was even a price put on his head, so anyone in the Papal States, which included most of central Italy, could receive a reward for killing him.

[00:11:07] Caravaggio wasn't safe anywhere near Rome, and so he headed south, first to Naples, where he stayed for around 9 months.

[00:11:17] Although he was a violent, known murderer, his artistic talents meant that he was still in high demand, and he worked on several paintings that you can still see in the churches of Naples today.

[00:11:32] However, he was still a wanted man, with a price on his head, and he couldn't return to Rome unless he was given a [pardon<sup>31</sup>](#) for the murder.

[00:11:44] At this time, the small island of Malta, to the south of Sicily, was the headquarters of the Knights of St John, a Catholic military order, and Caravaggio thought that he could go to Malta, gain the favour of the knights there, and they would be able to get him a [pardon](#).

[00:12:05] So in 1607, he arrived in Malta, offered his services, and the knights were honoured to have, really, one of Europe's most famous painters as their official painter.

---

<sup>30</sup> forced to leave a city or country

<sup>31</sup> officially forgiven (for something)



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

[00:12:20] He quickly became a favourite of the Knights, and was [admitted](#)<sup>32</sup> to the order, and Caravaggio became a Knight of Malta.

[00:12:29] He continued to paint in his [signature](#)<sup>33</sup> style, and if you come to Malta, and I would definitely recommend you do, you'll see one of his most famous works, the beheading of St John The Baptist, in the cathedral of the capital city, Valletta.

[00:12:47] The theme of [beheading](#)<sup>34</sup>, of religious characters getting their heads chopped off was a common one for Caravaggio, and he would paint his own face as the face of the chopped off head.

[00:13:02] The theory behind this is that Caravaggio was [obsessed](#)<sup>35</sup> with this idea that he was in effect a dead man, Caravaggio was only a [severed](#)<sup>36</sup> head. He had a price on his head, so that anyone in the Papal States could kill him and get a reward.

[00:13:21] But I don't think this is time to feel sorry for Caravaggio.

[00:13:26] He hadn't changed his ways when he got to Malta, and although he had been given this great opportunity, and been made a Knight of Malta, he didn't change his ways, he didn't start living an honest, crime-free life.

---

<sup>32</sup> given entry (to)

<sup>33</sup> typical of someone

<sup>34</sup> cutting the head off

<sup>35</sup> unable to stop thinking about something

<sup>36</sup> cut off



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

[00:13:42] He would still drink and fight, and one evening in August 1608 he picked a fight with the wrong man, a man called Fra Giovanni Rodomonte Roero, one of the top knights of Malta.

[00:13:58] Very much not something that you should be doing if you are looking to the knights to put in a good word for you, to get you a pardon.

[00:14:07] Caravaggio was arrested, and thrown into prison.

[00:14:11] It looked like this was [game over](#)<sup>37</sup> for him.

[00:14:14] But he managed to escape from jail, and escape from Malta. He [fled](#)<sup>38</sup>, again, this time north, to Sicily.

[00:14:23] This was still only in 1608, so he was only 37 years old at the time.

[00:14:30] He [floated around](#)<sup>39</sup> a bit in Sicily, still winning well-paid [commissions](#). Just like it was in Malta, he was still a known murderer and violent man, but he was an excellent artist.

---

<sup>37</sup> finished, ended

<sup>38</sup> past participle of 'flee'

<sup>39</sup> to move around without purpose



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

[00:14:45] While in Sicily, his behaviour started to get more and more **erratic**<sup>40</sup>, and he reportedly would sleep fully clothed with a sword by his side, and he would rip up an entire painting if there was even a word of criticism.

[00:15:04] He stayed for around 9 months in Sicily, and then returned to Naples, where he had enjoyed some success a couple of years beforehand.

[00:15:14] Obviously, when he got to Naples he didn't manage to stay out of trouble, and he was **viciously**<sup>41</sup> attacked outside a **tavern**<sup>42</sup>, his face **slashed**<sup>43</sup>, he was cut horribly, and left with really damaging wounds.

[00:15:30] It's not known exactly why he was attacked, but over the years he had certainly made enough enemies.

[00:15:37] Caravaggio thought it was a **retribution**<sup>44</sup> for attacking Fra Giovanni Rodomonte Roero back in Malta.

---

<sup>40</sup> in an irregular, unpredictable way

<sup>41</sup> in a cruel way

<sup>42</sup> a bar or pub

<sup>43</sup> cut with a sharp blade

<sup>44</sup> revenge for something



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

[00:15:46] Caravaggio painted a picture of Salome with the Head of John the Baptist, and again painted his own head as the [decapitated<sup>45</sup>](#) head of John The Baptist. He sent it to the Knights of Malta in an attempt to be forgiven, but it didn't work.

[00:16:03] However, through other channels Caravaggio thought he was having better luck, and friends in Rome told him that the pope's nephew, a [cardinal<sup>46</sup>](#) called Scipione Borghese, would be able to secure him a [pardon](#).

[00:16:21] In 1610 he travelled back towards Rome by boat, from Naples, with 3 paintings that he was planning to give to Borghese, the pope's nephew.

[00:16:32] When he got off the boat just outside Rome, it's thought that he was arrested by a captain, who didn't know anything about this [pardon](#).

[00:16:42] Caravaggio was released, but the paintings were still on the boat, which had already left, and travelled north.

[00:16:50] Caravaggio rushed north, and tried to find the ship in a port called Porto Ercole, to the north of Rome. However the ship wasn't there.

[00:17:00] We don't know a huge amount about exactly what did happen there, but what we do know is that on the 18th July 1610, Caravaggio died, aged 39.

[00:17:14] Historians are divided over what killed him.

---

<sup>45</sup> cut off

<sup>46</sup> a high-rank priest of the Catholic church



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

[00:17:18] Some say it was a fever, perhaps malaria.

[00:17:23] Others say that he **succumbed**<sup>47</sup> to the injuries from being attacked in Naples.

[00:17:30] It's also been suggested that the lead in his paint might have poisoned him, and also have been the thing that was responsible for driving him mad in the final years of his life.

[00:17:45] There are theories that it was Fra Giovanni Rodomonte Roero, the man who he had attacked in Malta, who had followed<sup>47</sup> him all the way back to Italy and murdered him.

[00:17:56] While others think it was the family of Tomassoni, the man murdered by Caravaggio in Rome 4 years before.

[00:18:05] Whatever it was that killed him, he died alone, in a town where he knew nobody, without any of his paintings, and without anyone to comfort him.

[00:18:16] Quite an **ignominious**<sup>48</sup> end, but consistent really with the way in which he lived his life.

[00:18:23] The legacy of Caravaggio is still alive and well, and he has had a huge influence on the world of art.

---

<sup>47</sup> if you succumb to an illness, you die of it

<sup>48</sup> embarrassing or humiliating



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

[00:18:31] Not just on other painters, but his use of shadows has been [credited<sup>49</sup>](#) by filmmakers such as David LaChapelle and Martin Scorsese.

[00:18:40] Indeed if you watch a Scorsese film, you can clearly see he uses a lot of the techniques that Caravaggio used 400 years beforehand.

[00:18:51] Caravaggio was undoubtedly a fantastic artist, and has had a huge impact on artists from all over the world.

[00:18:59] But he was also, evidently, a pretty horrible man, and ultimately a violent murderer.

[00:19:07] These days, when historical characters are being examined with our 21st century sense of [morality<sup>50</sup>](#), you might ask yourself, does it matter that the creator of beautiful art was a horrible man?

[00:19:22] Does this make you think differently about the work that he did?

[00:19:26] Or does it not matter [in the slightest<sup>51</sup>](#)?

[00:19:30] It is an interesting question, and the answer I think I will leave you to think about.

---

<sup>49</sup> given credit for

<sup>50</sup> personal or social standards for behaviour

<sup>51</sup> at all



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

[00:19:36] But all I'll say on this is that luckily for the Caravaggio fans out there, there don't seem to be any plans to cancel Caravaggio just yet.

[00:19:48] OK then, so that is it for the fantastic life of Caravaggio, probably the baddest of the bad-boy painters, certainly not a very nice man, but a brilliant, troubled, artist.

[00:20:01] If you haven't ever seen any of the works of Caravaggio before, I'd definitely recommend having a look. Naturally, they are completely different [in the flesh<sup>52</sup>](#), and if you ever are in the same city as a Caravaggio, it's definitely worth the trip.

[00:20:18] As always, I would love to know what you thought of the show, and of this episode.

[00:20:22] We are just about to launch a new forum for you to discuss episodes and discuss anything you would like to discuss. So if that is not ready yet then you can email hi @leonardoenglish.com, otherwise the forum will be on the website.

[00:20:38] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:20:43] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

---

<sup>52</sup> in real life



## Key vocabulary

<b>Word</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Paternal</b>	on the father's side
<b>Orphan</b>	a child with no parents
<b>Apprentice</b>	someone who has agreed to work for a skilled person for a period of time
<b>Chic</b>	stylish
<b>Sin</b>	law-breaking, often against religious laws
<b>Swiftly</b>	quickly
<b>Flee</b>	escape by running away
<b>Odd-jobs</b>	small jobs
<b>Big break</b>	an event that gives you the chance to become successful in your job
<b>Sponsored</b>	supported with payments
<b>Commissioning</b>	formally choosing someone to do something
<b>Turbulent</b>	full of changes and violence
<b>Idealised</b>	represented as perfect



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

<b>Figures</b>	characters
<b>Beggars</b>	poor people who ask others for money or food
<b>Cupid</b>	in Roman mythology, Cupid was the son of Venus, the Goddess of Love
<b>Appalled</b>	shocked and upset
<b>Depict</b>	represent
<b>Blasphemous</b>	offensive to God or religion
<b>Meticulous</b>	very careful
<b>Lengthy</b>	very long
<b>Engage</b>	participate (in)
<b>Duels</b>	a formal, arranged fight
<b>Pistol</b>	a small gun
<b>Satirical</b>	criticising of others in a funny, clever, way
<b>Array</b>	large group
<b>In demand</b>	requested by many
<b>Accounts differ</b>	there are different versions (of a story)



The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

<b>Castrate</b>	to remove the testicles of a male
<b>Exiled</b>	forced to leave a city or country
<b>Pardon</b>	officially forgiven (for something)
<b>Admitted</b>	given entry (to)
<b>Signature</b>	typical of someone
<b>Beheading</b>	cutting the head off
<b>Obsessed</b>	unable to stop thinking about something
<b>Severed</b>	cut off
<b>Game over</b>	finished, ended
<b>Fled</b>	past participle of 'flee'
<b>Floated around</b>	to move around without purpose
<b>Erratic</b>	in an irregular, unpredictable way
<b>Viciously</b>	in a cruel way
<b>Tavern</b>	a bar or pub
<b>Slashed</b>	cut with a sharp blade



## The Fantastic Life of Caravaggio

<b>Retribution</b>	revenge for something
<b>Decapitated</b>	cut off
<b>Cardinal</b>	a high-rank priest of the Catholic church
<b>Succumbed</b>	if you succumb to an illness, you die of it
<b>Ignominious</b>	embarrassing or humiliating
<b>Credited</b>	given credit for
<b>Morality</b>	personal or social standards for behaviour
<b>In the slightest</b>	at all
<b>In the flesh</b>	in real life

*We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.*

*What did you like? What could we do better?*

*What did you struggle to understand?*

*You can email us at [hi@leonardoenglish.com](mailto:hi@leonardoenglish.com).*

