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ABSTRACT

The U.S. celebration of Halloween has worldwide connections. Although Halloween originated in the pre-Christian European celebration of summer's end, many of the customs associated with the event derive from both pagan and Christian beliefs and practices throughout the world. This document gives a historic overview of Halloween customs and traditions. Suggestions are given for interdisciplinary classroom activities and discussions appropriate to middle school students. Contains 14 references.

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RATTLING CHAINS AND DREADFUL NOISES

CUSTOMS AND ARTS OF HALLOWEEN

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RATTLING CHAINS AND DREADFUL NOISES

The American celebration of Halloween has worldwide connections. People everywhere and in every age have set aside one day of the year to honor or commemorate the dead. These annual feasts of the dead usually coincide with harvest or the year's end.

Halloween--All Hallows (hallowed or holy) Eve--originated in the pre-Christian celebration of summer's end, or *Samhain* (pronounced sah-ween), by the ancient Celtic peoples of Europe and Great Britain. According to the teachings of the Druids, the Celtic priests and scholars, November first marked the beginning of both winter and the new year. At the death of summer and the old year, Bal, the chief Celtic god, symbolized by the sun, entered the kingdom of death. October 31 was therefore a night of gloom, a grieving for the decline of the sun and shortening days. Druids lit bonfires to guide Bal on his downward path.

The fires also served to guide and warm the dead souls, for on this evening Bal, acting in his role as the Lord of Death, summoned the souls of those who had died in the previous year to pass judgment on their deeds in human life. The dead had extraordinary power to work harm or take revenge on the living at this time. Thus, on the night of summer's end it was prudent to stay home and especially to avoid cemeteries and other places the dead might assemble. The evening culminated at midnight with the great festival of the dead.

Longfellow, in his poem "The Golden Legend," elegantly summarizes the spirit of Halloween:

Upon an ocean vast and dark
The spirits of the dead embark
All voyaging to unknown coasts.
We wave our farewells from the shore,
And they depart, and come no more,
Or come as phantoms and as ghosts.

A strong folk belief associated with this day is that the spirits of the dead revisit their former haunts. To placate them, the living would leave food and drink, and to counteract the evil influence of the dead (and other evil beings such as demons and witches) various magical taboos and prescriptions were observed. It was customary, for example, to bury the dead in nice clothes in the belief that when they returned on Halloween they would not be angry at

having to wear drab or shabby clothing. The following account (Hyatt #10321) was collected in Illinois during the 1930s: "If you bury any woman in all black with no color on her dress, she will always come back and haunt the family. I know a woman that was buried in all black several years ago, and she is coming back all the time."

The folklore of protection against ghosts and other evil powers is very rich. Methods to protect against spirits range from sprinkling salt around the door, laying a broom across the doorway, or hanging a horseshoe above the door to burning sulfur, carrying a rabbit's foot, or walking around with your pockets turned inside out. Indeed, one explanation offered for the custom of wearing masks and costumes on Halloween is that it disguises a person's identity from spirits who may be seeking revenge.

As Christianity began to replace the teachings of the Druids, many of the pagan celebrations were converted into Christian holidays. In the fourth century, one day was set aside in memory of all of the Christian saints; thus, November 1 eventually became All Saints Day. Then, in the ninth century, November 2 was designated as All Souls Day, a day of prayer for the souls of all the dead. Many of the pre-Christian beliefs and customs, however, continued to be practiced, often with a new interpretation. Bonfires, for example, might be explained as lighting the way of souls through purgatory to paradise. Of course, in both the pagan and Christian observances, a feast devoted to ancestral ghosts or souls is logically connected to the end of the year, as one year dies and another is born.

At the approach of winter, summer stores were opened. Nuts, apples, and ale coupled with the falling leaves to signal the year's end. Halloween is therefore at least tangentially associated with the harvest home festivities, celebrating a safe and successful in-gathering from the fields. Even the symbolism of the traditional colors of Halloween suggest this relationship: orange (or yellow) is the color of most ripe grain and fruit, while black stands for death, evil and magic. And death, of course, has long been personified as the "grim reaper," harvester of life.

The custom of begging for food from door-to-door, or "a-souling," is also related to both the harvesting of crops and the feast of the dead. In pre-Christian times, people who did not have sufficient stores might receive cakes, ale, apples or nuts from their wealthier neighbors to offer the dead. "As the centuries wore on, people began dressing like these dreadful creatures, performing antics in exchange for food and drink. This practice is called mumming, from which the practice of trick-or-treating evolved" (Santino 1982).

Although the feast of the dead subsequently became a feast for the living, the tradition of a-souling continued. In some communities, "soul cakes" were distributed to the poor, who then prayed for the souls of the ancestors of their benefactors or for the success of next year's crop. In other communities, the children of the poor went to the houses of the well-to-do and recited a ditty requesting food and drink for the feast. The following rhyme, collected in England in the nineteenth century (Burne, p. 383), is representative:

Soul! Soul! For a soul-cake!
I pray, good missis, a soul-cake!
An apple or pear, a plum or a cherry,
Any good thing to make us merry.

One for Peter, two for Paul,
Three for him who made us all.
Up with the kettle, and down with the pan,
Give us good alms, and we'll be gone.

This recipe for soul cake was recorded in Shropshire, England, in the mid-nineteen hundreds (Burne, p. 382):

3 lbs. flour, 1/4 lb. butter (or 1/2 lb. if the cakes are to be extra rich), 1/2 lb. sugar, 2 spoonfuls of yeast, 2 eggs, allspice to taste, and sufficient new milk to make it into a light paste. Put the mixture (without the sugar or spice) to rise before the fire for half an hour, then add the sugar, and allspice enough to flavour it well: make into rather flat buns, and bake.

While the a-souling tradition is an obvious forerunner to the modern trick-or-treat custom, the exact origin of playing tricks on those who do not give treats is not so plain. Several possible connections have been suggested. One is that children disguised in costumes

could get away with pranks since any such disruptions would have been attributed to the mischievous spirits who are abroad on this night. An interesting parallel custom is English Plough Day, when the ploughmen went begging for gifts. If they did not receive something, they would threaten to damage the grounds with their plows. In parts of the United States, the night before Halloween is designated as "mischief night"—a time set aside to bother the community with pranks and tricks.

The apples and nuts begged on Halloween were not simply eaten, but figured prominently in games, and, more particularly, in foretelling the future. Most of these divinations focused on one's future married life. You might select two nuts, designating one for yourself and one for your sweetheart, and throw them into the fire. If they lie still and burn together, the prognostication is for a happy marriage or a hopeful love. But if they bounce and fly apart, the signs indicate a stormy relationship or none at all. Like all elements of folklife, there are variations on this custom. An old poem (Brand, pp. 207-208) suggests one:

Two hazel nuts I threw into the flame,
And to each nut I gave a sweet-heart's name:
This with the loudest bounce me sore amazed,
That in a flame of brightest colour blazed;
As blazed the nut, so may thy passion grow,
For 'twas thy nut that did so brightly glow!

An American variant is to throw the nuts in a fire, then say, "If he loves me, pop and fly; if he hates me, live and die."

Apples, a well-known love charm, were used in several ways. At midnight on Halloween, sit before a mirror eating an apple with one hand, combing your hair with the other, and you will see your future spouse peering over your left shoulder. Games that American children still play with apples on Halloween originally had fortune-telling functions, too. Name the apples floating in a tub of water, then bob for them; the one you catch in your mouth reveals the name of your future spouse. The association between Halloween and apples

and nuts is so strong that in parts of England this night is called nut-crack night or snap-apple night.

In Scotland, a group of girls could perform a certain ritual on Halloween to determine who would be the first to marry. Each girl would hang her shift (slip) on a chair and repeat a prescribed verbal charm for ten minutes at midnight. The first shift to move was that of the girl who would marry first.

Underlying all of these rites of divination is the implication that it is the spirits of the dead—roaming about on this night—who are revealing the future. Naturally, any contact with ghosts and spirits is inherently dangerous. The following legend, collected in Ireland about a hundred years ago (Wilde, pp. 118-119), suggests that these customs were to be taken seriously:

. . . the incantation before the looking-glass was the most fearful of all, for the face of the future husband would appear in the glass, though sometimes a form filled up the surface of the mirror too terrible to describe. A young girl once practised this evil rite all alone in her room, the door being closed. After some time a violent scream was heard, and when her friends rushed in to the rescue they found her fainting with terror. Yet she kept silent, and would reveal nothing, and the next night she announced her intention to repeat the spell all alone, with closed door. They tried to dissuade her, but in vain. Alone she entered the room, and a profound silence followed. Her friends thought no danger was to be feared, and they were jesting and laughing when a terrible shriek resounded from the apartment, and on entering they found the girl lying dead upon the floor, her features horribly contorted, while the looking-glass was shattered to atoms.

A familiar sight on Halloween in America is the Jack-o'-lantern, a hollowed-out pumpkin with a carved face illuminated from within by a candle. But in Europe, where pumpkins and squash were not native, other kinds of oversized fruits and vegetables have been used. In Scotland,

Children make of themselves bogies on this evening, carrying the largest turnips they can save from harvest, hollowed out and carved into the likeness of a fearsome face, with teeth and forehead blacked and lighted by a candle fastened inside. (Kelley, p. 69)

Many names have been assigned to this eerie light that leads people astray over meadows, marshes and bogs. Whether known as Jack-o'-lantern, Will-o'-the-wisp (a wisp is a small twist of straw used as a torch), or Kit-with-the-canstick, those who gaze upon its light are supposed by tradition to fall under its spell, doomed to follow it until they are hopelessly lost and eventually die. Thus, the Latin name of *ignis fatuus* (foolish fire) suggests that only a fool would look upon these "elf fires" (as they were anciently designated).

Most accounts of Jack-o'-lanterns describe them as rather nebulous lights, but the following description obtained in North Carolina (Hand v.7, #5765) is unusually detailed:

A hideous creature; five feet in height, with goggle eyes and a huge mouth, its body covered with long hair, which goes leaping through the air like a gigantic grasshopper . . . stronger than any man and swifter than any horse . . . compels victims to follow it into a swamp where it leaves them to die.

The same collection (Hand, v.7, #5767) contains a method for catching a Jack-o'-lantern:

Hear him say, "thuh-thuh" and you repeat it; stop, sit down and so will he; cover it with your hat and wait until day—then you find him "a lump of jelly. Take a stick and beat him to death."

Folk tradition offers a number of explanations for this phenomenon: they are the souls that have broken out of purgatory and are doomed to wander; souls of unbaptized infants; spirits of criminals and other evil doers (particularly unjust land surveyors or those who have moved boundary markers); or just mischievous elves such as Puck, hob goblin or Robin Goodfellow. As is the case with many folk beliefs, there are also legends and folktales explaining the origins of the Jack-o'-lantern. The tale below comes from nineteenth-century England (Burne, pp. 34-35), showing the Christianizing of pagan customs:

Once upon a time there came to a blacksmith's shop late one night, a traveller whose horse had cast a shoe, and he wanted the blacksmith to put it on for him. So Will (that was the man's name) was very ready, and he soon had it on again all right. Now the traveller was no other than the Apostle Saint Peter himself, going about to preach the Gospel; and before he went away he told the blacksmith to wish a wish, whatever he chose, and it should be granted him. "I wish," says Will, "that I might live my life over again." So it was granted him, and he lived his life over again, and spent it in drinking and gambling and all manner of wild pranks. At last his time came, and he was forced to set out for

the other world, thinking of course to find a place in Hell made ready for him; but when he came to the gates the Devil would not let him in. No, he said, by this time Will had learnt so much wickedness that he would be more than a match for him, and he dared not let him come in. So away went the smith to Heaven, to see if St. Peter, who had been a good friend to him before, would find him a place there; but St. Peter would not, it wasn't very likely he would! and Will was forced to go back to the Old Lad again, and beg and pray for a place in Hell. But the Devil would not be persuaded even then. Will had spent two lifetimes in learning wickedness, and now he knew too much to be welcome anywhere. All that the Devil would do for him was to give him a lighted coal from Hell-fire to keep himself warm, and that is how he comes to be called Will-o'-the-Wisp. So he goes wandering up and down the moors and mosses with his light, wherever he can find a bit of boggy ground that he can 'tice folks to lose their way in and bring them to a bad end, for he is not a bit less wicked and deceitful now than when he was a blacksmith.

Halloween seems to have begun in very ancient times as a day of the dead, but throughout the centuries supernatural creatures and evil spirits of all kinds of have joined the ghastly parade that invades the human sphere once a year. Now one might encounter witches attended by black cats, troll-wives who like to eat little children, Jack-o'-lanterns to lead one astray, fairies who kidnap infants and leave changelings (fairy babies) in their place, vampires, werewolves, and all of the "invisible races" of Ireland, including gnomes and leprechauns. New creatures of course have been enlisted from popular culture and mass media. When you open your door to a knock this Halloween, do not be surprised to see the latest cartoon character or movie monster next to Count Dracula.

A Note on Sources

While numerous local and regional collections of folklore, such as those cited above, contain examples of beliefs and practices related to Halloween, many of these sources are out of print and not generally available in public or school libraries. Most of the works by Santino listed in the references below should be available. A good available source (but somewhat dated) is Kelley's Book of Hallowe'en; Linton and Barth are more recent. Cohen and Coffin have edited an accessible resource in Folklore of American Holidays, which contains a good summary of Halloween customs and practices as well as further references (see pp. 305-315). This work should be available in the reference section of many libraries. An older, but fairly thorough work (without references to other sources, however) is American Book of Days, edited by George William Douglas (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1948 rev. ed.), pp. 565-571. The third edition of this work (1978) was edited by Jane Hatch.

Suggested Activities

- Interview parents, grandparents or other older people on how they celebrated Halloween when they were kids. Display the results on a special bulletin board. Cover such topics as trick-or-treating (What sorts of treats were given? Did they play pranks?), costumes (What did they wear? Did they make their own costumes?), games played, and school-related activities (Was there a fair? A haunted house?).
- Have a classroom storytelling session, with students exchanging stories they have heard about haunted houses, the Hook, Fingernail Freddie, etc.
- Play some of the Halloween games, only add the divination (or fortune-telling) component. For example, bob for apples with each apple named for someone in the class. A variant of bobbing for apples in water is to hang each apple from a string.
- Have students make Jack-o'-lanterns out of fruits or vegetables other than pumpkins. Ask them to use their imaginations and bring in something different (such as potatoes, squash, rutabagas or turnips). This activity could be coordinated with the art teacher.
- Write Halloween poems incorporating some of the traditional beliefs and customs associated with this day.
- With the cooperation of the art teacher, make posters, perhaps for a Halloween poster contest.
- Select some books containing Halloween stories or themes and examine them in relation to the historical background to this celebration. Do these books accurately portray Halloween? How would the class rewrite these books in relation to the actual history of the Halloween celebration?

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