

# Halloween: Evolution of A Celtic Holiday

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## Introduction

On Halloween, it is not uncommon to find children, dressed up as ghosts and goblins, demanding candy from their neighbors under the threat of “trick or treat.” Homes become transformed into haunted houses as people decorate them with spider webs, hanging ghosts, bubbling cauldrons, and black lights. Inside, masquerade parties carry on and games, such as bobbing for apples, are played. Although these are common Halloween practices, the origins of Halloween are mysterious to most people. While other holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, have a historical significance that is well known, Halloween does not. Furthermore, Halloween is not even an official national holiday. So where does Halloween come from and what makes people celebrate it every year? This paper will trace Halloween back to its origin, the ancient Celtic Druids, and examine how it has evolved throughout the centuries.

## Cel tic Origins

Many of our modern Halloween practices originated with the ancient Celtic Druids’ festival of Samhain (pronounced ‘sow-in’). The Celts celebrated four Fire Festivals: Samhain, Oimelc, Beltane, and Lughnasadh. These festivals were held on the four cross quarter days, the days midway between the solstices and the equinoxes (Bonewits). Samhain, the most important of the Fire Festivals, was held from sundown on October 31 to sundown on November 1. This time of the year is midway between the autumnal equinox and the winter solstice (Aloi).

Samhain was a harvest festival. The word is thought to mean “summer’s end” (Douglas, 566). At this time of the year, all of the crops should have been harvested and animals should be brought in from distant fields. This final gathering of the crops and animals was called “Harvest Home” (Aloi). It also marked the end of the old year and the beginning of the new year.

(Santino, xv). A great feast was held and a giant bonfire was made in each community. The people would light torches from their fires at home and use them to light the bonfire for the festival. At the end of the festival, they would again light torches using the flames from the bonfire and use those to light the fires at home. This dying of the old flames and lighting of new flames was symbolic of the end of the old year and beginning of the new one (Myers, 259).

This time between the years was also a time when the powers of darkness were growing and the powers of growth were waning. The barriers between the past, present, and future broke down on this night and the gate between the physical world and the Other World was opened (MacCulloch, 258). Mischievous fairies, called sidhe (pronounced 'shee') (Barrett), would come out of the cave of Cruachan, the gate of hell, and kill farm animals or steal babies out of their cribs (Douglas, 566). The sidhe were also thought to bewitch men (Linton 40). In addition to the sidhe, the souls of the condemned who had died that year wandered the land on this night. These souls were condemned to the bodies of animals (565).

The bonfires that were lit were thought to rejuvenate the sun, frighten away evil spirits, and ensure a good harvest the following year. They were an attempt to help the powers of growth and light win the battle against darkness (Myers 259).

To further protect themselves, the people left out offerings of food for the spirits to eat in order to appease them. A train of people would stop at each house and demand food from the inhabitants. The train was led by a man who wore a white robe and a horse-head mask. He was followed by several men blowing cow horns (Linton, 60). The people following the robed man wore the skins of dead animals (Santino, 82). If the residents refused to give offerings, they were threatened with misfortune (Linton, 60). After the food was gathered, it was left out for the returned spirits to feast. Typical offerings of food included milk and barley (Barrett). After the

spirits finished eating, the train would lead them away to the outskirts of the village. The spirits, believing that the people dressed in animal skins were also souls of the condemned, would follow them and leave the town (Myers, 260).

Divination games were popular practices for the evening (MacCulloch 259). The spirits of the dead were thought to be able to see into the future. With the proper rituals or enticements, the spirits could be persuaded to share the knowledge of the future (Linton 26).

A traditional meal at Samhain was colcannon, a mixture of mashed potatoes, parsnips, and chopped onions. Into the mixture was thrown a ring, a thimble, a small doll, and a coin. When the dish was served, whoever found each item would be destined according to what they found. The ring meant that the person would marry within the year. Finding a thimble meant that the person would never marry. The doll signified that children would be in the near future. Whoever found the coin was guaranteed wealth (Douglas, 567).

The bonfire was at the center of another sort of divination. Near the end of the festival, the people would write their names on stones and throw them into the fire. The next day, they would rake through the coals of the fire and retrieve the stones. Whoever's stone was not found was destined to die before the next Samhain (Linton, 26).

A similar type of divination would determine the fate of lovers. Both lovers wrote their names on nuts and placed them on the hearth of the fireplace. If one nut burned and the other did not, then the one whose nut burned would love much and be rejected. If both nuts fall into the fire, then the lovers will break up soon. However, if both nuts burn with a gentle glow, the couple will be happy and stay together (28).

A final form of divination was used by girls to find out the name of the man they were to marry. At night, the girl would throw a ball of yarn out of a window and recite a special creed.

When she felt a pull at the yarn she would ask “Who holds?” She would then hear a faint whisper of the name of the man she was to marry (Douglas, 568).

There is some controversy concerning the festival of Samhain, however. There is some evidence that suggests that Samhain may have actually been the name of a god of the dead. Some sources suggest that the festival of Samhain may have been in honor of Samhain, the lord of the dead (Myers, 255), and a sun god, Muck Olla (Linton, 102). This Celtic deity of death, sometimes called Samana, is characterized as a cloaked skeleton carrying a sickle and is where we get the Grim Reaper. A grimmer version of the festival may have taken place, as horses (thought to be sacred to Muck Olla) and even humans (mostly criminals) were sacrificed by being locked in a wicker cage and burned in the sacred fire. These sacrifices were done in order to expiate the sins of those who were damned to take the form of animals and shorten their sentence (256). Black cats may have also been burned in the fires. They were thought to be “familiars” of witches or even the witches themselves (Linton, 60). Modern Neopagans claim that the Catholic Church fabricated these practices and no sacrifices ever took place (Bonewits).

## Evolution

The Catholic Church has a history of taking the holy days of other religions and converting them into a Christian holiday. The festival of Samhain is no different. The Catholic Church felt that the spirits and practices of Samhain gave honor to Satan. The Church felt that the powers of the Celtic religion were evil. Therefore, it had to be Christianized (Santino, xv). In 834, Pope Gregory III established November 1 as All Saints’ Day (Linton, 6). In 1006, All Souls’ Day was added to November 2 to honor all the souls of the faithful. All Saints Day is dedicated to all the dead saints and martyrs who are not recognized by the church, and All Soul’s Day is in remembrance of all Christians who have died (Santino, xv). This incorporated the

pagan idea of remembering the dead and put it in a Christian perspective (Linton, 6). Not only did this Christianize the holiday, it provided a rationale for Christian celebration (Santino, 10). Linguistically, the name *Halloween* comes from All Saints' Day. All Saint's Day became All Hallows' Day. The night before became All Hallows' Evening. From there it was shortened to Hallows' Even, and then Hallowe'en. Finally, the day became what is now Halloween (Bonewits).

The idea of a day when the dead can come to visit is fairly common. Ancient Egypt had a similar holiday held on the winter solstice. They believed that on that day, the souls of the dead would come back to visit them. The Egyptians welcomed them with food to eat and left out oil lamps to light their way (Linton 14).

Latin countries, too, have El Dia de Los Muertos, or the Day of the Dead. Similar to Samhain and the Egyptians customs, the spirits of the dead would come back to visit their families and be greeted by food for them to eat (Santino, xviii). It is a somber day. Dead relatives are honored and remembered on this day. Families travel to graveyards to visit the graves of loved ones. It is believed that the spirits of dead relatives come back to visit, so offerings of their loved one's favorite foods are left out (135). It is also a time of festivity. Families gather and eat pan de muerto (bread of the dead), candy skulls, and tombstones made of a sugar based dough (148). It is a time when people remember death and laugh at it. They accept it and incorporate it into their lives (xviii). In southern Texas, close to the Mexican border, Halloween practices and Dia de los Muertos practices have merged into one holiday. People on both sides of the border honor and remember the dead and engage in a festival of life (136).

In England, on November 5, 1605, a man named Guy Fawkes attempted to blow up the Parliament building. His attempt failed and he was tried, convicted, hung, and drawn and quartered. The day was commemorated as Guy Fawkes' Day. The attempt was viewed as a Roman Catholic plot against Parliament. As a result, participation in Halloween activities diminished, and participation in Fawkes' Day activities increased. The night before Fawkes' Day became known as Mischief Night. Bonfires were lit in the fashion of Samhain, and fireworks were set off in celebration. On this night, children played pranks on adults in town. The next day, the pranks were attributed to the acts of fairies (Santino, xvii).

A primitive form of trick-or-treating also took place on Guy Fawkes' Day. People would dress in rags as "Guys" and beg for money with which they would buy fireworks (84). The beggars, dressed as "Guys," would ask "a penny for the Guy" (102, Linton). In this way, many of the practices of Halloween moved to Guy Fawkes' Day in England.

A similar practice, called soul caking, took place in medieval Europe on All Soul's Day. Beggars begged for soul cakes in exchange for prayers that they promised to say for dead Christians in Purgatory. For each cake eaten, a soul is supposedly released from Purgatory. The beggars would repeat a rhyme: "mercy on all Christian souls for a soul cake." A typical soul cake is made of oatmeal and molasses and is now eaten at Halloween (Santino, 84).

The traditions of Halloween, however, did not make it to America until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Ulster Scots fled to America to escape discrimination and economic hardships. Shortly after, the potato famine of the 1840s drove many more Irishmen to America to escape starvation. With them, these Irishmen brought the customs of the festival of Samhain, which has become Halloween (xxi).

One of the major symbols, of Halloween, is the jack-o-lantern. The jack-o-lantern is one of the customs brought by the Irish to America. Linton retells the old Irish tale of the jack-o-lantern(43-44):

One Halloween night, Jack took a drink too many in the local pub, and his soul began to slip from his inebriated body. The Devil appeared at his side to claim his doomed spirit. But Jack was not yet ready to give up.

“Let’s have one drink together before we go,” he begged.

“Very well,” replied his Satanic Majesty, “but you’ll have to pay for it. I don’t carry money with me.”

“I have only sixpence,” said Jack, “but you can change yourself into any shape, so they say. Change yourself into sixpence and then you can change back again when I’ve paid for the tot of grog.”

This seemed a reasonable idea to the Devil, so he muttered an incantation and there he was on the bar counter, a shiny new sixpence. Jack snatched the coin and put it in his wallet, which had a silver catch in the shape of a cross. The cross prevented the Devil from getting out. He muttered and cursed inside the wallet but he was unable to open the flap or get back into his own shape again.

“If you’ll promise to let me alone for a year, I’ll let you out,” said Jack.

The Devil promised and Jack released him. Now Jack had in the back of his mind the notion that with a year’s grace he could reform, take his pay home to his wife and children instead of spending it in the pub, go to Mass every Sunday, and put money in the poor box. Then the Devil couldn’t take his soul. But as soon as Jack felt out of danger, he went back to his old mean ways.

The next Halloween, as Jack felt was anxiously hurrying home along a country road, the Devil was suddenly walking beside him, and Jack knew that he had come to claim his soul. As they walked, they came to a tree hung with big red apples.

“Don’t you want an apple?” suggested Jack.

“They’re fine-looking apples, for sure,” said the Devil, “but they all grow too high for picking.”

“Stand on my shoulders,” said Jack, “and then you can reach them.”

So the Devil climbed up on Jack’s shoulders, swung himself up to a branch of the tree and began to pick apples. Jack whipped out his pocketknife and cut the sign of the cross on the trunk of the tree, which made it impossible for the Devil to come down again.

“Let me out of this,” cried the Devil, “and I won’t claim your soul for ten years.”

But Jack said, “I won’t let you out of that tree until you promise me that you won’t ever come after me anymore.”

The Devil, being desperate, gave his promise. Before the next Halloween, Jack’s body just wore out and his soul had to go some place. He was turned away from Heaven because he had been mean and stingy all his life, but when he got to the gates of hell, the Devil shouted, “Go away! You tricked me into promising that I’d not claim your soul. I must keep my word. You cannot enter hell.”

“But where am I to go?”

“Back where you came from.”

“How can I find my way in the windy dark?”

The Devil answered by throwing Jack a chunk of live coal from the hell furnace. Jack put it inside a turnip he was gnawing and with this “jack-o’-lantern” has been wandering the earth ever since, a lost soul with no place to go.

In Ireland, jack-o-lanterns were carved out of turnips, rutabagas, or potatoes. Pumpkins proved to be a better choice when the Irish arrived in America (43).

## Modern American Halloween

When Halloween first became popular in the United States, pranks were the most common activities. In rural areas, people considered trick-or-treating begging, and would not engage in it. The most common pranks involved tipping over outhouses or moving property (including outhouses and farm machines) to obvious public places, such as on top of buildings (Santino, 46-48). Typically, only boys would engage in pranks. Pranking on Halloween became a sort of rite of passage. The younger boys, when they got old enough, would go along with the older boys and be initiated (53). Later pranks include soaping windows and toilet papering houses (Cohen, 309).

By the 1930s, the pranks had become too disruptive. People began inviting the boys in and offering them baked goods as an alternative to playing pranks (Santino, 89). In the 1940s, it was custom for children to dress in costume and go by each neighbor’s houses. After the neighbor had guessed the name of each child, the children would be rewarded with baked goods and head to the next house. By the 1950s, the term “trick-or-treat” had been coined and the practice had become popular. Boys and girls dressed up in natural and supernatural themes. Common costumes for boys were burglars, hobos, pirates, Indians, ghosts, and goblins. Common costumes for girls were witches, gypsies, and nurses (91).

By the 1970s and 1980s, however, Halloween had lost its personal feel. It had become commercialized. Children were no longer invited inside neighbors' homes or offered baked goods. Children went to each person's door, said "trick-or-treat," were handed a commercially packaged piece of candy and directed to the next house (92). The costumes also reflected commercialization. The majority of the costumes worn at this time were from popular television shows and movies, such as ALF, Freddy Kreuger, Spuds McKenzie, the California Raisins, and Elvira. Furthermore, about this time, urban legends of apples with razors in them and candy laced with poison became popular. People did not trust their neighbors anymore (93). Shopping mall trick-or-treating is now considered safe and is the chosen alternative for many families (120).

Another change in Halloween practices occurred at this time, as well. Adults began to take part in the holiday. Masquerade parties were popular among older adults and those college age (Cohen, 30). Parties at clubs involved masquerading and heavy drinking. Although the most common age group for these kind of parties is 21-30, people of all ages (older than 21) show up. Popular costumes for this age group include those mocking religious symbols and those mocking public leaders. Also, sexual costumes, such as cross-dressing or those that are simply risqué, such as the French maid costume, are popular (Santino, 106).

At home, people put up elaborate decorations to transform their homes into haunted houses. Many people dress up as monsters and put up elaborate decorations to give the children in their neighborhood a thrill. There are still some people who try to make Halloween a personal experience the children will remember (108).

Halloween costumes have even found a place in the workplace. Santino reports about a financial institution, that he calls FinCorp, which encourages its employees to dress up every

Halloween. Different departments of the building decorate in different themes including a western theme, a television studio theme, and a creepy cave theme. Even the cafeteria was decorated and had a “witch” serving hot cider from a cauldron (118).

Not only is Halloween a children’s holiday, it is a holy day for modern Wiccans. Wiccans refer to the night as the Druids did, the festival of Samhain. It is one of the Wiccans’ eight Sabbats that they celebrate each year: Samhain on October 31, Yule on December 21, Imbolc on February 2, Ostara on March 1, Beltane on May 1, Litha June 21, Lammas July 31, and Mabon on September 21. These eight days divide the “wheel of the year” into 8 equal sections (Copywrong).

For Wiccans, Samhain is the ideal night to perform necromancy, talking to dead spirits. On this night, they call upon the dead to “return this night to make merry with [them]”(Decker). Witches believe in a God and a Goddess. The Goddess can take three forms: the Crone, the Maiden, or the Mother. During this time of the year, the Goddess is in the form of the Crone. She opens the gate to the dead and allows movement between the two worlds (Aubin). However, not all witches observe the Sabbat on October 31. The ones who do usually wait until late at night, when young trick-or-treaters will not bother them. Others observe the Sabbat on the true cross-quarter day, when the sun has reached fifteen degrees in Scorpio. This can be up to a week after October 31 (Nichols).

## Conclusion

Halloween has meant different things to different people. To the ancient Druids, Samhain was a time to be looked forward to and to be feared. It was a time to remember the past and look into the future. To the children of 17<sup>th</sup> century England, Mischief Night was a time when they could play tricks on the adults and blame it on fairies. To Americans today,

Halloween is a night to dress up in scary costumes and collect as much candy as possible from their neighbors. It is a night for festivity and fun. Finally, to the Wiccans of today, Samhain is much the same as it was to the ancient Druids: a time to commune with spirits of those who have died. Though the night has had many names and many changes, there seems to be something special about this time of the year that many people recognize as a time to remember death and incorporate it into their life.