

Why do we have Halloween?

READING PASSAGE

Read the following text carefully before answering the questions. Some questions will require you to infer information, consider the writer's choice of language or distinguish between fact and belief.

1. An Ancient Beginning

Every year, as October draws to a close, streets become crowded with miniature witches, ghosts and vampires. Pumpkins glow from windowsills, cobwebs appear in shop displays and children eagerly prepare for an evening of trick-or-treating. To many people, Halloween seems like a modern celebration devoted to sweets, costumes and harmless frights. However, beneath its colourful appearance lies a history stretching back more than two thousand years.

Many of Halloween's oldest traditions are associated with Samhain (often pronounced 'Sow-in'), a festival celebrated by ancient Celtic communities, particularly in Ireland. Samhain marked the end of the harvest and the beginning of the darker half of the year. As winter approached, the days shortened, temperatures fell and food became more difficult to obtain. For communities whose survival depended heavily on farming, this seasonal change was far more significant than it is for most people today.

Samhain was not simply an excuse for celebration. It marked a period of uncertainty, when families prepared themselves for the demanding months ahead. According to later accounts of Celtic traditions, some people believed that the boundary separating the living from the dead became less distinct at this time of year. Spirits, they thought, might cross into the human world.

2. Fires, Disguises and Superstitions

Fire played an important role in seasonal gatherings. Large bonfires offered warmth and light, but they could also carry symbolic meaning, representing protection during the approaching darkness. Some traditions involved wearing disguises, although historians cannot be certain that these customs were identical to the costumes worn today.

The idea of disguising oneself may have been connected to beliefs about wandering spirits. According to one popular explanation, people dressed in unusual clothing to avoid being recognised by supernatural visitors. Whether this was a widespread ancient practice remains uncertain, but it provides a fascinating possible connection to modern Halloween costumes.

It is important, however, to distinguish between historical evidence and stories that have been repeated over generations. Not every familiar explanation of Halloween can be proved.

Traditions frequently change as communities adopt new beliefs, move to different countries and reinterpret customs inherited from their ancestors.

3. A New Name and Changing Traditions

As Christianity spread across Europe, older seasonal customs gradually became associated with Christian festivals. All Saints' Day, observed on 1 November in many Western Christian traditions, was a day for remembering saints. The evening before it became known as All Hallows' Eve, with 'hallow' being an older word connected to holiness or saints.

Over time, the name was shortened to Halloween.

The development of Halloween was not a straightforward replacement of one celebration by another. Instead, different traditions influenced one another across centuries. Customs connected with remembrance, supernatural beliefs, food and community gatherings gradually became intertwined.

In parts of Britain and Ireland, people took part in activities such as souling, which involved visiting houses and receiving food in exchange for prayers for the dead. Another custom, guising, involved dressing up and visiting neighbours, sometimes performing songs, jokes or verses in return for treats. Although these practices were not exactly the same as modern trick-or-treating, they shared some recognisable features.

4. From Turnips to Pumpkins

One of Halloween's most recognisable symbols is the illuminated pumpkin, commonly known as a jack-o'-lantern. Yet pumpkins were not always the vegetable of choice.

In Ireland and parts of Britain, people traditionally carved frightening faces into turnips or other root vegetables. A candle placed inside could transform an ordinary vegetable into an unsettling decoration.

The name 'jack-o'-lantern' is often associated with an Irish folktale about a cunning character called Stingy Jack, who repeatedly tricked the Devil. According to versions of the legend, Jack was eventually condemned to wander in darkness, carrying a glowing ember inside a hollowed-out turnip. This is folklore rather than a historical account, but it helped shape the stories surrounding these lanterns.

During the nineteenth century, large numbers of Irish people emigrated to North America, particularly during and after the devastating Great Famine. They carried familiar customs with them, adapting some to their new surroundings.

Pumpkins, which were widely available in North America, proved larger and generally easier to carve than turnips. Gradually, the pumpkin became the preferred Halloween lantern. This change demonstrates how a tradition can retain its meaning while its appearance changes considerably.

5. How Halloween Became a Major Celebration

By the twentieth century, Halloween had developed into a widely celebrated occasion in the United States. Community events, costume parties and neighbourhood activities became increasingly popular. Trick-or-treating grew into a familiar custom, particularly during the middle decades of the century.

Businesses also recognised Halloween's commercial potential. Shops began selling costumes, decorations and enormous quantities of sweets. Films, television programmes and advertisements helped spread particular images of Halloween around the world.

As a result, Halloween celebrations in Britain today contain a mixture of older local traditions and customs influenced by American popular culture.

Nevertheless, Halloween is not celebrated in exactly the same way everywhere. In some communities, it remains a relatively small occasion; in others, elaborate decorations and organised events attract considerable attention. Some families enjoy its playful atmosphere, while others choose not to participate because of religious beliefs, personal preferences or concerns about frightening younger children.

6. Why Does Halloween Still Matter?

Halloween has survived because it has repeatedly adapted to the needs and interests of different generations. What began as seasonal observances connected with harvests, winter and beliefs about the supernatural has gradually developed into an occasion associated with imagination, entertainment and community.

Its appeal may also come from something more fundamental: human curiosity about the unknown. Ghost stories allow people to explore frightening possibilities while remaining relatively safe. Costumes offer the opportunity to become someone — or something —

entirely different for an evening. Even the humble jack-o'-lantern transforms an everyday object into something mysterious.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Halloween is not that it has changed so much, but that fragments of its distant past remain recognisable.

When a child pulls on a ghost costume or a family places a glowing pumpkin beside the front door, they are participating in a celebration shaped by centuries of migration, belief, storytelling and reinvention.

Halloween, therefore, is more than a single festival with a single origin. It is a collection of traditions that have travelled through history, changing along the way without entirely losing their connection to the past.

Questions

Instructions: Choose the best answer (A, B, C or D) for each question. Only one answer is correct.

1. What is the main purpose of the opening paragraph?

- A. To argue that Halloween is becoming too commercial
- B. To contrast modern Halloween with its much older origins
- C. To suggest that Halloween was invented for children
- D. To explain why pumpkins are more popular than turnips

2. Why was the arrival of winter particularly important to ancient Celtic farming communities?

- A. It marked the beginning of their most productive farming season
- B. It meant that all religious celebrations had to stop
- C. It created difficulties involving food supplies and survival
- D. It allowed communities to travel more easily

3. In the passage, the word 'distinct' is closest in meaning to:

- A. Clearly separate
- B. Extremely frightening
- C. Unusually distant
- D. Entirely imaginary

4. What does the writer suggest about the ancient practice of wearing disguises?

- A. It was definitely invented by Christian communities
- B. It was identical to modern trick-or-treating
- C. It was practised by every Celtic community
- D. Its exact origins and purpose cannot be established with certainty

5. What is the effect of the phrase 'the approaching darkness'?

- A. It proves that bonfires were only used at night
- B. It suggests both the coming winter and the fears associated with it
- C. It implies that Celtic communities had no other sources of light
- D. It describes a sudden eclipse

6. Which statement best describes the writer's approach to historical claims?

- A. The writer treats all traditional stories as proven facts
- B. The writer dismisses all folklore as worthless
- C. The writer separates established information from uncertain explanations
- D. The writer avoids discussing beliefs that cannot be scientifically tested

7. How did Halloween acquire its modern name?

- A. It developed from the name All Hallows' Eve
- B. It was named after a Celtic harvest goddess
- C. It came from the Irish word for pumpkin
- D. It was invented by American shopkeepers

8. What does the word 'intertwined' suggest about Halloween traditions?

- A. They disappeared completely
- B. They remained strictly separate
- C. They were all created at the same moment
- D. They became closely connected and influenced one another

9. Which feature did souling and guising share with modern trick-or-treating?

- A. The use of carved pumpkins
- B. Visiting homes and receiving something in return
- C. The wearing of identical ghost costumes
- D. The organisation of large public bonfires

10. Why does the writer describe the story of Stingy Jack as 'folklore rather than a historical account'?

- A. To show that it is too frightening for children
- B. To argue that all Irish traditions are fictional
- C. To clarify that the story is a legend, not verified history
- D. To prove that jack-o'-lanterns were invented in America

Answers

1. B
2. C
3. A
4. D
5. B
6. C
7. A
8. D
9. B
- 10.C