

Halloween as Tourist Attraction: Rites of Reversal and Unwelcome Guests



Lucy M Long^{1*} and Hannah M Santino²

¹Long, Center for Food and Culture, USA

²University of Limerick, Ireland

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***Corresponding author:** Lucy M Long, Center for Food and Culture, 550 West Wooster St, Bowling Green, Ohio, 43402, USA

Abstract

This opinion piece describes the history of Halloween and how it has been adapted into today's celebration. It discusses the meanings of the holiday, the elements and customs involved, and how some function as rites of reversal. It also describes which activities are open to outsiders and can be used for tourism.

Keywords: Halloween; Rituals reversal; Tourism; Liminality; Trick-or-treat; Day of the dead; Celtic; Ireland; Mexican

Introduction

Halloween, officially on October 31, is today a globally recognized holiday. It is celebrated with imagery that evokes death and the afterlife, oftentimes frightening but delightfully so. Part harvest festival and fright fest, it has become an extended time for overindulgence in candy, alcohol, costumes, and parties. Like most holidays, it offers a liminal period in which the rules of normal life have been lifted, but it also serves as a rite of reversal and spectacle in which those rules are publicly flaunted and even mocked.

Because so much of the celebration is public, Halloween would seem to be easily accessible to tourists and vacationers, and much of it is. There are also private aspects to it, such as trick-or-treating and children's parties, that might seem public, but do not welcome outsiders. Tourists would be trespassing into private domains and could even run into legal restraints. However, some actors in the hospitality industry are now treating the holiday as a significant tourism attraction, drawing from it for décor, activities, and events.

Halloween as celebrated today is a merging of ancient Celtic traditions with Irish-American, mainstream American, and a smattering of Mexican-American customs-and of course, American marketing. It is based on the festival of Sam'hain which

marked the end of the year in the Celtic calendar at approximately the end of October. This was considered a time during which the boundaries thinned between the worlds of the living, the dead, and unearthly beings (such as fairies, who were malevolent to humans). Creatures from those nether realms roamed the earth at this time, and humans had to take care not to welcome them into their homes or to enter into any interactions with them. Fires were lit to frighten away the dangerous beings, people sometimes set out food to appease any ill will from them, and humans huddled at home. If they had to go about, they would carry light with them. Associated with the holiday was the story of Jack who was so mean that he was sent away from the gates of Hell. An ember thrown out to him landed in a turnip, hence the origins of the Jack-a-Lantern, a continuing motif in American Halloween. (In Ireland, winter turnips are what Americans know as rutabagas and are very dense. In the U.S., pumpkins, which are much easier to carve out, are used.)

In 601 A.D. Pope Gregory I, declared that Sam'hain was pagan and turned it into an official religious observance instead: Oct.31 became All Hallow's Eve or Hallowe'en; Nov.1 became the Feast of All Saints or All Hallows; and Nov.2 became All Soul's Day. Within Ireland, the church recognized these holidays, but October 31st retained its aura of danger, with families gathering around

bonfires and staying away from dangers lurking outside. Prior to that night children and young men would dress in rags and beg for coins. Irish immigrants to the US in the 1800s (and maybe earlier) took these traditions with them, and Halloween became a time of playing tricks, oftentimes by young men who roamed urban neighborhoods as well as the countryside committing acts of vandalism. (My father tells of young “scallywags” setting logs across the road to block cars and horses in the southern Appalachian Mountains where he grew up in the 1920s and 30s.)

Hallowe'en was “tamed” in the 1950s and turned into Halloween, a children's holiday to be celebrated with pumpkin carving, decorations, costumes, parties, and trick-or-treating. This last became a much-anticipated rite of reversal for children when they could dress in costumes and swarm their neighborhoods, knocking on strangers' doors and demanding treats, usually, candy, with rhymes such as “trick or treat; smell my feet, give me something good to eat.” The ritual is mostly an innocent one, but there are rumors of evil neighbors poisoning candy or putting razor blades in apples. Those fears have led to newer customs such as taking bags of candy to the local hospital to be x-rayed before children are allowed to eat any and to more controlled trick-or-treat events in which businesses pass out candy on a designated day and time, and schools and churches host parties, costume parades, and “trunk-or-treat” where parents offer treats from cars in a parking lot.

In the early 2000s, images and activities from the Mexican Day of the Dead (Dia de los Muertos) began being adapted (or co-opted!) into mainstream American Halloween celebrations. Taking place over the three days of Oct. 31-Nov. 2, this holiday was a time of recognizing life over death, although the imagery is oftentimes misinterpreted as mourning the dead and even celebrating the underworld. Ofrendas, traditional altars memorializing those who passed away in the past year, have also been adopted by some non-Hispanic Americans and are a somber alternative to the usually more raucous Halloween festivities.

The motifs associated with Halloween today evoke its beginnings, although oftentimes as caricatures--skeletons, ghosts, witches, frightening animals, such as black cats, bats, snakes. For trick or treating, children and teens would dress in costumes of those figures as well as characters from popular media, the grown-up world (policeman, fireman, nurse, etc.) or children's make-believe fantasies-princess, fairies, monsters, and so on. Adults also dress in costumes, sometimes to hand out candy, at other times for parties. The holiday also coincides with the autumn season, the harvest, and the American Thanksgiving holiday. Symbols and activities with those associations have also been incorporated into Halloween-corn, pumpkins, and apples, frequently show up as food or décor this time of year, and Halloween colors of orange and black are ubiquitous.

Most holiday celebrations are complex events involving numerous types of rituals, and some of these are more open to outsiders and tourists. Decorating with Halloween colors

and motifs can be done by everyone and are frequently used to create public displays in shops, community buildings, and homes, including elaborate constructions in front yards. A favorite pastime starting the end of September (or even earlier) is to walk or drive through neighborhoods and business districts looking for and appreciating these displays.

Similarly, numerous restaurants and grocery stores feature Halloween and harvest décor along with foods associated with the season. Pumpkin is a ubiquitous ingredient and flavor; found in pies, soups, pastries, baked goods, and drinks. Pumpkin spice has become a popular flavor for coffee this time of year. Apples frequently appear in dessert and sweet dishes similar to pumpkin, but also as cider, both sweet and alcoholic, and served both cold and hot. Going to farm stands, farms, and orchards to pick out pumpkins and apples is a popular family and social ritual, and many of those venues offer festivals this time of year open to anyone willing to pay an admission fee. Corn is also associated with this season and shows up at Halloween as candy corn, shaped like corn and other seasonal vegetables. Corn mazes-mazes made in cornfields where the dried stalks can grow up to 10 or 12 feet high-are a popular attraction in the countryside.

An activity that has recently become popular for tourists is ghost tours in which a guide tells stories about scary, possibly paranormal, happenings in a place. These might also take visitors through a house, museum, cemetery, park, or neighborhood that is said to be haunted, and a number of museums, parks, and cultural organizations have developed these as a way to bring in funds. A different kind of experience is a haunted house, a building or venue purposely designed to be frightening Figure 1.

Restaurants and bars tend to offer occasions for revelry around Halloween, oftentimes allowing or even requiring costumes. These are open to the public, welcoming tourists and anyone willing to pay an admission fee or for food and drink. Similarly, theaters might feature horror movies and occasions for costumes. Social clubs and community organizations, such as churches and schools, might host Halloween parties, but these are usually limited to members or known visitors Figure 2.

Like the private Halloween parties, there are other activities associated with the holiday that are not open to tourists. Trick or treat is one of the most memorable rituals for many American children and is spreading in popularity to other countries Figure 3. The event traditionally included the design and construction of a costume-oftentimes with a parent's help-or purchasing one from a local store. Masks are an important part of this and can be of anything associated with Halloween, death, scary characters, well-known public figures, or benign characters. Children then go, usually accompanied by parents or older siblings or, if older, in groups with friends, from house to house ringing doorbells and holding out bags or other containers to receive candy. Because children are involved, unfamiliar adults or adults dressed in costumes that are too frightening are not welcome to participate in the ritual Figure 4.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Conclusion

Halloween is becoming more and more popular in tourism, but it is helpful for tourism producers as well as tourists to know the history as well as the customs in specific areas and groups in order to be familiar with what is appropriate. Not everyone celebrates the holiday nor participates in its motifs or activities. Some religious groups protest that it worships or celebrates Satan and involves Satanic rituals. Black cats are not offered for adoption

during this time, and cat owners are encouraged to keep their cats inside. Fears of candy or other foods being polluted or dangerous in some way may keep some families away from treats, and warnings about Halloween drinks being spiked abound among young people. It is all too easy to overindulge in sugary sweets or alcohol this time of year, a reminder that the normal rules of living are actually beneficial. Aside from such cautions, however, Halloween offers a liminal time perfect for parties and tourism.



Figure 3



Figure 4



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