

# **Halloween/Day of the Dead – Grade 4**

Created by Estela Soberón

## **Lesson Summary:**

In this lesson, students will compare and contrast Mexico's Day of the Dead with the United States' Halloween. Students will learn the value of appreciating and understanding other cultures while at the same time preserving their own traditions and histories.

## **Subjects:**

History and Literature

## **Time:**

Four weeks

## **Materials:**

History of Halloween sheet  
History of Day of the Dead sheet  
Drawing materials  
Computer with access to the Internet  
Notebook of work.

## **Objectives:**

### **NOTE: Meets Mexico Education Standards**

- Explore the origins of the events Halloween and Day of the Dead.
- Find differences and similarities between the events.
- Appreciate the richness that cultural diversity brings to our lives.
- Learn to appreciate other cultures in order to expand one's personal world-view, while at the same time realizing the importance of conserving and valuing one's own cultural traditions.

## **Activities:**

- Ask and answer questions about the subject.
- Collect, organize and interpret data.
- Analyze differences and similarities.
- Examine and understand cultural traditions.
- Reflect on the importance of conserving one's own traditions and customs.
- Develop the four basic abilities of communication: write, listen, read, and speak.

**Focus Activity:**

The teacher will write the names of both events on the chalk board: Halloween and Day of the Dead. The teacher will also write some of the representative elements of each event, such as *Mexico, United States, Flowers, "Jack-O-lanterns," witches, small skulls of sugar, altars, trick or treat, Celtics, pre-Hispanic cultures, Spanish, Ireland, etc.* Once the columns have been filled and the elements discussed, the teacher will ask the students the following question: In what ways are these two events related? The students will research both the events in order to answer this question. They should write down all the information and data gathered in their notebooks.

The students will watch a Day of the Dead video, found on the TIDES website, and will make a list of the important objects and items they observed on the ofrendas (altars).

**Activities:**

The students will:

- write summaries of both events using data found during the investigation;
- write histories of terror;
- create small skeletons dedicated to their teachers and friends;
- build an ofrenda in the classroom;
- write an essay about how important it is to maintain one's own culture and traditions;
- investigate the historical figure Jose Guadalupe Posada;
- make a Halloween costume that will be entered in a contest.
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**Final Project:**

The students will create a diagram in which they will indicate differences and similarities between both events. For this activity, they should utilize biographies, information accessed from the Institute of Alexander Bain, and Wikipedia.

**Support:**

Halloween and Day of the Dead are festivals related to the theme of death. Halloween is celebrated in the United States, while in Mexico the Day of the Dead has been celebrated for centuries. At the root of both celebrations is the idea that there is life after death. Both have pagan origins, and are connected to All Hallow's Eve, a festival that originated in Christianity. Nevertheless, many

of the rites and the symbols surrounding these events are different, as they arose in separate historical contexts and thus reflect the beliefs of different cultures.

## **Halloween**

Every year in North America, on October 31<sup>st</sup>, children go out into the night dressed as witches, skeletons, pumpkins, demons, black cats, and ghosts, knocking on doors and saying, “trick or treat!” The idea is that anyone who refuses to give the children a treat will have a trick played on them. In Spanish, this phrase would translate as “travesura o trato.”

The origins of such a festival are very old and draw on a variety of cultures, including Celtic, Roman, and Christian. Centuries ago, Celtic towns organized festivals to honor Samhain, god of the dead. They associated death and bad spirits with the coming of winter, during which time they made bonfires and used disguises (or costumes) to keep evil spirits far away. The Celts also believed that during this night the spirits of their dead family members and friends could come back to visit their loved ones.

Many celebrations also contained Roman elements, such as festivals that honored the harvest goddess, Pomona. With the arrival of Christianity the European towns started to celebrate All Hallows' Eve. This celebration commemorated people both living and dead, and formed a part of the Community of Saints.

In the Middle Ages, the Celtic, Roman and Christian traditions fused together, into what is recognized today as Halloween. The traditional colors of black and orange are said to have originated from the festivals of Samhain and Pomona respectively, while the Celtic ideas of the return of the spirits were combined with the Christian beliefs of communication between the Community of the Saints, and this also gave support and significance to the festivity.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Irish took this tradition to the United States. In spite of its European origins, the festival is more important in North America than in the old world.

## **Day of the Dead**

In Mexico, the tradition of the Day of the Dead is approximately 3,000 years. Some native civilizations, like the Aztecs, tended to worship to their dead in an annual festival that lasted about a month. This celebration was carried out in the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the Aztec solar calendar, which would correspond to our month of August today.

When the Spanish arrived in Mexico in the 16th century, the friar's evangelists tried to convert the Indians to Christianity. Among the traditions they brought to the New World were the festivals held on November 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> – All Hallow's Eve and Day of the Faithful Deceased.

The Spanish started to celebrate Christian festivals, but incorporated elements of the pre-Hispanic festivals celebrating the dead into them. They raised altars to honor their dead, a tradition which Mexicans carry on to this day. Some native elements present in the Day of the Dead celebrations are the resin, the traditional small dishes like the pumpkin in powdered brown sugar, tamales, tortillas, and the cempazochitl flowers. In turn, the elements that originated with the Christian and Hispanic culture are the watchman, the images of saints, or the bread of dead that was incorporated when the Spanish introduced wheat in America, and which became a substitute for skulls of human beings that were exhibited in the pre-Hispanic altars.

The most important figure on the altars of the Day of the Dead is The Catrina, a skeleton dressed as a woman that symbolizes death. This character also arose from crossing cultures between the pre-Hispanic and the western traditions. During the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the numerous wars and the appearance and propagation of the Black Death over all of Europe originated a new culture towards death. The presence of death became a constant in the routine of life, and thus human beings started to see it with both familiar and imminent. This routine contact with death was called the Dance of Death and could be seen in many paintings. In these illustrations, Death was personified and represented by the figure of a skeleton, scythe in hand, that came to earth to take all those that got in the way, rich or poor, noble or working-class.

The friars that came to the New World in the 16th century brought with them this personage, which mixed with the pre-Hispanic Mictecacihuatl deity, the "Dame of Death," to give origin to "Catrina." In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this singular woman was immortalized in the engravings of the Mexican artist Jose Guadalupe Posada.

The Mexicans followed the tradition of putting alters dedicated to the dead in the living rooms of their homes to honor loved ones who had passed away. This tribute is raised so that family, friends and, most importantly, the deceased themselves are honored with altars when they visit them. It is for these reasons that the altars need to contain items such as a photograph of the person being remembered, a small dish and other objects that are enjoyed in life, water to calm their thirst, candles to light their way, flowers from cempaxochitl, salt, small skulls of sugar, bread of death, some alcoholic drink like aguardiente or mexcal, resin and incense. Another important tradition of the celebration is

to write festive verses called “little skulls,” which describe in a funny way, how a friend or a family member will die in the future.

In Mexico, November the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> are the days of festivity in which the Pantheons are filled with people that wish to remember their loved ones. During the celebration, the Mexicans visit their loved ones and take them flowers, food, Mariachi music, and those things that could have made them happy in life. In places like Mixquic, close to the Mexican city and the Island of Janitzio, in the state of Michoacán, thousands of visitors come to enjoy a full festival of flavor and color.