

# Will the real Father Christmas please stand up?

<b>Time</b>	45-60 minutes
<b>Interaction</b>	groupwork; jigsaw reading
<b>Level</b>	B1 (Intermediate) to C1 (Advanced)

## Language areas practised

### Sub-skills and Functions

- paraphrasing important facts
- interpreting a text
- expressing your opinion

### Grammar and Lexis

- reporting facts (he is said to...)
- Christmas traditions

## Preparation

Photocopy the 3 theory texts and the Activity sheet below (1 of each per group of 3 students). Larger groups of 4-5 students are also possible; make extra copies of the theory texts as required.

## Procedure

**1. Vocabulary:** Hand out copies of the Activity sheet (1 per group of 3-4 students). Check pronunciation of the vocabulary items, and either let them check the meanings using dictionaries, or explain/ elicit yourself.

**2. Before reading:** If you are teaching teenagers, they will enjoy drawing a picture of Father Christmas at this stage - encourage them to do so from memory. All students should discuss the questions about Father Christmas in their groups and take brief notes.

**3. Jigsaw reading:** Hand out the 3 theory texts, so that each member of a group of 3 receives 1 of the 3 theories. If you have groups of 4, simply provide additional students with 1 of the 3 theories. Read through the introduction at the top with them (it's the same for all 3 texts), then let them read their own text silently. Emphasise that they should read carefully enough to be able to retell the key details in their own words. After they have finished reading, make sure that the student who read theory text 1 goes first, followed by text 2, then 3.

**4. After reading:** Allow students 10-15 minutes to discuss these questions. Organise a whole group discussion afterwards, eliciting opinions as appropriate. Note that there are no right answers, but it should be noted that modern Father Christmas is clearly an amalgam of a wide range of cultural influences, shaped both by ancient Christian and pagan traditions, and modern global consumerist culture. However, within this interesting history, the important role of Jolopukki has often been overlooked.

## Will the real Father Christmas please stand up? – Activity sheet

### 1. Vocabulary

Check you know the following items of vocabulary: originate (v), attribute (n), reindeer (n), sleigh (n), depict (v), bishop (n), elf/elves (n), chimney (n), mythology (n), (evil) spirit (n).

### 2. Before reading

Discuss the following questions and take brief notes:

1. What do you know about Father Christmas?
2. What does he look like? Draw a quick picture of him.
3. What does he do? Where does he live?
4. Where did the story of Father Christmas originate?

### 3. Jigsaw reading

You will work in groups of three. You will each read one of three texts about the origins of Father Christmas. After reading your text, tell your group what you learnt. Start

with theory 1, then theory 2, then 3. Remember to tell it in your own words. Do not read directly from the text.



### 4. After reading

Discuss the following questions in your group:

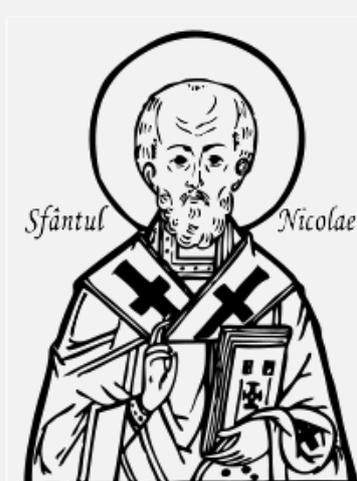
1. Which of the theories provides the best explanation of the origins of Father Christmas's appearance?
2. Which of the theories provides the best explanation for his behaviour at Christmas time?
3. Which best explains where he lives and how he travels?
4. Which of the three origins has most influenced our modern understanding of Father Christmas? Why?
5. Why do you think Father Christmas is so popular today?

## Will the real Father Christmas please stand up?

In Great Britain we call him Father Christmas, in Russia they call him Grandfather Frost and in the USA they call him Santa Claus. He is known around the world as a happy old man with a long white beard, riding a sleigh pulled by reindeer and delivering presents to all the children of the world. But where did the story of Father Christmas originate?

### Theory 1: Saint Nicholas

Try doing a quick search on the Internet for 'origins of Father Christmas', and the first name that you will probably see is that of Saint Nicholas. It is often accepted, especially in European culture that he is the origin of the modern-day Father Christmas, and that some of his more recent attributes (such as the reindeer and sleigh, and his red and white fur coat) are simply a product of the colder climates in which Christmas is celebrated. But how true is this?



*A typical depiction of St. Nicholas*

Saint Nicholas was a Greek bishop who lived from 270-343 A.D. in the town of Myra, which is today called Demre in modern day Turkey. He was a kind man, born to a rich family, and often helped people in need, sometimes by placing money in shoes left out, or even throwing purses of money through windows. Several stories about him say that he could even bring the dead back to life. However, the idea that Saint Nicholas gave presents to children seems to have originated more recently. In a number of pictures from mediaeval times (e.g. 13<sup>th</sup> century), he is depicted as an old man in traditional bishop's clothing with a white beard.

Saint Nicholas's strong links with the modern Santa Claus possibly come through Dutch traditions. The name Santa Claus originates in the Dutch 'Sinterklaas'. During the Middle Ages in Holland, children were often given presents in honour of Saint Nicholas on his name day, the 6<sup>th</sup> of December. They call this day 'Dag Sinterklaasje', and many Dutch families still give presents on its eve, the 5<sup>th</sup> of December. In Dutch Christian traditions he is often depicted as a Christian bishop, although this is changing as modern-day Holland becomes more multicultural, and his religious associations are disappearing in advertising.

Saint Nicholas does appear to be the original figure on which Father Christmas was based, but so many of the things that we associate with him, such as clothes, his home in the Arctic, his reindeer and sleigh, and his tradition of giving presents to children on 24<sup>th</sup> of December do not seem to originate in Saint Nicholas, so where do they come from?

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### Theory 2: Jolopukki

Jolopukki was originally an evil goat spirit, described in the cultural traditions of the Sami people, reindeer farmers of Lapland, in the north of the Scandinavian countries of Finland, Norway and Sweden. People were afraid of him and traditionally offered him presents at the time of the winter solstice (21<sup>st</sup> December) in order to chase away the darkness of winter. As he was absorbed into Scandinavian culture, especially in Finland, he became more generous, giving presents only to well-behaved children.

In Finnish tradition, Jolopukki is said to live in a world of snow in Lapland. He has a team of elves to make the presents that he gives to children. When he comes to visit, he knocks on the front door and asks: 'Are there any well-behaved children here?' Jolopukki has gradually lost his goat-like features, and he is usually depicted wearing red leather trousers and a red fur coat.

Like all Laplanders, Jolopukki travels around on a sleigh pulled by reindeer, although it cannot fly like Father Christmas's sleigh. The flying association may come through the influence of the god Odin, who, according to Norwegian mythology, led a 'Wild Hunt' through the frozen winter skies.

It is likely that a number of the attributes of Jolopukki that make him sound very similar to Father Christmas are a product of more recent influences from other countries, and also from Norwegian mythology, in which the figure of Odin himself is often perceived to be another possible influence on the modern Father Christmas. However, apart from the 'Wild Hunt' and his long white beard, many of the features that associate him with Father Christmas originate in the character of Jolopukki.

If Jolopukki is indeed the origin of the modern Father Christmas, one key question remains – How did he become so important in western consumer culture?

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### Theory 3: 'Twas the night before Christmas

In 1822 an American writer, Clement Clark Moore wrote a poem called 'A visit from Saint Nicholas'. Today this poem is usually called by its first line 'Twas the night before Christmas' ('twas' is a contraction of 'it was'). In the poem, Moore describes the arrival of Saint Nicolas at a house on a flying sleigh pulled by 8 reindeer, including Dasher, Dancer and others, but not Rudolf. Landing on the roof of the house, Saint Nicolas comes down the chimney with a bag of presents, from which he fills the stockings that are hanging by the fire. Moore describes Saint Nicolas in the poem as a 'jolly old elf', dressed in fur, with a white beard, a pipe and a 'little round belly'.



*An early illustration of Santa Claus as an elf by Thomas Nast from 1881*

The poem became famous and established a number of familiar traditions in American culture. Images of Santa Claus in American popular culture were based on Moore's description of him, including Thomas Nast's famous illustrations of him in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, still as an elf.

However, interestingly it was only in illustrations of Father Christmas in advertisements by the Coca-Cola company in the 1930s that we finally see the familiar colour images of Father Christmas that we know today. The first was an image by Fred Mizen from 1930 in which he is depicted in his now familiar red and white clothes. In the following year, he had been turned into a laughing old man playing with children as he gives them presents in the first of many illustrations by Haddon Sundblom. Sundblom was the son of Finnish immigrants to the USA, and may well

have drawn upon his knowledge of Jolopukki from Finnish culture to complete our image of the modern Father Christmas.

It is likely that the marketing campaigns of Coca-Cola helped to establish this modern image of Santa Claus. Some people believe that Coca-Cola promoted images of Santa Claus wearing red in order to associate him with the colour of the Coca-Cola brand, although this is denied by the company, leaving us to draw our own conclusions. What do you think? Have we found the real Father Christmas?