

Let's get a little more background on the inspiration behind our favourite red suited man. It could be interesting reading for some of your students!

Saint Nicholas of Myra is the primary inspiration for the Christian figure of Santa Claus. Nicholas was famous for his generous gifts to the poor, in particular presenting the three impoverished daughters of a pious Christian with dowries so that they would not have to become prostitutes.

People in the Netherlands (as well as other countries) celebrate the name day of Saint Nicholas on December 6<sup>th</sup> with a festival known as the Sinterklaas feast. On the eve of the festival, children put their shoes next to the fireplace chimney with a carrot or some hay in it and a bowl of water for Sinterklaas' horse. The next day they will find some candy or a small present in their shoes, thrown down the chimney by a Zwarte Piet (one of Sinterklaas' helpers) or even by Sinterklaas himself. (And what if a house doesn't have a chimney? Don't worry...Sinterklaas has a magic key that can open every door in the Netherlands!) Other important Sinterklaas facts include his penchant for red capes and a big book that tells him if children have been naughty or nice in the past year.

The figure of Odin, a major god amongst the Germanic peoples prior to their Christianization has a lot in common with Sinterklaas. Odin was sometimes recorded, at the native Germanic holiday of Yule, as leading a great hunting party through the sky. According to sources, children would place their boots, filled with carrots, straw, or sugar, near the chimney for Odin's flying horse Sleipnir to eat. Odin would then reward those children for their kindness by replacing Sleipnir's food with gifts or candy.

Father Christmas is the last Santa Claus inspiration on our list...but he's a little bit different than the last three we've looked at since he was neither a gift bringer nor particularly associated with children. He is rather meant to typify the Christmas spirit of good cheer. Famously, Father Christmas was reflected as the "Ghost of Christmas Present" in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol"; a great genial man in a green coat lined with fur who takes Mr. Scrooge through the bustling streets of London, sprinkling the essence of Christmas onto the happy populace.



Scrooge's second visitor (wearing green) in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, a Victorian representation of Father Christmas.



Sinterklaas