



JOHN G.
NEIHARDT
STATE HISTORIC SITE

LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt
Chapter 11: “The Killing of Crazy Horse”
Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

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Summary:

Some students of history suggest that the death of Crazy Horse, on September 5, 1877, signals the end of Native resistance on the Plains. Others contend that the Massacre at Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890, deserves this distinction. For Black Elk, both events are important—and tragic.

In this chapter Black Elk recounts some of the events leading up to his cousin’s death; in chapter 24 he will tell the story of “The Butchering at Wounded Knee.”

As Black Elk’s band travels from the Red Cloud Agency to Spotted Tail’s camp, a group of Red Cloud’s people admonishes them to return to the agency. In the meantime, Crazy Horse continues on to Spotted Tail’s camp. General Crook has ordered that Spotted Tail replace Red Cloud as head chief of the Lakota, and Black Elk says that Crazy Horse believes,

therefore, that the Lakota will be safe with Spotted Tail. Still resistant to the whites, Crazy Horse refuses to meet with the US President in Washington.

The remainder of the chapter is devoted to the arrest and killing of Crazy Horse—from Black Elk’s limited perspective. Soldiers and police first take Crazy Horse to the agency, then to Camp Robinson. Black Elk, his father, and others also go to Robinson to see what will happen to the great leader. From a distance Black Elk hears Crazy Horse’s demand to be left alone: “Don’t touch me! I am Crazy Horse!” Frightened at the time, Black Elk can provide only a general impression of the tumultuous and confusing scene of Crazy Horse’s arrival and death. He says that he later learned the details: that the soldiers lied to Crazy Horse, that they put him in a cell and planned to kill him, that Crazy Horse attempted to defend himself with a knife, and that a soldier fatally wounded him with a bayonet.

When he returns to the agency, Black Elk hears the mourning for Crazy Horse throughout the night. He and his father are among those who weep.

On the next morning Crazy Horse’s father and mother transport their son’s corpse to some unknown place. Black Elk speculates that this place is near Pepper Creek (and perhaps later, the Badlands); however, he adds that “It does not matter where his body lies, for it is grass; but where his spirit is, it will be good to be.”

*Historical note: The killing of Crazy Horse has a profound effect. One historian, Jeffrey Ostler, writes that Crazy Horse’s death was a “terrible blow to the Lakotas.” James C. Olson says that “it removed the most serious source of significant trouble from the Red Cloud Agency” (and that the old chiefs now became less inclined to violence—though there were sporadic outbursts— because they could see the dire consequences of returning to the warpath. The mysterious and controversial Crazy Horse ultimately emerged, asserts Dan L. Thrapp, as “a symbol of many Sioux and other Indians in this day, of the valiant free spirit of their people.”

See Ostler’s *The Lakotas and the Black Hills: The Struggle for Sacred Ground*. Viking, 2010, page 109; Olson’s *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem*. University of Nebraska Press, 1965, page 246; and Thrapp’s *Encyclopedia of the Frontier*, 3 vols. University of Nebraska Press, 1988. Vol. 1, page 342.

Study questions:

1. Explain this sentence: “. . . he [Crazy Horse] was getting ready to tie up his horse’s tail again. . . .”
2. Black Elk says that this Lakota leader has become a Wasichu. Name this leader.
3. Black Elk hears rumors that perhaps Crazy Horse is not killed but that instead something else is wrong with him. Provide two answers.

4. Who holds Crazy Horse from behind and attempts to take a knife from him?
5. According to Black Elk how old is Crazy Horse when he dies?
6. Identify the two people who remove Crazy Horse's body and take it to some unknown place.
7. Where does Black Elk believe the body may be hidden? (two possible answers)
8. For Black Elk the location of Crazy Horse's corpse really does not matter. Explain.

Prompts for student writing:

1. Research the life of Crazy Horse. Then write a chronological summary in no more than one page. Use your own words.
2. Identify and discuss at least two ways that Crazy Horse shows he is defiant (in this chapter).
3. Why, in your opinion, do Black Elk, his father, and many other Lakota mourn the death of Crazy Horse? Include reasons and details to support your opinion.