



JOHN G.
NEIHARDT
STATE HISTORIC SITE

LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt
Chapter 14: “The Horse Dance”
Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

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Summary:

In the previous chapter Black Road tells Black Elk that performing his vision will free him from fear. The horse dance is an elaborate reenactment on Earth-Mother, but Black Elk believes it also happens simultaneously in the spirit world of Sky-Father. As Black Elk looks above, he sees that the dance is “. . . like a shadow cast upon the earth from yonder vision in the heavens. . . .”

The horse dance ritual involves several steps, each of which has a special meaning. Black Elk must purify himself and fast before the ceremony begins, and Bear Sings and Black Road must assist their friend in making other complex and colorful arrangements. The village must be laid out in a circle to represent the hoop of the Lakota nation. In a smaller circle, a sacred tepee, the Six Grandfathers must paint a hoop, which circumscribes the black and red roads, and add small horse hoof prints to reflect the horse dancing that occurs outside the tepee. The variously colored horses must dance in the four directions.

Everything—clothes, colors, gifts, songs, and prayers—must contribute in a meaningful way to this grand celebration.

Early in their preparations, Black Elk and his two friends hear thunder in the distance—a sign, they believe, that the thunder beings are happy and willing to help with the dance. Near the end of the horse dance, when the riders are facing the West, the people see a cloud and hear thunder again. Black Elk cries out to the spirits of the cloud, and the Grandfathers repeat a song from his vision. All the horses—those in the ceremony and others in the village—then begin to neigh in unison. For the second time in this chapter, Black Elk is confident that the thunder beings of his vision are pleased.

Black Elk now offers gifts to his people: the healing herb, the cleansing wind, the flowering stick, his nation's hoop. He believes his nation is being “made over”—or restored. Sky, village, and, within that village, tepee—on three levels the reader sees Black Elk's great vision—from macrocosm to microcosm.

Significantly, the horse dance itself operates on a personal and social level—as a way for both Black Elk and his small band of Lakota to understand a remarkable vision. Because of the horse dance, Black Elk overcomes his confusion, his loneliness, and his fear. He now rises each morning to view the daybreak star. He is reborn.

Study questions:

1. Why does Black Elk ask Bear Sings to help with the horse dance?
2. Bear Sings and Black Road paint certain symbols on each “side” of the sacred tepee. Tell what is painted on each of these four sides.
3. When no one else is listening, Black Elk teaches his two friends something from his vision. Identify something.
4. How many maidens participate in the ceremony? How many Grandfathers?
5. Describe how Black Elk paints his horse and himself for the horse dance.
6. Black Elk stays in the sacred tepee until the horse dance begins. Who is in the tepee with him?
7. Black Elk carries one object during the ceremony. Identify that object and tell what it represents.
8. Identify the people Black Elk sees in a cloud.
9. After Black Elk prays and “the vision [goes] out,” what change takes place in the weather?
10. Black Elk hopes that his people will be like blossoms that grow on something. Identify something.
11. Describe how Black Elk feels once the horse dance is over. (more than one answer)
12. Black Elk says that he rises early every morning in order to see something. Identify something. According to him, what does this object represent?

Prompts for student writing:

1. Create a list of five or six of the most important parts of the horse dance.
2. Identify and explain at least three important effects of the horse dance.
3. How can art—in this case, a dance—help us to understand something? Provide an example from the world of art: sculpture, painting, music, dance, plays and other literature, etc.? Do not use this chapter as an example.
4. Ceremonies and rituals often reveal our most deeply held wishes, dreams, or thoughts. Is this statement true of the horse dance? If so, how? Use details from the chapter to support your opinion.