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**LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt**  
**Chapter 16: “Heyoka Ceremony”**  
**Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts**

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**Summary:**

The heyoka ceremony recognizes that people may be more receptive to truth if it is cloaked in comedy. Several aspects of this ceremony are humorous, of course, but Black Elk points out that it is not actually “foolish.”

Wachpanne, experienced in the heyoka ceremony, coordinates the ritual. Gathered in a circle around a sacred tepee, the people listen to a prayer and a song, preludes to the sacrifice of a dog to the four directions and to Father-Sky and Mother-Earth. During the ceremony thirty heyokas perform tricks and act silly so that the people will laugh and be happy.

Painting their bodies and shaving half of their heads, One Side and Black Elk hope to be funny but also to show humility before the thunder beings. They carry crooked bows and arrows, and ride painted horses to reflect the two riders in the dog vision.

Wachpanne speaks two prayers, the first an offering, the second about the heyokas. As the dog cooks, One Side and Black Elk follow with a song. Black Elk then describes some of the “foolish” things done by the heyokas.

Still on horseback, One Side and Black Elk charge the boiling dog, shooting it in the head and heart in imitation of the two riders from the dog vision. The heyokas and others now rush forward in an attempt to eat pieces of the sacred dog flesh.

The heyoka ceremony has the desired effect. First, it serves like medicine, says Black Elk, to make the people feel better. Second, it helps them “to see the greenness of the world, the wideness of the sacred day, [and] the colors of the earth.” Third, it affirms the Lakota belief that everything in life has a purpose. Fourth, the ceremony reveals the wish of the Grandfathers: that the Lakota should imitate the grasses when they show “tender faces to each other.”

**Study questions:**

1. How is the heyoka ceremony different from other ceremonies Black Elk has described?
2. What is the sacrifice included in this ritual? Why this particular sacrifice?
3. Who takes charge of the ceremony? How is he qualified for this responsibility?
4. The heyokas must have had a certain experience before they qualify as heyokas. Identify this experience.
5. Two riders appeared in the dog vision. Who reenacts the roles of these two riders in the heyoka ceremony?
6. Briefly describe the scene in which the heyokas appear to drown.
7. Why is eating pieces of dog flesh “good” for the people?

**Prompts for student writing:**

1. Describe at least three ways the heyoka ceremony includes humor.
2. In your opinion, what is the main purpose of the heyoka ceremony? Does it achieve this purpose? Does it have some effects beyond this main purpose?