



JOHN G.
NEIHARDT
STATE HISTORIC SITE

LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt
Chapter 18: “The Powers of the Bison and Elk”
Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

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Summary:

Performing his vision for his people is essential, says Black Elk, for it gives his vision power. He adds that only his “great fear” compels him to share his vision, and if he fails to do so he may die. The horse dance and the heyoka ritual are turning points, for once he establishes the power of his vision through these ceremonies, he can serve as a medicine man.

Black Elk points out that some aspects of his great vision have not yet been performed. He also acknowledges that he cannot translate all of his vision into words; some of it apparently remains a mystery even to him. Always humble, he claims to be merely the means by which the spirit world communicates its message.

Black Elk proceeds to describe the relatively simple bison ceremony, which culminates in several significant ways: (1) the people gather, and the sick offer gifts in the hope of being cured; (2) Black Elk, One Side, and Fox Belly move among the people, pretending to be

bison; (3) Black Elk shares “the water of life” with the small children; and (4) he cures some of the sick. Consequently, Black Elk feels the power of his vision “all the time.” He can now declare his manhood.

When he is 20 (Raymond J. DeMallie says 21 in *The Sixth Grandfather*, page 322), Black Elk conducts the elk ceremony, which celebrates the power of males and females to reproduce. Running Elk assists him in organizing this ritual, which includes six elk men and four young girls. The elk men stand for the four quarters (or directions), plus Mother-Earth and Father-Sky. The girls, for the four quarters of the sacred hoop.

The elk men are painted black because the power to grow, or to regenerate, is mysterious and comes from the night. The four virgin girls wear scarlet to represent birth, and their faces are yellow except for the variously colored symbols on their foreheads. One girl has a red daybreak star on hers to represent the source of life; another, a blue moon to show that women’s power derives from the moon; another, a sun, commonly a symbol of warmth and healing; and yet another, a big blue circle on her face signifying the nation’s hoop. The masks on their faces suggest the enigmatic nature of women’s power. The girls also carry red flowering sticks taken from a cottonwood tree; these sticks represent the flowering tree—the life that men must nourish.

The four girls emerge from the sacred tepee, with the elk men close behind, dancing around them, just as “the power of the man,” says Black Elk, “encircles and protects the power of the woman.” All of the participants—girls and elk men—now reenter the tepee, with the girls first.

Black Elk ends the chapter by declaring that the elk ceremony illustrates how the Lakota should live—according to the Power of the World and its natural rhythms.

Study questions:

1. What does Black Elk believe will happen to him if he does not perform his vision for his people?
2. The red man of Black Elk’s great vision changes into something. Identify something.
3. What does Black Elk mean when he says, “Of course, it was not I who cured”?
4. Why doesn’t Black Elk tell all of his vision to others?
5. What color is Black Elk painted for the bison ceremony? Why?
6. Who else is painted in this color?
7. Black Elk gives each of the little children a gift. Identify this gift.
8. Why does Black Elk choose bison and elk as the main animals of these ceremonies?
9. The flowering sticks are cut from a certain type of tree. Identify this type.
10. Who carries the stick, the pipe, the herb, and the sacred hoop during the elk ceremony?
11. Which group of participants enters the tepee first?

Prompts for student writing:

1. In which ways do these two ceremonies reveal the close relationship between nature and the Lakota?
2. Explain the difference between the bison ceremony and the elk ceremony. Provide details.
3. Consider only this chapter as you briefly discuss the importance of numbers in *Black Elk Speaks*.
4. Reflect on the rituals Black Elk performs for his people in this and earlier chapters. How are the Lakota affected by these rituals? Discuss specific evidence.