



JOHN G.
NEIHARDT
STATE HISTORIC SITE

LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt
Chapter 19: "Across the Big Water"
Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

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Summary:

Before Black Elk tells of his journey to England, he laments the destruction of the great bison herds by wasteful, dishonest, and greedy whites. Starvation has ensued, forcing the Lakota and many other Indian nations onto the reservations. The sacred hoop is broken, and his people are in despair. Black Elk does continue to cure individuals but acknowledges that he lacks the power to fulfill his vision: to restore the hoop and the flowering tree, and thus save his precious Lakota.

Will this deplorable situation end? Where lies salvation?

Black Elk becomes hopeful of an answer when he receives an offer to participate in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. He joins the show, travels to Europe, and looks to the "great world of the Wasichus" for a means of remaking Lakota culture. Will he find anything of benefit?

The journey takes Black Elk and the Wild West Company from Rushville to Omaha, Chicago, and New York City, where they perform in Madison Square Garden for approximately three months before crossing the Atlantic. The voyage proves difficult for the Natives: the rocking ship induces sickness, lack of appetite, sleeplessness, and extreme fear. Conditions are so bad that some of the Natives dress for death and sing death songs. When Black Elk sees a dead bison thrown overboard, he cries, believing that his people are losing even more of their power.

Conditions improve in London when Buffalo Bill's troupe performs privately for Queen Victoria, called Grandmother by Black Elk because she is also queen of Canada (Grandmother's Land). Black Elk says that the performers admire Victoria because she speaks well of them. About two weeks after this performance, the participants in the show attend a celebration in honor of Victoria's Grand Jubilee. Black Elk wishes that Queen Victoria were the Grandmother of his people, too. The year is 1887.

*For a fascinating account of Black Elk in Europe, see Joe Jackson's *Black Elk: The Life of an American Visionary*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

Study questions:

1. What are some of Black Elk's reasons for deploring the whites' mistreatment of the bison?
2. According to Black Elk some of the Wasichus are crazy for something. Identify something.
3. Why does Black Elk think he ought to join Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show?
4. Who does Black Elk have in mind when he says, "They had forgotten the old ways of my people"?
5. Because the Native performers are told the fire-boat is going very fast, Black Elk believes that something might happen. Identify something. (two answers)
6. Black Elk refuses to wear something while he is on the boat. Identify something.
7. According to Black Elk, who owns Grandmother's Land?
8. What does Black Elk notice about Victoria's hand when he shakes it?
9. During the Jubilee celebration, some in the crowd get sick and fall over. Why?

Prompts for student writing:

1. Research the destruction of the bison on the northern plains. In no more than one page summarize your findings in your words.
2. Black Elk agrees to join the Wild West Show because he wants to learn about the lives of the Wasichus. Does he learn anything that will help his own people? Think carefully about the details of this chapter before you answer in a paragraph.
3. Discuss Black Elk's response to Queen Victoria. In your topic sentence, tell in general how he feels about her. Support your answer with specifics.

4. Have you ever traveled to an unknown place? How did you feel at the time? What were your thoughts? If you wish, compare or contrast your reaction to Black Elk's.