



JOHN G.
NEIHARDT
STATE HISTORIC SITE

LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt
Chapter 20: "Spirit Journey"
Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

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Summary:

Although he enjoys his time with the Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, Black Elk becomes disoriented and homesick when he is left behind in Manchester, England.

An English-speaking Lakota convinces him to join a small show operated by Mexican Joe Shelley. In Paris Black Elk develops a romantic relationship with a Wasichus girl and meets her parents. He then travels to Germany and Italy before going back to Paris.

During an illness Black Elk has a dream-vision of returning to his native homeland. Traveling westwardly on a cloud, he sees the ocean, many towns, the Missouri River, the Black Hills, and, most important, "the center of the world" where the spirits took him on his great vision. Looking down on Pine Ridge, he observes a gathering of his people and the tepee of his mother and father. When the cloud returns to Paris, Black Elk finds himself once more with

the girl and her family, who tell him that he has been in a death-like state for three days. Black Elk does not tell them about his remarkable journey.

Black Elk again encounters Buffalo Bill, who arranges a voyage home after first honoring Black Elk with a “big dinner.” First by boat and then by train, Black Elk eventually reaches Rushville and rides in a wagon to Pine Ridge. The year, he notes, is 1889.

A treaty made that same year reduces the size of the land allotted to Natives by half and establishes five reservations (See Raymond J. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, page 324). Black Elk calls this treaty “foolish.”

Black Elk cries tears of happiness when he sees his parents, and he then proceeds to tell his mother about his recent spirit-vision. Apparently, she will believe what the Wasichus family in Paris would not.

Unfortunately, Black Elk’s journey into the lands of the Wasichus does not show him a way to save his people. The Lakota will have to look elsewhere for salvation—as they do in the next chapter.

Study questions:

1. Identify, in order, the European cities to which Black Elk travels. (Some may be mentioned more than once.)
2. Identify Pahuska.
3. Black Elk performs in another person’s smaller show. Name this person.
4. Provide evidence that Black Elk has a romantic relationship with a girl in Paris.
5. When Black Elk becomes homesick, Buffalo Bill treats him in a kind manner. Explain.
6. What unusual event does Black Elk observe near Naples, Italy (after he leaves Germany)?
7. What does Black Elk believe the family in Paris would have bought for him if he had died?
8. Black Elk’s mother also has a dream-vision. Describe it.

Prompts for student writing:

1. In one paragraph summarize Black Elk’s dream-vision in this chapter.
2. Restrict yourself to this chapter as you respond to this question in an essay: How is Black Elk’s spirit journey a rite of passage? (A rite of passage includes three stages: Separation: isolation from the hero’s society. Initiation: a series of ritual deaths and rebirths in which the hero learns about himself or herself and his or her people. He or she gains knowledge and experience, prerequisites for a return. This stage is often suggested by a dream, a visit to the underworld, or sleep. Return: marked by rejection or

acceptance, or both; a bringing together. This stage often involves a discovery of self and of important values, and a reintegration into society.)