



JOHN G.  
**NEIHARDT**  
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**LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt**  
**Chapter 21: “The Messiah”**  
**Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts**

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*\*Historical note: The Ghost Dance or “Messiah Craze” as it was called by some whites, emerged in the late 1880s in western Nevada. Wovoka (Wanekia), also known as Jack Wilson, claimed to have had a vision of God. Wovoka told his listeners God planned to appear on earth again and that the Native people must prepare for this return. Moreover, Wovoka claimed that when God returned, the dead would rise, whites would disappear, and bison would repopulate the land. To ensure the arrival of this paradise, the people had to sing sacred songs and prayers, perform a special dance, and wear ghost shirts. Wovoka’s message spread rapidly among the Plains Indians, including the Lakota, who hoped that a Messiah would restore their former way of life.*

**Summary:**

Black Elk alludes to the treaty of 1899 again, emphasizing that it was unilaterally conceived and sanctioned. He declares that the Lakota did not want this treaty. His people, he adds,

are starving, and death seems near. In one of the saddest sentences of the book, Black Elk says, “We could not eat lies, and there was nothing we could do.”

Besides starvation, disease also decimates the Lakota, and Black Elk specifically mentions measles and whooping cough. The situation is dire.

As his people suffer and die, Black Elk hears rumors of a sacred man who has had a vision that, if enacted, will save the Natives. To confirm these rumors, the Lakota send emissaries to investigate Wovoka’s story. Black Elk is skeptical, but an event occurs which may be a catalyst for his change of heart: the death of his father.

Black Elk travels to Wounded Knee Creek and witnesses a dance that contains some of the elements of his own great vision: a holy tree, a circle of men and women forming a sacred hoop, faces painted red, the pipe, and eagle feathers. Suddenly, Black Elk feels happy. He recommits himself to healing the people, uniting them within the sacred hoop, and making the holy tree bloom. Believing in the truth of his great vision, Black Elk will now participate in the ghost dance.

*\*Historical note: As participation in the Ghost Dance increased and the dancing became more frenzied, white settlers, government officials at the various agencies, and the US military became fearful. On December 15, 1890, when Indian police attempted to arrest Sitting Bull, a melee broke out, and the old chief was killed. Then, when Big Foot and his band of Minneconjou moved south toward Pine Ridge, they were taken prisoner and escorted to Wounded Knee Creek. Chaos ensued when Big Foot’s people were ordered to give up their weapons. On December 29, 1890, Big Foot and many others, including women and children, were killed by troopers from the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry—an event commonly referred to as The Massacre at Wounded Knee.*

### **Study questions:**

1. Identify two causes of the starvation of the Lakota.
2. What kills many little children, in particular?
3. Do the Lakota immediately accept the rumors they hear of Wovoka’s (Wanekia’s) vision? Provide evidence for your answer.
4. How many people do not see anything of wonder in Wovoka’s hat?
5. How many of Black Elk’s family die before he returns home from Europe? How many die after he returns?
6. Where does Black Elk work in order to provide food for his mother?
7. To whom is Black Elk referring when he mentions “the son of the Great Spirit” that the Wasichus killed but was “coming to the Indians this time”?
8. Identify Wanekia.

### **Prompts for student writing:**

1. Review the first two pages of this chapter. Now write a paragraph summary of the problems faced by the Lakota.
2. Contrast Black Elk’s initial opinion of the ghost dance with his later opinion. Why does he have these two opinions, and why does he change his mind?

3. Identify two ways Black Elk reveals he cares about his immediate family.
4. If someone told you the story of Wovoka's vision, would you believe it? Support your answer with reasons.