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**NEIHARDT**  
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**LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt**  
**Chapter 22: “Visions of the Other World”**  
**Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts**

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**Summary:**

This chapter, like others, reveals the profound difference between the real and the ideal. On the one hand, the Lakota suffer horribly from starvation, disease, confinement on reservations, and death. On the other hand, the ghost dance and the accompanying visions offer “all good and beautiful things in a great circle of peace”—even an escape from mortality.

Do the Lakota really believe their dream of a return to paradise? Consider that during the dance, some of the people laugh because they are so happy—an indication that they may be convinced by Wovoka’s dream. Still others cry out for what has been lost to the Wasichus. Does their weeping and wailing indicate that they realize a Golden Age cannot be recovered? Whatever the answers may be, the dance evokes powerful emotions in its participants, one of whom is Black Elk.

The chapter begins with Good Thunder, now Black Elk's stepfather, offering up a prayer on behalf of Black Elk. Remembering his dead father, sister, and brother, Black Elk cries profusely, then thinks of his people's despair and of his promise to help them. As he stands beneath the sacred tree "that never bloomed," he implores the Great Spirit to restore life and happiness to the Lakota.

When Black Elk dances, he again feels queer, fearless, happy. In a vision he sees an eagle feather transform into an eagle and a beautiful land in which "fat and happy" animals gather in a circle. He observes the sacred tree, flowering.

But reality intervenes. Black Elk comes back to earth, only to discover that the sacred tree is still dead. Nevertheless, he believes that if the Lakota follow his vision—which he shares with them—the tree might really bloom again. He will aid his people by making ghost shirts for them.

Carrying a sacred stick with an eagle feather attached, Black Elk also leads the dance. In yet another vision, he floats above the earth, sees a spotted eagle, and glides over a beautiful land. In the center he sees a blooming tree and a Christ-like figure. Twelve men in this vision show him a perfect world in which the sky is blue, the land green, and all the people young. Twelve women inform him he should take this image of paradise back to the Lakota.

So, Black Elk sings his vision for the people four times. They respond by weeping for all that is gone.

**Study questions:**

1. During the first time that Black Elk dances in this chapter, two men hold his arms. Name these men.
2. Describe what happens to Black Elk's legs as he begins his first vision.
3. In his vision two men appear wearing something special. Identify something.
4. In the evening after his first vision, Black Elk makes something that he carries in the dance. Identify this object.
5. What happens to some of the Lakota even before the dance begins?
6. How many villages appear in Black Elk's second vision? How many men speak to him? How many women speak to him?
7. In his second vision what does Black Elk notice about the ages of the people?
8. Many men and women attempt to cross something in Black Elk's second vision. Identify something.
9. Black Elk is supposed to stand for someone "in the world." Identify someone.

**Prompts for student writing:**

1. In a paragraph discuss how Black Elk's two visions in this chapter are similar.
2. Identify and discuss at least two ways the dance affects Black Elk.
3. Write a two-paragraph essay in which you contrast the ideal world of Black Elk's visions (in this chapter) to the real world in which the Lakota must live. You might add a third paragraph in which you comment on the significance of this contrast. What does it suggest to you?