



JOHN G.  
**NEIHARDT**  
STATE HISTORIC SITE

**LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt**  
**Chapter 23: “Bad Trouble Coming”**  
**Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts**

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**Summary:**

The ghost dance—and Black Elk’s accompanying visions—are powerless to prevent conditions from deteriorating, and the increasing popularity of the ghost dance only makes the Wasichus more fearful. When the agent at Pine Ridge, Daniel Royer, orders the tribes to cease dancing, he galvanizes their commitment to the dance, and the possibility of violence grows.

Black Elk laments not only the reduction in rations allotted to his people but also the quality of these rations: he adds that even though the cattle are poor his people have no recourse but to eat what they are given.

During a dance with the Brulé, Black Elk sees a flaming rainbow and hears an eagle telling him to “Remember this,” a reference to the great vision. Black Elk now realizes that he should follow his great vision and not the lesser ones.

As the Oglala dance near Wounded Knee Creek, they hear rumors of approaching soldiers. The Natives again move their camp, this time to Grass Creek, then to White Clay, and eventually closer to Pine Ridge.

Good Thunder, a member of the Indian police, warns that he and Black Elk will be arrested soon, no doubt because they are two of the many leaders of the ghost dance. Black Elk mentions a Black Robe, or Catholic priest, who attempts to convince Black Elk's people to remain on Wounded Knee near Manderson, but after sojourning on Cluny Table in the Badlands, Black Elk's Lakota move to the agency at Pine Ridge.

Neihardt now inserts a short paragraph of historical importance. On December 15, 1890, approximately 40 Indian police and two troops of soldiers from the 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry attempt to arrest the great Sitting Bull, who, though old, is still considered a threat to peace. During the chaos that breaks out, the great chief is killed.

Black Elk also learns that Big Foot and his beleaguered band have left the Badlands. When Big Foot surrenders, soldiers escort him and his people to Wounded Knee Creek. "It was the next morning," says Black Elk, "that something terrible happened."

As the poet Philip Larkin wrote, ". . . nothing contravenes the coming dark. . . ." ("The Building," in *High Windows*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974, page 24)

### **Study Questions:**

1. What happens to Good Thunder and Kicking Bear when they return from visiting Wovoka (Wanekia)?
2. The agent mentioned in the second paragraph is called something by Lakota. Identify something.
3. Who is camped on the Grand River?
4. Black Elk says that his people get more \_\_\_\_ than they do cattle? (a one-word answer)
5. Which tribe of Lakota is camped on Cut Meat Creek?
6. In this chapter Black Elk has another vision. Which three important symbols does he see?
7. Black Elk believes he has made a "great mistake." Explain.
8. Good Thunder warns Black Elk that something is going to happen to him (and to Good Thunder). Identify something.
9. According to Black Elk, the Lakota should depend on a certain group of people. Identify this group.
10. Why does Black Elk admire the Black Robe? (By the way, his name was Father Francis M. Craft.)
11. What horrific event occurs at Standing Rock?
12. How old is Black Elk in December 1890?

13. Big Foot and his band are led by soldiers to a certain place. Name this place.
14. Know the full date of the massacre of Big Foot's band.
15. Locate these places on a map: Wounded Knee, Cluny Table, Standing Rock, Pine Ridge.

**Prompts for student writing:**

1. Summarize Black Elk's speech to the Brulé. (It begins with "My relatives. . . .")
2. Identify and discuss at least two important ways this chapter suggests impending doom for the Lakota.
3. Choose either Sitting Bull or Big Foot. Then write a one-page biography in your words.