



JOHN G.
NEIHARDT
STATE HISTORIC SITE

LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt
Chapter 24: “The Butchering at Wounded Knee”
Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

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**Historical note: At about 2:00 p.m. on December 28, 1890, Maj. Samuel E. Whitside intercepted Big Foot’s Minneconjou near Porcupine Butte. Using an interpreter, Whitside gained Big Foot’s agreement to camp on Wounded Knee Creek, and four troops of the 7th Cavalry, plus an artillery platoon with two Hotchkiss guns, served as escort. That evening, after the prisoners and their escort had arrived, Col. James W. Forsyth assumed command, providing four more troops of the 7th Cavalry and two more Hotchkiss guns. On the morning of December 29, Forsyth urged Big Foot’s people to forfeit their weapons. Because not all weapons were forthcoming, Forsyth and Whitside ordered soldiers to search the village and later the warriors themselves. A medicine man dressed as a ghost dancer—though perhaps not Yellow Bird, as Black Elk indicates—chastised his people for complying, thereby exacerbating the situation. A weapon was fired, soldiers shot into the crowd, and the Indians returned fire. Women and children fled to a large ravine but were pursued, and many were wounded or killed, the soldiers using the deadly Hotchkiss guns to prevent escape.*

For reliable information on this horrific incident, see Jerome A. Greene's American Carnage: Wounded Knee, 1890.

Summary:

When Black Elk goes to Pine Ridge, he watches as soldiers begin to move toward Big Foot's band, and he suspects "something terrible" will happen. The next morning he hears cannon fire, and a messenger brings news of a fight.

Black Elk delays his appearance at Wounded Knee long enough to saddle his horse and put on his ghost shirt, which he describes in elaborate detail, reminding his listeners that his shirt is a reflection of his great vision. Black Elk carries only a sacred bow (the Wasichus have taken most of the guns). When Black Elk and a group of twenty warriors arrive at Wounded Knee, the fighting is in progress, and the fleeing women and children are seeking safety in a dry gulch. Black Elk tells his party of warriors to summon up their courage and save their relatives.

In an especially poignant moment, Black Elk sees a baby on the ground, wraps her in a shawl, and later returns to rescue her.

Twice, Black Elk mentions that he is not hit by the soldiers' bullets—evidence, he no doubt believes, that his ghost shirt protects him. As some of the Lakota pursue the soldiers, they see the carnage—the "dead and wounded women and children and little babies . . . scattered . . . where they had tried to run away."

When he observes the dead women and children, Black Elk longs for death. He adds that he does not feel pity for the dead; instead, he believes they are better off in "the other world." Nevertheless, he wants to avenge their deaths.

Dog Chief later shares with Black Elk his eyewitness account of the events leading to this massacre. (The reader recalls that Black Elk was not present when the massacre began.) After the soldiers leave the bloody field of Wounded Knee, a blizzard ensues, and the temperature falls. The gulch becomes a grave for "butchered women and children."

Study questions:

1. The sounds of something seem to travel through Black Elk's body. Identify something.
2. Why does he place the daybreak star on the left side of his ghost shirt?
3. Which weapon does Black Elk carry to the fight?
4. Black Elk sees this group of Lakota huddled in a dry gulch. Identify the group.
5. Why doesn't Black Elk take the first baby that he sees away from the battlefield?
6. Black Elk considers two boys to be brave. Why?

7. Black Elk sees another baby feeding at its mother's breast. What is the mother's condition? What happens to the baby?
8. Who is sick when he arrives at Wounded Knee? How does this person die?
9. On the day of the massacre the sun is shining. What happens to the weather after the soldiers leave?

Prompts for student writing:

1. Research the Massacre at Wounded Knee. Then write a one-page summary.
2. Identify and discuss at least three ways that the Massacre at Wounded Knee is so horrific.
3. Using at least two examples for support, discuss Black Elk's compassion.
4. Discuss at least two or three ways that the soldiers have a military advantage during this massacre.
5. Which word better identifies what happens at Wounded Knee, *massacre* or *fight*? Or both? Support your opinion with evidence in a paragraph.