



JOHN G.
NEIHARDT
STATE HISTORIC SITE

LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt
Chapter 26: "Author's Postscript"
Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

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**The geographical setting: Harney Peak was renamed Black Elk Peak in 2016. Located in the Black Hills, it is the highest point (7,244 ft.) in South Dakota. On May 30, 1931, Black Elk, age sixty-eight, his son Ben, John Neihardt, and Neihardt's daughters Enid and Hilda climbed this peak. Black Elk's great vision at age nine had taken place at the center of the earth, and Black Elk believed that standing atop the peak was his second journey to this sacred place.*

See Hilda Neihardt's Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow, the chapter appropriately titled, "The Vision Revisited," pages 90-95.

Summary:

Black Elk wishes to stand upon Harney Peak "in the sacred hoop of the world" before he dies. His purpose? To speak to the Six Grandfathers of his vision. His words to his son Ben

foreshadow the appearance of the thunder beings, who will manifest themselves as thunder and perhaps as rain, too.

Black Elk locates, exactly, the place in his vision where he stood, though he acknowledges that his vision was spiritual; whereas, on this day he finds himself in a tangible place. Dressed and painted in a manner similar to the way he appeared in his vision, Black Elk invokes the Grandfather, recalling that the Great Spirit once commanded him to restore life to the sacred tree. Weeping, Black Elk laments that he has failed in this task. In a hopeful moment he also remembers his great vision and says that perhaps “some little root of the sacred tree now lives.” He calls upon the Great Spirit to care for the tree so that it will bloom once more—not for Black Elk but for his people. He prays that someday his people will reenter the sacred hoop.

Clouds then gather, and a slight rain begins. Those gathered upon the peak hear thunder but see no lightning as Black Elk’s powerful entreaty comes to an end: “O make my people live.”

Silent now, with his face to the sky, in the brief rain, Black Elk cries. And the sky clears.

Study questions:

1. Where is Black Elk when this chapter begins? At what landmark does he point?
2. According to Black Elk, what things belong to the Great Spirit? Provide a specific answer.
3. Which object does he hold as he speaks to four quarters (directions)?
4. What does Black Elk admit about the sacred tree?
5. More than once, Black Elk says that this may be the last time he speaks to the Six Powers. Why?
6. Describe the weather during the final moments when Black Elk stands on the peak. Then consider question #4 below.

Prompts for student writing:

1. Black Elk says that he “speaks in sorrow” to the Six Powers. Identify some of the reasons for his sadness.
2. In an essay discuss Black Elk’s love for his fellow Lakota. Support your position with examples from anywhere in the book.
3. What is the meaning of the weather at the end of *Black Elk Speaks*? Answer in a well-developed paragraph that includes details but also your own interpretation.

4. Research Black Elk's life using two or three reputable sources other than this book. (If necessary, see the list of books appended to this curriculum).
5. Consider this book as a whole. Would you recommend it to another reader? Yes, or no? Or both? In an essay develop two or three reasons for your answer and then support these reasons with ample evidence.
6. The events in this book are narrated mainly from Black Elk's point of view. Identify what you believe is Black Elk's main purpose for telling his story to John Neihardt. Develop this message in an essay that contains relevant details. (You may wish to alter this topic slightly and write about why Neihardt chose to write this book.)