



JOHN G.  
**NEIHARDT**  
STATE HISTORIC SITE

**LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt**  
**Chapter 4: “The Bison Hunt”**

**Developed by: Joe Green, Neihardt Board of Directors; retired high school English teacher from Minden, Nebraska; recipient Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association (NRCSA) 2014 Outstanding Secondary Teacher Award.**

**Copyright: John G. Neihardt Foundation.**

**Use: Copyright holder grants permission for educational use.**

**Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts**

**Summary:**

This chapter may very well be titled “The Rebirth of Black Elk,” for, having experienced his great vision, Black Elk now returns to the teepee of his parents, feeling like his former energetic self despite his swollen body. His parents inform him he has been ill for twelve days, so ill he appeared dead. They are therefore reluctant to allow Black Elk to resume normal physical activity. However, Whirlwind Chaser, a medicine man brings their son “back to life.”

When Whirlwind Chaser claims to see something strange and sacred in Black Elk, the young boy fears Whirlwind Chaser will see into him, misinterpret his vision, and cause the people to consider him “crazy.”

A significant stage in the rite of passage is the hero’s unsettling sense of being unique. As Black Elk emerges from his remarkable near-death experience, he ponders his vision,

hesitant to tell anyone about it because he fears no one will believe it. Acknowledging that he does not understand his vision (and will never understand it completely), he feels “a strange power glowing in his body.” Consequently, Black Elk occasionally isolates himself from the village and eats little as he contemplates the vision’s meaning. He longs to return to the world of the vision, which appears to offer him an escape from others.

The incident with the bow reveals the transformative power of the vision. Momentarily suspecting the vision was merely a dream, Black Elk considers killing a bird sitting in a bush, but he avoids doing so. However, when he sees a frog, he does not hesitate to kill—though afterward he feels so guilty he wants to cry. Here we see a fundamental tension in Black Elk’s life because of the vision: to kill a creature would be expected by his culture but would also violate an important principle of his vision, that all life has value. How can Black Elk ever reconcile the demands of this world and the teachings of the Grandfathers?

The remainder of the chapter describes a bison hunt, and though Black Elk is too young to participate, he and the other young boys emulate the hunters by “scouting” for bison and yelling when they see them. The reader will note that the bison hunt is a communal ritual: it not only provides essential food but also demonstrates the importance of sharing.

#### **Study questions:**

1. Even though Black Elk’s body is swollen, he longs to “run around” as any child would. Why does he possess such energy?
2. What happens when Black Elk attempts to translate the meaning of his vision into words?
3. What does Whirlwind Chaser tell Black Elk’s father about Black Elk?
4. Whenever he sees Whirlwind Chaser, Black Elk runs away. Why?
5. What reason does Black Elk give for not shooting the bird?
6. How does he feel after he kills the frog? Why?
7. Why do the Lakota parents keep their children nearby when the camp travels?
8. Consider the bison hunt. How do Black Elk’s people show their spirit of cooperation before, during, and after the hunt?
9. Tell what Black Elk and the other little boys do during the hunt.
10. Identify the specific tasks performed by the women after the hunt.
11. After the hunt the little boys play a game. Describe this game.
12. Which boy leads the dance?
13. Explain how the Lakota boys learn endurance.

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

1. In a single paragraph identify and explain the effects of the great vision on Black Elk. You might consider physical, psychological, and social effects.
2. Standing Bear speaks twice in this chapter. Summarize the information he provides.

3. Even though Black Elk feels a sense of separateness from his people, he also reveals that he is a part of his people. Discuss how Black Elk practices or learns the ways of his people.
4. The episode with the bow and arrow is important to this chapter and involves two animals, though in different ways. What does this episode reveal about Black Elk?
5. Discuss the important roles played by women in Lakota culture. Cite facts from this chapter to support your answer.