



JOHN G.
NEIHARDT
STATE HISTORIC SITE

LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt
Chapter 5: “The Soldiers’ Town”
Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

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.

Summary:

Following the bison hunt and the drying of the meat, the Lakota, including Black Elk’s Oglala, convene in northwestern Nebraska at Camp (later Fort) Robinson. The purpose of the gathering is to meet and feast with relatives. Black Elk notes that Crazy Horse’s band of Oglala does not join the six bands (actually seven) because Crazy Horse, whom Black Elk calls “the greatest chief of all,” will not associate with the Wasichus (whites). During this festive time Black Elk feels happy and plays with the other boys. For now, at least, he does not think about his vision.

Ten years old that winter, Black Elk sees a Wasichus for the first time. The fair-skinned Wasichus look ill to the young Oglala.

Though happy, Black Elk worries that a fight might begin at any time. When a boy (historian Raymond DeMallie says he was probably a young man) chops off the top of a flagpole, armed soldiers surround the Indians, threatening a violent reprisal, but the “great chief” Red

Cloud intervenes. He agrees to punish the culprit and acknowledges that the deed was foolish. This incident ends peacefully.

During a journey to the Black Hills to cut teepee poles, Black Elk hears the whistle of an eagle. Momentarily, he returns to his vision, to that “queer feeling”—a reminder to the reader of the power of Black Elk’s vision to influence his life.

Again, the “queer feeling” comes over Black Elk as he and his father hunt for deer. In a reversal of roles, the inexperienced son tells the experienced father to wait for the deer to come to them. Black Elk’s advice is sound. To atone for killing the two “relatives,” Black Elk then prompts his father to pray to the Great Spirit on behalf of the deer. This prayer is another illustration of Black Elk’s close relationship with nature—a quality he shares with all Lakota.

This chapter ends on a happy note as Black Elk narrates his adventures while fishing with the young Iron Bull and with Watanye, the man with bleeding lips from whom Black Elk hears the humorous story of High Horse’s courting. Black Elk will tell this funny story in the next chapter.

Study questions:

1. Black Elk says that six bands of his people gather at Camp Robinson. Actually, the Lakota consisted of seven bands. Use the internet or some other source to locate the names of these seven tribes.
2. Why do the Lakota meet at Camp Robinson?
3. How does an approaching thunderstorm make Black Elk feel? Explain.
4. When Black Elk becomes ill for a night and day, his parents make him ride on a pony drag. What is Black Elk’s explanation for his sickness?
5. The Wasichus appear ill to Black Elk. Why?
6. Summarize the incident with the flagpole. Who resolves the tension between the Lakota and the soldiers?
7. Name “the greatest chief of all” according to Black Elk.
8. The sound of something causes Black Elk to momentarily return to the world of his vision. Identify something.
9. Why is climbing a hill difficult for Black Elk’s father?
10. How does Black Elk respond to the killing of the deer? Why is respect for “the wild things” an important part not only of Black Elk’s vision but of Lakota culture?
11. The summer is a happy time for Black Elk, but will this happiness last? Locate the sentence in chapter 5 in which Black Elk declares that serious trouble is imminent. Quote the sentence in its entirety. (Keep in mind that Black Elk is an adult when he tells his story. He thus knows past, present, and future.)
12. Why do Iron Bull and Black Elk throw back the little fish?
13. Identify Watanye’s physical problem. How does it affect his relationship to Black Elk?

14. Despite the embarrassment that accompanies this problem, Watanye enjoys spending time with Black Elk. How does Watanye show that he likes his young friend?

Prompts for student writing:

1. In a paragraph discuss at least three occasions in this chapter when Black Elk's great vision affects him—at least momentarily.
2. Red Cloud might be named "Peacemaker" in this chapter. How does he deserve this name?
3. Identify and explain at least two ways that Black Elk demonstrates his close relationship to nature in this chapter.
4. Discuss the friendship between Black Elk and Watanye. Include details but also comment on why each might value this friendship.

Write an essay in which you compare or contrast your own childhood to Black Elk's. Begin by making a list of differences and similarities. You may use any or all of the first five chapters for details about Black Elk. (Your teacher can help you to organize this type of essay.)