



JOHN G.
NEIHARDT
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LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt
Chapter 8: “The Fight with Three Stars”
Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

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Summary:

Black Elk’s father believes that the Lakota have no choice but to fight if they are to save the Black Hills. Now 13, Black Elk is already proficient with a bow and arrow, and pistol, while riding a horse, and he believes he can use these skills to help his people. As a “river of Wasichus” enters Lakota territory, Black Elk and some other boys risk their lives when they join a war party. The youngsters earn praise for their bravery in this, Black Elk’s “first fight,” which proves to be merely a skirmish.

Several bands now converge near the Rosebud River, approximately forty miles north of today’s Sheridan, Wyoming. Although two prominent chiefs, Red Cloud and Spotted Tail, are not present, Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Gall, Dull Knife, and other “great men” are there to lead the Indian efforts in the June 17, 1876, “Battle of the Rosebud,” a prelude to the more famous Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Prior to the Rosebud battle Black Elk's village conducts a sun dance, a magnificent and meaningful ritual in Lakota culture. The sun dance involves singing, dancing, gift-giving, and feasting. Most important, it focuses on the sacred tree, which is planted in the center of the dancing area. After fasting and purifying themselves, several young men, their bodies painted, allow their chests to be pierced so that rawhide strips may connect them to the tree. Dancing around the tree, the participants experience great pain, ceasing to dance only when their flesh tears loose or when their agony prevents them from continuing.

During the dance several young boys, including Black Elk, have a "good time" poking old men with sharp blades of grass or shooting holes in bags carried by women. Black Elk's story frequently includes such comic scenes.

Black Elk hopes to join the warriors in attacking Crook's soldiers. However, he is prevented from participating by his uncle, who reminds him of his small size and of the possibility of death. Black Elk is told to remain in camp to watch over the "helpless ones."

Because he does not participate, Black Hawk calls upon Iron Hawk to describe the exciting battle. Once he finishes, Iron Hawk repeats Black Elk's assertion that the fight with Crook was incomplete—but a victory for the Native people, nevertheless. Both Black Elk and Iron Hawk note that Crook's soldiers retreat to Goose Creek (in northern Wyoming).

Readers should not overlook the final sentence of Iron Hawk's narrative: "Then we all broke camp and moved over to the Greasy Grass." Greasy Grass is another name for the Little Bighorn River. Custer's defeat is imminent.

Study questions:

1. According to Black Elk's father why should the Lakota people fight the whites?
2. Why does Black Elk consider Red Cloud a "cheap man"?
3. What gift does Black Elk's aunt give to him?
4. How does Big Man inspire the boys before they begin the attack on a group of wagons?
5. When the soldiers circle their wagons, what tactic does the Indian war party employ?
6. Is this tactic successful in defeating the soldiers? Explain by considering Black Elk's opinion.
7. Name the bands and tribes that gather on the Rosebud River.
8. The sun dance ritual contains many elements, one of which is finding a tree to plant at the center of the dance area. Who locates this tree?
9. Which group of Lakota chops down the tree and trims off its branches?

10. Identify two ways that the boys provide entertainment during the dancing.
11. Black Elk says that this person will lead his people in the fight against Crook's army. Name this person.
12. Black Elk must perform a certain task as the battle takes place. What is this task?
13. How old is Iron Hawk when the Battle of the Rosebud takes place?
14. Sitting Eagle, a Shyela or Cheyenne, kills someone during the battle. Identify this person as specifically as possible.
15. Crook's soldiers retreat to a certain place at the end of the day's fighting. Name that place.

Prompts for student writing:

1. What do you think is the main purpose of the sun dance? After you write a one-sentence answer to this question, finish your paragraph by describing the most important stages in the dance. Put these stages in chronological order.
2. Research the Battle of the Rosebud. Be sure to identify where it occurred, when, why, the main leader or leaders on each side, the number of participants, the number of casualties (the killed and wounded), and the results. Condense your writing into a one-page answer.
3. Who was General George Crook? Write a brief biographical summary of his life (no more than one page).
4. What lessons do young Lakota males have to learn? Why are these lessons important? You may use any relevant information from chapters 1-8.
5. Reread the section about Black Elk's first fight. Then create a topic sentence in which you offer your opinion of the tactics used by the war party. Are those tactics effective? Ineffective? Intelligent? Foolhardy? Support your opinion with details from Black Elk's description of this fight.