



JOHN G.
NEIHARDT
STATE HISTORIC SITE

LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt
Chapter 9: “The Rubbing Out of Long Hair”
Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

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Summary:

The title refers to the death of Lt. Col. George Custer during the Battle of the Little Bighorn River, June 25-26, 1876. Black Elk’s words frame this important chapter, which also includes versions of the battle by Standing Bear and Iron Hawk.

Black Elk’s band moves to the Greasy Grass on the same day that Crazy Horse defeats Crook on the Rosebud. Subsequent to the victory, Crazy Horse also travels to the Greasy Grass, joining several other camps in a gathering so large “you could barely count the tepees.” The medicine man Hairy Chin asks Black Elk and five other boys to participate in a Bear ceremony to “cure” Rattling Hawk, who had been grievously wounded at the Rosebud. This ceremony restores Rattling Hawk’s ability to walk and eventually to fight again.

While swimming, Black Elk again feels “queer” and senses something bad will occur. His premonition proves valid when he and some other boys hear shouts of an impending attack. The Bighorn battle has begun.

Black Elk joins some warriors in a wooded area, where he remains long enough to recall his great vision. He associates his people with the thunder-beings of his dream and feels the soldiers will be “rubbed out.” Even in the tumult of battle, Black Elk’s vision thus remains a powerful force in his life.

Shouts that “Crazy Horse is coming!” and the sounds of eagle bone whistles seem to inspire the Lakota and their allies—though there are casualties on both sides, and the fighting is brutal and bloody. Before scalping a soldier, Black Elk shoots him in the forehead. He then proudly shows his mother this, his first scalp, and she honors his achievement with “a big tremolo” (a rapid repetition of the same musical note).

Standing Bear, 16 at the time of the battle, details the killing of the 7th Cavalry under Custer. After he knocks a soldier to the ground, Standing Bear and some others move toward the village, “and there are dead men and horses scattered along there, too. They are all rubbed out.” In the course of battle the Indians become “crazy,” says Standing Bear, and he illustrates his assertion by telling of a Lakota who inadvertently scalps a friendly Shylea (Cheyenne).

Iron Hawk, 14, continues the narrative. He joins Little Bear, also a Hunkpapa, in attacking dismounted cavalry. When Little Bear is wounded, his brother-friend Elk Nation saves him, at great risk to his own life. Dusk approaches, but the battle continues. Iron Hawk kills a soldier, shooting him with an arrow and then beating him to death with his bow. As he does so, Iron Hawk thinks of the frightened women and children.

Black Elk concludes the chapter. As he and other boys fire arrows into the bodies of the dead soldiers, he takes a watch from a dying soldier, initially believing it is a necklace. Black Elk also observes Black Wasichu’s father and his own father as they butcher a soldier in revenge. Black Elk then honors the request of a young boy by taking a soldier’s scalp and presenting it to the boy.

The Lakota now break camp, fleeing throughout the night to Wood Louse Creek in the Bighorn Mountains. Black Elk completes the chapter by singing a kill-song.

*Historical note: For the victors at the Little Bighorn, the consequences are tragic. Although the defeat of Custer is a high point for the participating tribes and reveals that they can fight effectively as a unified force, a predominately white nation is saddened, shocked, and rabid in its desire for revenge. In response, General Sheridan reinforces Generals Terry, Gibbon, and Crook. Within a month Sheridan also takes control of the Teton Sioux reservations, and a new commission uses lies and threats to compel the Lakota to forfeit the Black Hills. Congress allocates funds for two new forts in the area of the Little Bighorn fight. The military response—with strong support from the government and public—is unrelenting and causes even more suffering and death among the Indians. The psychological damage is profound,

too, as Black Elk attests: “Wherever we went, the soldiers came to kill us, and . . . we were not happy anymore.”

Study questions:

1. Identify the location of the “big village.” Also, identify the advantages of gathering in this particular place.
2. How does Hairy Chin prepare Black Elk for the Bear ceremony?
3. During his preparation for the ceremony, Black Elk recalls his great vision. How does this memory make him feel?
4. At daybreak after the ceremony, Black Elk’s father instructs his son to do something important. Identify something.
5. Someone “is coming!” Name someone.
6. Black Elk kills and scalps a soldier. To whom does he show this scalp?
7. To which Lakota tribe does Standing Bear belong? How old is he at the time of the Bighorn fight?
8. Standing Bear provides an example to show how “crazy” the warriors were. Explain.
9. Near the end of his story, Standing Bear says that his people “started back home,” then moved to the Bighorn Mountains. Explain the reason for this quick departure from the Greasy Grass.
10. To which tribe does Iron Hawk belong? How old is he at the time of the Little Bighorn fight?
11. How does Iron Hawk alter his appearance before entering the battle?
12. Elk Nation performs an act of great courage. Briefly describe this act.
13. As Iron Hawk beats a soldier to death with his bow, he thinks of certain people. Explain. Be specific.
14. Iron Hawk says it was “funny” to see something happen. What did he see?
15. Black Elk takes a “bright and yellow” object from a soldier? Identify the object.
16. Black Elk believes that something looks “good to eat.” Identify something. Does he eat it?
17. Black Elk’s people head for a certain place in the Bighorn Mountains. Name that place.

Prompts for student writing:

1. Discuss the brutality of warfare as presented in this chapter. Provide at least four examples to support a topic sentence. Be sure to paraphrase, not quote.
2. Discuss how Crazy Horse helps his people. (This chapter provides at least two examples.)
3. Write a chronological summary of the Battle of the Little Bighorn River. Limit your summary to one page. (Refer to a map if necessary or draw one of your own and attach it to your paper.)
4. Research the life of George Custer. Write a one-page summary.
5. Research the life of Crazy Horse. Write a one-page summary.
6. Identify and explain at least three ways that the Lakota show that they care for one another (in this chapter).
7. Would you like to have grown up in Black Elk's world? Why? Why not? Develop a short, perhaps one-page, essay. Provide reasons and details to support your answer.