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LESSON PLAN: *Black Elk Speaks*

Chapter 1: “The Offering of the Pipe”

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Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

Summary:

Black Elk, the speaker, establishes a cordial relationship from the outset, calling his listener his “friend.” He announces he will narrate the story not of his life only but of others’ lives as well. The scope of his story extends, he says, to “all life,” to all creatures, to everything that grows. Black Elk’s narrative will focus mainly on his vision, on the holy tree, and on his people’s dream. Before he and his friend smoke the sacred pipe, Black Elk uses it to invoke the Spirit of the World, and he explains the symbolism of the pipe. The ribbons represent the quarters of the universe and their corresponding colors and functions; the eagle feather, the oneness of the world. All life, he says, comes from the sky-father and the earth-mother. Black Elk tells how the pipe was given to his people by a mysterious woman who appeared first to two scouts, then to the village. To the chief she presented the pipe, asserting that it would secure a good future. Black Elk declares that this story is “true.” He lights the pipe, speaks to Grandfather, Great Spirit, and prays for the vision and strength to “face the winds.” He also asks the Great Spirit to look beneficently upon future generations. Admitting his own weakness, Black Elk implores the Great Spirit to hear his words. The prayer concludes with “Hechetu aloh!” (“So it is!”). Finally, he asks his friend to smoke with him to ensure their friendship. Black Elk’s remarkable story is about to begin.

Study questions:

1. Black Elk addresses his “friend” at the beginning of the chapter. Who is this friend? (There may be more than one answer to this question.)
2. According to Black Elk whose story will this be?
3. What does Black Elk mean when he says that “all life . . . is holy”?
4. What do Black Elk’s “mighty vision,” the holy tree, and his people’s dream have in common?
5. How does Black Elk know his vision is true?
6. What are the quarters of the universe, and their associated colors, as represented on the pipe?
7. What does the bison hide on the mouthpiece of the pipe symbolize?
8. Describe the physical features of the sacred woman who brought the pipe to Black Elk’s people.
9. What finally happened to the “foolish” scout? Why do you think he suffered this horrible fate?
10. What were the final words of the sacred woman before she left the tepee? Do these words contrast with anything Black Elk has already said about the fate of his people?
11. What is Black Elk’s relationship to the quarters of the world?
12. In his prayer Black Elk asks the Great Spirit to look upon the faces of one group of people in particular. Identify this group. Why does Black Elk give this group special attention in his prayer?
13. Locate at least one example of Black Elk’s humility.
14. This first chapter establishes Black Elk’s friendship with his listener. How does Black Elk enhance this close relationship? (There may be more than one answer to this question.)
15. Based upon this introductory chapter, can you predict the kind of story Black Elk will tell?

Suggested prompts for student writing:

1. In a well-developed paragraph discuss how Black Elk’s description of the sacred pipe reveals his close relationship to nature.
2. Black Elk says that he lived in “happiness and sorrow.” Admittedly, the reader does not yet know the events Black Elk has in mind. However, Black Elk does introduce these contrasting emotions. In a contrast paragraph discuss two or three aspects of chapter 1 that

suggest Black Elk's happiness and two or three aspects of the chapter that suggest his sorrow. Formulate a clear topic sentence before you examine the evidence.

3. Is Black Elk a virtuous person? In your topic sentence identify *one* virtue that he exemplifies in this chapter. Then paraphrase or quote solid evidence to support your position. In the last and most important part of your paragraph, explain how your example relates to the topic sentence. Your explanation might include why Neihardt would want to define Black Elk in this way.

4. The word *friend* appears in the first sentence and in the last sentence of this chapter. In a paragraph consider this question: Why does Black Elk (or Neihardt, the writer) emphasize the word *friend*, especially in the first chapter of Black Elk's story?

5. The first chapter provides the reader with a glimpse into Black Elk's personality and into his world. Choose one—his personality or his world—for a paragraph. Give your paragraph a controlling topic sentence. Support your main idea with evidence from the text.