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LESSON PLAN: *Black Elk Speaks*
Chapter 3: “The Great Vision”
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Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

Summary:

Now two years older, age nine, Black Elk again hears a voice calling to him. He then becomes ill, and his great vision begins. Complex in its particulars, Black Elk’s vision is a journey into a spirit world in which he will see “the whole hoop of the world” where all life lives “together like one being.” Although he will emerge from this mystical experience “triumphant” and filled with a sense of power, his sacred vision also imposes a great burden, for the Grandfathers of his dream-vision instruct him to return to his people, cure them of sickness, and destroy their enemies. In essence, the Grandfathers expect him to restore a dying world and its people—to repair his nation’s broken hoop and make the holy tree bloom once more.

The vision itself defies easy summary. Told that his Grandfathers are calling him, he flies from the tepee in which he lies. Two men with flaming spears take him into a world of cloud where he sees horses arranged and colored to represent the four directions. Black Elk sees a cloud transforming into a tepee with a rainbow as a door. Six men, the Grandfathers, sit within. They represent the Powers of the World associated with the four directions, the Sky, and the Earth. The Grandfathers carry sacred objects related to their respective powers.

Black Elk makes four “ascents.” The first ascent enables him to see that “all the land was green.” The second, a troubled world in which the leaves of the holy tree are falling. The third,

the winds of destruction and death. The fourth, the starvation of his people and their ponies, and the disappearance of the holy tree of life.

Still, in the fourth ascent, Black Elk cries in despair as life suddenly returns to his vision: he sees a fat bison and a flowering tree in the center of the nation's hoop. He now realizes that he and his people "must find a new strength" if the cycle of life is to continue.

Hopeful, though surrounded by terror, Black Elk sings of his power and of his desire to make his nation live again. He envisions the resurrection of his people as he stands on the highest mountain.

Black Elk vision ends as the two men who appeared earlier present him with the herb of understanding. Instructed to drop this herb to the earth, Black Elk watches as it grows and blossoms, and "in no place was there darkness." Returning to the Six Grandfathers, Black Elk sees the rainbow flaming above the tent and hears the cheering universal voices. Even the sun sings in celebration as Black Elk returns to his own tepee where his father and mother hover over him.

How can Black Elk implement this remarkable vision? How can he use it to help his people? Why does the prospect of sharing his vision make him feel alone and fearful? These are questions he must try to answer now that his great vision is complete.

Study Guide:

1. How old is Black Elk when he has his great vision?
2. A voice says, "It is time; now *they* are calling you." Identify *they*.
3. Describe Black Elk's physical condition when Man Hip asks him what is wrong.
4. Two men take Black Elk into a cloud world. What do these two men carry?
5. Identify the four types of horses, their respective colors, and the directions they represent.
6. Identify the six directions or places represented by the Six Grandfathers.
7. What does each of the Six Grandfathers carry and then present to Black Elk?
8. What does the holy stick represent?
9. Black Elk travels through four ascents. What does he see in each ascent?
10. In the first ascent, what is happening to the holy tree?
11. After the four ascents Black Elk says that "we must find another strength." What does he mean by this statement?

12. In the fourth ascent, Black Elk sees signs of a better life for his people. Identify these signs.
13. Who sings of the coming of the horse nation? What is the meaning of this song for Black Elk?
14. What is the most important geometric shape of this chapter? Why?
15. When Black Elk drops the day-break-star herb on the earth, what happens? What is significant about the colors? What meaning does this event have?
16. Where does Black Elk see the flaming rainbow?
17. As Black Elk comes back to earth from his vision, as the singing stops, how does he feel? Why does he have this feeling?
18. When Black Elk returns to his own tepee, who is there?
19. Black Elk has a great vision. Why do you think he has this vision?
20. What does Black Elk's vision teach him?
21. What responsibilities must Black Elk now face because of his vision? Do you think he will succeed?

Suggested prompts for writing:

1. Sigmund Freud suggests that fear propagates dreams. Does this idea relate to Black Elk's vision in any way? As you formulate an answer, consider the historical and cultural situation in which Black Elk finds himself, including the events described in chapter 1.
2. Freud also argues that dreams are sometimes wish-fulfillments. That is, we dream of what we hope, what we desire. To what extent is Black Elk's vision a wish-fulfillment?
3. What are the positive aspects of Black Elk's great vision?
4. What are the negative aspects of his vision? (You might combine questions 2 and 3 to create a contrast essay.)
5. To what extent does Black Elk's vision incorporate symbols associated with the culture of his people? To answer this question fully, you may have to conduct some research into Lakota religious practices and symbolism.
6. In an essay, discuss how Black Elk, like many other literary heroes, moves through the three stages of the rite of passage. Include specific evidence associated with each stage of his spiritual journey. (**Separation**: isolation from the hero's society. **Initiation**: a series of ritual deaths and rebirth in which the hero learns about himself or herself and his or her people. He or

she gains knowledge and experience, prerequisites for a return. This stage is often suggested by a dream, a visit to the underworld, or sleep of any sort. **Return:** marked by rejection or by acceptance, or both; a bringing together. This final stage often involves a discovery of self and of important values, and reintegration into society.)

7. Discuss the important values Black Elk learns from his vision. You might use this prompt for an essay in which each body paragraph focuses on a specific value.