



JOHN G.
NEIHARDT
STATE HISTORIC SITE

LESSON PLAN: “Death of Crazy Horse”
From *Song of the Indian Wars* by John G. Neihardt
Developed by Joe Green

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Includes: Notes on, Study Questions, Writing Prompts, Selected Sources

A Note on “The Death of Crazy Horse”
(Chapter 14 of John G. Neihardt’s *Song of the Indian Wars*)

John Neihardt’s *Song of the Indian Wars* begins with the westward movement of Americans after the Civil War. These emigrants contributed to our nation’s growth in many significant ways, but their insatiable desire for land and wealth also violated the sacred lands, hunting grounds, and migratory routes of the Native peoples. Moreover, they brought disease, starvation, and death to many.

Neihardt shows how the US military attempted to enforce the will of whites in the West and how the Native peoples on the Northern Plains responded to the dominant white culture’s inevitable and unrelenting intrusion. In the face of overwhelming odds, some Natives sought peace by reluctantly signing treaties that purported to guarantee the survival of their people and to provide them with at least some land. Others tried to escape from the rapacious white invaders—the epic flights of Dull Knife’s Cheyenne and of the Nez Perce come to mind. Still others resorted to violence—small attacks on most occasions, but large ones, too, like the Fetterman Fight, the Battle of the Rosebud, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Their efforts ultimately failed: the Wasi’chu were too powerful.

From this clash of cultures emerged many heroes, and Neihardt finds them on both sides of the conflict: Captain James Powell, Sergeant Max Littman, Private Samuel Gibson, Major George “Sandy” Forsyth, Captain Thomas Weir, Lieutenant Edward Godfrey, Dull Knife, Roman Nose, Gall, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse. Biographer Tim Anderson points out that Neihardt “alternates between the cavalry and the native resistance” as he moves through his poem. In this way, he ensures that his treatment of history is fair. Keep in mind, though, that Neihardt doesn’t merely write history: he presents humans—both white and Native—in several dimensions. We see weaknesses as well as strengths, vices as well as virtues. No hero is perfect.

“The Death of Crazy Horse,” the most important chapter in *The Song of the Indian Wars*, narrates the final days of Crazy Horse (Tȕšašúŋke Witkó), a prominent leader and warrior of the Oglala band of the Lakota Sioux. Of the many heroes of the Indian Wars, Neihardt considered Crazy Horse the greatest.

Born probably between 1840 and 1845, Crazy Horse witnessed the death of Chief Conquering Bear in the 1854 Grattan Massacre, an event that apparently caused the young Crazy Horse to go on a vision quest. This quest led to his courageous decision to become a warrior and to help his people in their fight for preservation.

In 1866 he and others lured soldiers into an ambush during the Fetterman Fight (The Battle of the Hundred in the Hand) and achieved a victory for the combined force of Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho. A few months later, in 1867, Crazy Horse took part in the Wagon Box Fight, the final major engagement of Red Cloud’s War (1866-1868). During the Great Sioux War (1876-1877) Crazy Horse fought in two major battles. On June 17, 1876, he led Lakota and Northern Cheyenne warriors in a surprise attack against General George Crook in the Battle of the Rosebud. Then, on June 25, 1876, he participated—and may have served as a leader—in the defeat of Lieutenant Colonel George Custer’s soldiers on the Little Bighorn River.

The Battle of Wolf Mountain was the final significant fight in Crazy Horse’s struggle to protect his people. On January 8, 1877, he and Two Moons led hundreds of Lakota Sioux and Northern Cheyenne against Colonel Nelson Miles. Although this battle was a draw in some respects, the Natives departed from the field suffering from the extreme cold and deep snow, starvation, and despair.

Their situation became so bleak that on May 5, 1877, Crazy Horse and his band surrendered at Camp Robinson (soon to be called Fort Robinson). For a few months, he lived in a village not far from the Red Cloud Agency, which was near the camp. However, rumors began to spread that Crazy Horse planned to leave and incite further violence. When General Crook ordered his arrest, Crazy Horse and his wife escaped to the Spotted Tail Agency. Then, on September 4, 1877, he agreed to come into Camp Robinson. Taken to the guardhouse, Crazy Horse struggled to escape, and a guard stabbed him with a bayonet. Crazy Horse died that night, September 5, 1877. His corpse was given to his parents, who transported it to an unknown place.

Crazy Horse's lyrical speech just before he dies, and the response of his father and mother to their son's death—well, suffice it to say that you will be profoundly moved.

To enhance your understanding of the poem, we are including a study guide, some suggestions for writing, and a list of sources. These aids may be useful to teachers and students in particular.

You can read all of *The Song of the Indian Wars* in the latest edition of Neihardt's *Cycle of the West*, published in 2018 by the University of Nebraska Press, with extensive literary and historical notes by Joe Green. You can learn more about Neihardt himself by reading Timothy G. Anderson's excellent biography, *Lonesome Dreamer: The Life of John G. Neihardt*, published by the University of Nebraska Press in 2016.

Study Questions for John G. Neihardt's "Death of Crazy Horse"

1. Do the whites still fear Crazy Horse? Provide two or three solid examples to support your answer.
2. In which ways are Crazy Horse and his people suffering?
3. How does Crazy Horse demonstrate that he cares deeply for his people?
4. Crazy Horse's band hears news about Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce. Why are the Lakota enthused by this news?
5. One of the soldiers promises something to Crazy Horse if he will come from Spotted Tail's camp to Camp Robinson. What is this promise?
6. Why doesn't Crazy Horse want to be confined in a guardhouse?
7. Is the unnamed soldier justified in stabbing Crazy Horse with his bayonet? Consider the facts closely before you answer.
8. Read Crazy Horse's final speech closely. What are the main points?
9. ("Long Hair" is George Custer.) Crazy Horse says that the whites believe a lie about Custer's death. What is this lie, and how does Crazy Horse defend himself against this accusation?
10. How do Crazy Horse and his parents demonstrate that they share a profound love?
11. Neihardt connects the death of Crazy Horse to nature in the final stanza. In what ways? Why does Neihardt relate the human experience to nature?

12. What is your response to the death of Crazy Horse? Which details in the poem affected you the most?

Writing Prompts for John G. Neihardt's "Death of Crazy Horse"

1. In the second stanza Neihardt writes this line about Crazy Horse: "The last great Sioux rode down to his defeat." List and discuss the ways that Crazy Horse and his people are defeated.
2. In an ideal world there would be no wars between cultures but instead mutual toleration, perhaps even admiration. Consider this idea for an essay in which you tell how the violent conflict on the Great Plains between whites and Native Americans could have been resolved peacefully. You might craft your essay in the form of a letter written simultaneously to two people, say Crazy Horse and Custer, or as a public letter to a prominent newspaper, or as a letter to the US government. Imagine that you are living in 1877. Incorporate details from Neihardt's story.
3. Is Crazy Horse a hero worthy of your admiration? Use Neihardt's story and perhaps details from other sources to support your answer. Think about the word *hero* before you begin writing. Use a literature handbook to find a good definition of this word and allow this definition to guide your writing. Or develop a definition of your own.
4. Read from three or four books or articles about Crazy Horse written by professional historians. Then ask yourself this question: Is Neihardt's literary interpretation of history accurate? Does he deviate from historical accounts in any ways? Be sure to consult reputable sources.
5. Finally, if you are looking for a companion piece to "The Death of Crazy Horse," consider reading Neihardt's famous *Black Elk Speaks*. Do these two literary works present a similar view of Native history in the nineteenth century? Or are they essentially different?

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