Black Elk Speaks

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN G. NEIHARDT

John G. Neihardt was born in Sharpsburg, Illinois on January 8, 1881 and grew up in Kansas and Nebraska. He enrolled in the Nebraska Normal College in Wayne, Nebraska in 1893, where he supported himself by working as a bell-ringer, ringing a bell to notify teachers and students when it was time to change classes. His first published work was the *Divine Enchantment* (1900), a long poem which expanded on his Protestant upbringing to explore a more universal take on spiritual experience. As a young man, Neihardt worked for an Indian trader in Bancroft, Nebraska, a town outside the Omaha Reservation, which spurned his fascination with American Indian culture. He became acquainted with many Omaha Indians during this time and wrote several short stories inspired by these friendships, publishing them in magazines like *Overland*, *Outing*, and the *American*. In 1908, Neihardt married Mona Martinsen, a sculptor who studied with Rodin in Paris, and they had three children together: Enid, Hilda, and Sigurd. In 1921, Neihardt was named Poet Laureate of Nebraska. One of Neihardt's most well-known works is *A Cycle of the West* (1949), a book of five epic poems written over 30 years that traces the history of western settlement and the displacement of American Indians. He worked as an editor and critic for the *Minneapolis Journal*, the *Kansas City Journal-Post*, *The New York Times*, and the *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*. Neihardt's relationship with Black Elk began in 1930, when he wanted to speak with a holy man who had firsthand experience with the Ghost Dance movement in order to complete *Song of the Messiah* (1935), the final installment of *A Cycle of the West*. Black Elk and Neihardt engaged in a series of conversations about Black Elk's life and involvement in the movement, and they developed a deep, meaningful connection. *Black Elk Speaks*, which is derived from these conversations, was published in 1932. Over the course of his career, Neihardt taught at the University of Nebraska and the University of Missouri. He died in 1973 at the age of 92.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Black Elk receives his great vision in the Black Hills, which the Lakota view as sacred. Much of Black Elk Speaks focuses on the Lakota's struggle to defend their rightful, sacred land against white colonizers. The Lakota people assumed control of the Black Hills in 1776, after conquering the Cheyenne. The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868—an agreement settled between the U.S. government and the Ogalala, Minneconjou, and Brule bands of the Lakota tribe, as well as the Dakota and Arapaho tribes—dictated that the Black Hills would be exempt from white settlement. In 1874, however, Lt. Col. George Custer led an expedition into the Black Hills to scout a location for a military post, which led to the discovery of gold in the Hills. As a result, hundreds of miners flocked to the Black Hills to mine illegally, disregarding the provisions outlined in the 1868 treaty. By 1889, the U.S. government seized control of the Black Hills and forced the Lakota to relocate to government agencies across South Dakota.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

One important aspect of *Black Elk Speaks* is its focus on Black Elk's quest toward spiritual discovery. Other books that chart a protagonist's spiritual journey include Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* and Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*. Black Elk Speaks isn't authored by Black Elk exclusively: the book is a representation of Black Elk's story, as told through Neihardt. This aspect aligns *Black Elk Speaks* with a sub-genre of autobiography coined "as-told-to" narratives, or firsthand accounts conveyed through authors, anthropologists, or ethnographers. Plains Indians, in particular, were common subjects of such works. Some other notable "as-told-to" autobiographies are *Pretty-shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows* by Frank B. Linderman and *Cheyenne Memories* by John Stands in Timber and Margot Liberty. Many regard *Black Elk Speaks* as a somewhat problematic work due to issues of authenticity that arise from Neihardt's authorship. While Neihardt's depiction of Black Elk's story has been said "to read like extensions of [Black Elk's] consciousness," issues of translation, cultural differences, and the artistic liberties Neihardt took to transform the transcripts of his conversations with Black Elk into a cohesive book make it impossible to regard *Black Elk Speaks* as a direct, wholly accurate portrayal of Black Elk's life and views. Raymond J. DeMallie's study of *Black Elk Speaks*, titled *The Sixth Grandfather*, presents direct transcripts from Black Elk's conversations with Neihardt, thereby granting the reader a more accurate representation of Black Elk's story.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Black Elk Speaks
- **When Written:** 1932
- **Where Written:** U.S.
- **When Published:** 1932
- **Literary Period:** American Realism
- **Genre:** Biography
- **Setting:** Great Plains, Western U.S.
- **Climax:** Tensions mount between the Wasichu soldiers and the Sioux as the Ghost Dance movement revitalizes the

Indian resistance. These tensions culminate in the Wounded Knee Massacre, in which many Lakota—mainly women and children—are murdered by U.S. soldiers.

- **Antagonist:** The U.S. government
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Sacred Land. Harney Peak, the location in the Black Hills where Black Elk received his great vision, was renamed Black Elk Peak in 2016.

The Title that Never Was. Neihardt originally wanted Black Elk Speaks to be called "The Tree that Never Bloomed," after one of the main sacred symbols in Black Elk's vision.

PLOT SUMMARY

Black Elk Speaks tells the life story of Black Elk, a Lakota medicine man, visionary, and spiritual leader, as he reflects on the destruction of his culture as a result of American westward expansion, as well as his failure to enact his visionary powers to save his people and preserve their way of life. The book is based on transcripts from conversations held between the book's author, John Neihardt, and Black Elk.

The narrative begins with Black Elk ceremoniously lighting the peace pipe. He offers the pipe to the Great Spirit and asks the Spirit for knowledge before passing it around to his audience. He tells his audience that the story he will tell isn't only of his life, but of all life. Black Elk explains that he is a Lakota of the Ogalala band. He speaks of his early childhood years, which were darkened by the looming threat of the Wasichus (white people) moving westward in pursuit of gold and wealth. Black Elk grows up fearing that the *Wasichus* will take over his land, kill his people, and destroy their way of life.

Black Elk is five years old the first time he hears voices in the clouds, though he is too afraid to tell anybody about them. When Black Elk is nine years old, he becomes very ill. One night, he loses consciousness and has his first, great vision. In this highly symbolic vision, Black Elk is transported into a cloud world, where he meets Six Grandfathers in a tepee with a rainbow at its door. The Grandfathers explain that they summoned forth Black Elk to give him sacred objects and the power to heal and to save his people. In his vision, Black Elk sees his people being forced to march down a black road of war and destruction. The Grandfathers send Black Elk back to earth and tell him to use his power and knowledge to help his people and restore their **nation's sacred hoop**.

Black Elk regains consciousness and finds himself in his tepee with his parents, who tell him he's been sick for 12 days, but that a medicine man named Whirlwind Chaser, who is Standing Bear's uncle, cured him. Whirlwind Chaser tells Black Elk's parents that there is something special about him. Black Elk isn't the same after his vision: he feels lost and confused by the higher calling given to him in the vision, and he's also afraid to tell anybody what he's seen, for fear that they won't believe him.

As Black Elk grows up, he continues to receive advice from voices, which often alert him to the presence of dangers lurking nearby. Still, Black Elk grows increasingly forlorn when he isn't able to fully act on the powers given to him in his vision. Tensions continue to mount between the Indians and the *Wasichus* as Black Elk grows older, with more *Wasichus* moving west in search of wealth. The discovery of **gold** in the Black Hills and the development of the Transcontinental Railroad ultimately leads to the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876, a war waged between Plains Indians and U.S. Army. The battle is a success for Black Elk's people, but their problems continue nonetheless.

Backed by the U.S. government and a series of broken treaties, *Wasichus* continue to take over Indian land and, increasingly, Indians are forced to either live on government agencies or starve to death. Crazy Horse, a Lakota chief, warrior of great renown, and Black Elk's second cousin, is murdered by *Wasichus* in 1877 while resisting arrest. After Crazy Horse's death, Black Elk and some others move north to Canada, known as "Grandmother's Land," joining others such as Sitting Bull and Gall, who have chosen to live in exile rather than live on *Wasichu* agencies.

Motivated by the higher calling he assumes after his initial vision, Black Elk returns to his homeland. A medicine man named Black Road tells Black Elk that he must perform his vision publicly if he wants to activate its powers. After a series of public ceremonies—such as the horse dance, the dog vision, and the heyoka ceremony—Black Elk realizes his vision and takes ownership of his power. His people now accept him as a medicine man, and he is 19 years old when he performs his first healing. Black Elk might be capable of healing individual people, but he remains unable to help his people reclaim their stolen culture and land, and the nation's hoop remains broken. Out of desperation, he joins Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in order to gain insight into *Wasichu* culture, reasoning that a familiarity with his oppressor's culture might help him know how to help his people.

Black Elk tours with Buffalo Bill's show throughout the U.S. and in Europe, where he meets Queen Victoria, whom he calls Grandmother England. Black Elk sees nothing of value in *Wasichu* culture, which he sees as motivated by greed, and he decides that it was only out of desperation that he thought his journey abroad could help his people. Black Elk becomes friendly with a *Wasichu* girl while he is in Paris, and she invites him back to her family home. While visiting the girl's family, Black Elk falls ill and has another vision in which he travels across the Atlantic Ocean on a cloud and sees his family, who

are suffering. Black Elk regains consciousness to find the girl's family hovering over him and learns that he had been near death for several days.

Black Elk returns home after recovering from his illness to find his people displaced, suffering, and living on agencies. Their condition has worsened during his time abroad: the bison are mostly dead, and everyone is cold and starving. Shortly after he returns to his native land, Black Elk hears about a new movement, the Ghost Dance, started by a Paiute man named Wovoka, who many believe to be a Wanekia (messiah). According to Wovoka's premonitions, dancing the Ghost Dance will help Indians gain entry into an afterlife in which they have defeated the *Wasichus*, their culture is restored, and they are able to see their deceased relatives. Black Elk is initially skeptical of the Ghost Dance movement but starts to believe in it after recognizing many similarities between the Ghost Dance and his initial "great vision." Black Elk participates in the movement, hoping that it will allow him to finally act on vision and save his people.

The Ghost Dance movement reinvigorates the Plains Indians, reigniting the rebellious efforts that had dwindled as their displacement and suffering grew more widespread. *Wasichu* soldiers recognize the Indians' renewed strength and become intimidated by the threat that the Ghost Dance poses to their power. As a result, they enforce guidelines that limit when and where dances can occur. Tensions grow, culminating in the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, in which many Lakota people—half of whom were women and children—are murdered by U.S. cavalrymen.

Black Elk wants to seek revenge after the Wounded Knee Massacre, but Chief Red Cloud ultimately convinces Indians that their situation is too dire and that it is in their best interest to surrender. In the aftermath of this defeat, Black Elk laments his inability to act on the powers given to him in his initial vision and mourns the destruction of his people.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Black Elk – Black Elk is an Ogalala Lakota medicine man, spiritual leader, and the narrator of the *Black Elk Speaks*. He begins hearing voices when he is only four years old and he experiences his first great vision when he is nine, during a period when he is deathly ill. In this richly symbolic vision, Black Elk is transported to a cloud world where the Great Spirit shows him the dire future of starving, misery, and displacement that awaits his people before granting him the power necessary to rescue them and restore his nation's "**sacred hoop**." As spiritually invigorating as this experience is, Black Elk's vision quickly becomes the source of much anxiety and alienation. Black Elk is reluctant to talk to anybody in his tribe about his vision because he doesn't think they will believe him, and this social isolation makes him feel like an outsider. After Black Elk assumes his role as a medicine man and gains the respect of his people, he feels mounting pressure to save his people and their culture and to fulfill the destiny presented in his vision. Despite Black Elk's desire to rescue his people and restore their sacred hoop, his spiritual power proves to be no match for the malicious worldly forces that the Lakota are up against: over the course of *Black Elk Speaks*, his people are displaced, dehumanized, and killed by the growing Wasichu presence in their land, and Black Elk regards his inability to prevent and correct the *Wasichus*' acts of violence as a personal failure. Black Elk's dedication to honor the higher purpose that his vision grants him makes him a humble character, though his attitude toward his people's white oppressors is critical and bitter. He disdains the *Wasichus*' unending greed, and he justifies committing acts of violence and revenge against them on the basis that the *Wasichus* lie to his people and attack them without provocation. At the end of the narrative, Black Elk's replaces his anger and bitterness for grief and resignation when he accepts that the "sacred tree" that represents his culture is dead, and that he has failed to protect his people.

Crazy Horse – Crazy Horse is a Lakota chief, holy man, warrior, and Black Elk's second cousin. Black Elk admires Crazy Horse and grows up hearing stories of his bravery. According to Black Elk, Crazy Horse became a chief after he had a vision as a boy, and it is Crazy Horse's sacred, visionary power that makes him such a powerful warrior and protects him from harm. He is a prolific warrior, having fought in the Fetterman Fight, the Fight with Three Stars (the Battle of the Rosebud), and the Battle of Little Bighorn. Everyone respects Crazy Horse, though he behaves somewhat reclusively when not in battle, rarely talking to anyone and never singing and dancing with the other Lakota, except with small children. Crazy Horse repeatedly fights on behalf of his people and their land, refusing to surrender to the Wasichus (white people) and relocate his people to government agencies. In 1877, Crazy Horse is murdered while resisting arrest at the Red Cloud Agency. His death greatly affects the Lakota. Black Elk sees Crazy Horse's death as contributing significantly to his people's decline, and he wonders whether his people would still have control of the Black Hills if Crazy Horse hadn't died.

Red Cloud – Red Cloud is a Lakota chief. In 1868, Red Cloud and chiefs from other Sioux tribes sign the Fort Laramie Treaty with the U.S. government that creates the Great Sioux Reservation and establishes the Black Hills as exempt from white settlement. However, less than 10 years later, miners enter the Hills illegally when **gold** is discovered there, and the treaty is eventually broken. Black Elk describes Red Cloud as a "great" chief, though he ultimately thinks that Red Cloud is too passive toward the Wasichus (white people), whom he stopped fighting after signing the Fort Laramie Treaty. Red Cloud and

his band are known as "Hang-Around-the-Fort" people because they cooperate with the U.S. government and live on agencies instead of fighting to save their land and preserve their way of life. After the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, Red Cloud makes a speech to the Sioux warriors, persuading them to surrender to the U.S. government.

Black Elk's father – Black Elk's father is also named Black Elk; he is a medicine man and a cousin to Crazy Horse. Black Elk's father was injured in the Fetterman Fight in 1866. Although Black Elk's father isn't an especially developed character, Black Elk shows how instrumental his father's instruction is to his development as a hunter and warrior. Many of Black Elk's interactions with his father occur when they are hunting together. Black Elk's father is loyal to his family; for example, when his nephew, Black Wasichu, is killed in the Battle of Little Bighorn, he and Black Wasichu's father retaliate by butchering a Wasichu (white) soldier. Like Black Elk, Black Elk's father believes it is his people's responsibility to defend their land. For this reason, he reveres Crazy Horse's bravery and condemns Red Cloud, finding Red Cloud's willingness to sell the Black Hills to the *Wasichus* "cheap."

White Cow Sees / Black Elk's mother – White Cow Sees is Black Elk's mother. She is proud of her son's accomplishments in battle, which she demonstrates by celebrating when he returns home from the Battle of Little Bighorn with his first scalp. White Cow Sees is affectionate toward Black Elk, as evidenced by the concern she expresses when he is ill as a child and by her happiness when he returns home from his long trip to Europe. In turn, Black Elk takes care of White Cow Sees: Black Elk's father and siblings die while he is in Europe with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and when Black Elk returns home, he works at a Wasichu store to support her.

Standing Bear – Standing Bear is Black Elk's friend; he's a Minneconjou Lakota. He is present during Black Elk's conversations with Neihardt. Because Standing Bear is a few years older than Black Elk, Black Elk consults him to verify parts of his life that he was too young to remember. Standing Bear participates in the Battle of Little Big Horn.

John Neihardt – Neihardt is the author of *Black Elk Speaks*. With Ben Black Elk acting as a translator, Black Elk told Neihardt the story of his life. *Black Elk Speaks* is Black Elk's life story, as told through Neihardt. When Black Elk addresses an audience (using "you"), he is speaking to Neihardt. The Author's Postscript at the end of the book is told from Neihardt's perspective.

The Six Grandfathers – The Six Grandfathers are the six wise men who summon Black Elk to the cloud world in his great vision. In his vision, Black Elk finds the Grandfathers waiting for him in a cloud tepee that has a flaming rainbow for a door. The Grandfathers take turns giving Black Elk sacred objects and powers to restore his people before showing him the dire future that awaits the Lakota, followed by a depiction of Black Elk's people living in peace and harmony. Black Elk returns from his vision with the understanding that the Grandfathers have given him the sacred task of restoring his **nation's hoop** (which symbolizes cultural unity) and saving his people. Black Elk believes that the Six Grandfathers are the Powers of the World, or a manifestation of all that the Lakota believe to be sacred.

Wovoka ("The Wanekia") – Wovoka is a Paiute Indian who pioneers the Ghost Dance movement. Wovoka is called "Jack Wilson" by the Wasichus, and American Indians believe that he is a *Wanekia*, or messiah. Wovoka's vision suggests that the apocalypse is approaching and that, by performing the Ghost Dance, American Indians will be able to transport themselves to a better world in which their culture is restored and they are reunited with their deceased relatives.

General George Custer – Custer was commander of U.S. Seventh Cavalry, who were defeated in Battle of Little Big Horn. The Lakota call Custer *Pahuska*, which is the Lakota word for "Long Hair." In the summer of 1874, Custer led an expedition into the Black Hills which resulted in the discovery of **gold**, which led to an influx of illegal Wasichu mining activity in an area that had been allotted to the Sioux in the Fort Laramie Treaty in 1868.

Parisian girl – The Parisian girl is a Wasichu (white) girl who takes a liking to Black Elk when she meets him while he's traveling throughout Europe with Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows. While at the girl's house, Black Elk falls ill and has a vision in which he is transported home to his people.

Grandmother England – "Grandmother England" is Queen Victoria of Great Britain. Black Elk and the other Wild West Show performers meet Grandmother England when they perform for her in London. Grandmother England is kind to the American Indians, and Black Elk wonders whether his people would be struggling as hard if she—and not the U.S. government—had taken over his land.

Sitting Bull – Sitting Bull is a Hunkpapa chief and holy man. Sitting Bull fought in the Battle of Little Bighorn, after which Sitting Bull and Gall, another Hunkpapa chief, flee to Canada to avoid living on government agencies. U.S. soldiers kill Sitting Bull for resisting arrest Shortly before the Wounded Knee Massacre.

Yellow Bird – Yellow Bird is a Lakota warrior who is part of Big Foot's band. When Wasichu soldiers force Big Foots' people to give up their guns, Yellow Bird resists. His gun accidentally goes off, killing a U.S. Cavalry officer, which starts the massacre at Wounded Knee. Yellow Bird dies at the massacre.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Iron Hawk – Iron Hawk is a Hunkpapa Lakota and Black Elk's childhood friend. Iron Hawk is present for Black Elk's conversations with Neihardt and contributes information

pertaining to his involvement in the Battle of the Rosebud and the Battle of Little Bighorn.

Fire Thunder – Fire Thunder is Black Elk's childhood friend. Fire Thunder is present during Black Elk's conversations with Neihardt and adds clarifying details to Black Elk's narrative.

Ben Black Elk – Ben Black Elk is Black Elk's son. He is present during Black Elk's conversations with Neihardt and serves as translator.

Whirlwind Chaser – Whirlwind Chaser is Standing Bear's uncle and the medicine man who cures Black Elk when he falls ill and has his first vision. Whirlwind Chaser tells Black Elk's mother and Black Elk's father that there is something special about their son.

Buffalo Bill – Buffalo Bill, also known as William Cody, was a U.S. soldier and showman. Black Elk joins Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and travels throughout Europe with the production from 1886-1889. Black Elk also refers to Buffalo Bill as *Pahuska*, the Lakota word for "Long Hair."

Watanye – Watanye is an older Lakota man who teaches Black Elk to fish and tells him the story of High Horse.

Refuse-to-Go – Refuse-to-Go is Black Elk's maternal grandfather. Refuse-to-Go doesn't appear much in the story, but Black Elk says that he is very close to him.

Plenty Eagle Feathers – Plenty Eagle feathers is Black Elk's grandmother and White Cow Sees's mother.

Red Eagle Woman – Red Eagle woman is Black Elk's grandmother and Black Elk's father's mother.

Drinks Water – Drinks Water is a Lakota holy man who has a premonition about the Lakota people's dire future.

High Horse – High Horse is the subject of Watanye's tale, "High Horse's Courting," a story about High Horse's attempts to win over a girl he likes.

Red Deer – Red Deer is High Horse's friend. Red Deer assists High Horse in winning over his love interest.

Crow Nose – Crow Nose is a Lakota horse guard who murders a Crow trying to steal a horse.

Three Stars (General Crook) – Three Stars is U.S. Cavalry General George Crook. Crazy Horse's warriors defeat Three Stars's troops at the Battle of the Rosebud in 1876. Three Stars was also involved in the treaty of 1889, which took away much of what remained of the Black Hills for the Sioux people.

Rattling Hawk – Rattling Hawk is a Lakota warrior wounded in the Battle of the Rosebud. Black Elk helps Hairy Chin, an old medicine man, heal Rattling Hawk.

Hairy Chin – Hairy Chin is an old Lakota medicine man who heals Rattling Hawk. Black Elk helps Hairy Chin with Rattling Hawk's healing ceremony.

Black Wasichu – Black Wasichu is Black Elk's cousin who dies in the Battle of Little Big Horn.

Gall – Gall is a Hunkpapa chief. Gall fought in the Battle of Little Bighorn. He and Sitting Bull flee with their people to Canada to avoid living on agencies.

Dull Knife – Dull Knife is a chief whose Shyela tribe was attacked by Colonel Mackenzie in November 1876.

Spotted Tail – Spotted Tail is Crazy Horse's uncle; he's a Lakota chief. Black Elk is critical of Spotted Tail, who he thinks is too cooperative with the U.S. government.

Running Horse – Running Horse is Black Elk's uncle. Black Elk is hunting bison with Running Horse when he hears a voice that alerts him to a band of nearby Crows, who are enemies to the Lakota.

Hard-to-Hit – Hard-to-Hit is Black Elk's cousin who dies while Black Elk's people are in Canada.

Bear Sings – Bear Sings is a medicine man who helps Black Elk perform the horse dance.

Black Road – Black Road is a medicine man who helps Black Elk perform the horse dance. He also tells Black Elk that performing his vision publicly will allow him to access the powers it imbues him with and be accepted by his people.

Few Tails – Few Tails is a medicine man who helps Black Elk perform the lamenting ceremony that leads to his dog vision.

Wachpanne – Wachpanne is a man with heyoka experience who helps Black Elk perform the *heyoka* ceremony.

One Side – One Side is Black Elk's friend who helps him perform the heyoka ceremony and is present when Black Elk finds the sacred four-rayed herb. One Side also helps Black Elk perform the bison ceremony.

Cuts-to-Pieces – Cuts-to-Pieces is a man whose son is cured by Black Elk in his first healing experience.

Fox Belly – Fox Belly is a medicine man who helps Black Elk perform the bison ceremony.

Running Elk – Running Elk is Standing Bear's uncle who helps Black Elk with the elk ceremony.

Good Thunder – Good Thunder is a Lakota man with whom Black Elk dances the Ghost Dance, and one of the men Black Elk's people send to report back on Wovoka's legitimacy.

Kicking Bear – Kicking Bear is a Lakota man heavily involved in the Ghost Dance movement. Black Elk dances with Kicking Bear and Good Thunder.

Big Foot – Big Foot is a Minneconjou Lakota chief. He and his people are killed at the Wounded Knee Massacre.

Dog Chief – Dog Chief is Black Elk's friend who was present at the beginning of the Wounded Knee Massacre and tells him how the battle began.

TERMS

Agency – Agencies were establishments enacted by the U.S. government to control American Indian life. Many American Indians had no other choice but to live on agencies after westward expansion resulted in their displacement and the diminishment of their food sources, like bison. At the time, agencies were synonymous with reservations.

Brules – The Brules are one of the seven bands, or tribes, that make up the Lakota people. The other tribes are Black Feet, Hunkpapa, Minneconjou, Ogalala, Sans Arcs, and Two Kettles.

Crow – The Crow are a Plains tribe. They were enemies of the Sioux during the timespan **Black Elk** covers in his narrative.

Ghost Dance – The Ghost Dance movement was a messianic movement pioneered by a Paiute Indian named **Wovoka** (called Jack Wilson by the Wasichus) in the late 19th century. The movement spread across the U.S. and was adopted by various American Indian tribes. Wovoka believed that performing the Ghost Dance would grant Indians entry into the afterlife, allow them to reunite with their deceased relatives, and harness the powers of the dead to rebel against their *Wasichu* oppressors, take back their stolen land, and restore their traditional way of life.

Heyoka – *Heyoka* is a Lakota word meaning "contrary" or "sacred clown." In the Lakota culture, *heyokas* are sacred people—people with access to spiritual knowledge and power—who publicly perform those powers in an entertaining, opposite fashion, and one might compare a *heyoka*'s demeanor to that of a court jester. The purpose of a *heyoka* ceremony is to give people joy or laughter so that they are ready to receive wisdom or truth. Only people who have had visions of the thunder beings can be *heyokas*.

Hunkpapa – The Hunkpapa are one of the seven bands, or tribes, that make up the Lakota people. Hunkpapa means "Head of the Camp Circle" in Lakota. **Iron Hawk** is a Hunkpapa.

Lakota – The Lakota are one of the Great Sioux Nation's three tribes. The Lakota people consist of seven different bands, or tribes: Black Feet, Brules, Hunkpapa, Minneconjou, Ogalala, Sans Arcs, and Two Kettles.

Lament – Lamenting is a type of vision quest in which the lamenter is "crying for a dream." In this sacred ritual, the lamenter seeks the advice of a medicine man before isolating themselves and crying out for a vision. Lamenters who are spiritually worthy receive a vision and then must consult their medicine man guide to help them interpret it. **Black Elk** receives his dog vision when he goes lamenting.

Minneconjou – The Minneconjou are one of the seven bands, or tribes, that make up the Lakota people. Minneconjou means "Planter by Water" in Lakota. **Standing Bear** is a Minneconjou.

Ogalala – The Ogalala are one of the seven bands, or tribes, that make up the Lakota people. Black Elk is an Ogalala Lakota. Ogalala means "Scatter One's Own" in the Lakota language.

Sioux – The Sioux are a grouping of Indian tribes: the Lakota, the Dakota, and the Nakota. The Lakota (**Black Elk**'s tribe) are the westernmost Sioux tribe.

Wasichu – *Washichu* is the Lakota word meaning for "white people." In the Lakota language, the term also refers to "something holy, incomprehensible."

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

NATURE

Black Elk Speaks tells the story of Black Elk, a Lakota medicine man, warrior, and spiritual leader, as he reflects on the increasingly violent conflicts between the Lakota and white settlers that were the backdrop for his spiritual development and coming of age. In addition to the horrible physical violence that white settlers and soldiers inflicted on the Lakota people, white settlers' westward expansion also resulted in the clashing of two strikingly different cultures. The Lakota people organize their lives around nature: their months are named after natural occurrences (August is "the Moon When the Cherries Turn Black," for example), and they see themselves as part of a larger picture of natural forces created by one "Great Spirit." Beyond showing how significantly nature figures into Lakota spirituality and customs, *Black Elk Speaks* emphasizes the strikingly different way that Wasichus (white people) relate to nature. Whereas the Lakota see the natural world as sacred and have an interdependent relationship with it, the *Wasichus* see themselves as separate from nature, and their relationship to the natural world is one motivated by greed and the desire to control and exploit it.

Lakota people view themselves as united with the natural world, making no hierarchical distinction between humans and nature. Nature is involved in their daily life, cultural symbols, and spirituality. Black Elk, the book's narrator and protagonist, makes this clear in his opening remarks when he describes the story he is about to tell as not only "the story of my life," but "the story of all life [...] and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things." Black Elk's opening remarks situate humans ("two-leggeds") as a part of the larger picture of the natural world. To the Lakota, there is no line where the natural world ends and humans begin—rather, all aspects of the earth, whether they be plants,

animals, or people—"are children of one mother and their father is one Spirit." The Lakota's interdependence with nature is reflected in their respect for animals. For example, while the Lakota hunt bison, Black Elk explains that they "kill[] only what [they] needed." The Lakota's reverence toward nature is also reflected in the way animals are incorporated into their spirituality. Animals feature prominently in Black Elk's initial prophetic vision, which includes four groups of 12 horses representing the north, south, east, and west. The vision also features a man painted red who turns into a bison before turning into the sacred "four-rayed herb" that Black Elk will later incorporate into his healing practices. The transformation of the man into an animal, and later a plant, further emphasizes the Lakota's interdependent relationship with nature.

In contrast, *Wasichu* culture situates the natural world as separate from humans. *Wasichus* strive not to be a part of the natural world, but to control and benefit financially from nature. Early in the book, Black Elk explains that the main reason his people and the *Wasichus* are fighting is because "the Wasichus had found much of the **yellow metal** that they worship and that makes them crazy." Black Elk recalls one particular time in his childhood (1874) when his people had been camping in the Black Hills, which had been allotted to them in an 1868 treaty with the *Wasichus*. Despite the fact that this land was reserved for the Lakota people, the *Wasichus* began mining the Hills illegally after discovering that there was gold there, forcing Black Elk's band out of their sacred land. Black Elk explains: "our people knew there was yellow metal in little chunks up there, but they did not bother with it, because it was not good for anything." While the Lakota revere nature and only take from it what they know they can use, the *Wasichus* take more than what they need so that they can exploit it for financial gain.

The *Wasichus* also demonstrate a comparable lack of reverence toward animals. By 1883, Black Elk laments, "they say, the last of the bison herds was slaughtered by the Wasichus." Unlike the Lakota, who only killed as many bison as they needed to survive through the winter, the *Wasichus* "did not kill them to eat; they killed them for the metal that makes them crazy, and they took only the hides to sell." Just as the *Wasichu* exploited the sacred Black Hills—which had been home to the Lakota people—for the gold buried underground, so, too, did they dishonor and destroy the animals that had been an important cultural symbol and critical food source for the Lakota people. Another example of the *Wasichus'* disrespect for the natural world occurs when Black Elk is on a ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean to be a part of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, a traveling production that featured performances by cowboys, Sioux, and other things stereotypically associated with the "Wild West." When a destructive storm kills several animals, including a bison, the *Wasichus* carelessly throw the dead animal overboard. Black Elk recalls that he "felt like crying, because [he] thought right there they were throwing part of the power of [his] people away." It is unthinkable for Black Elk to carelessly waste the life of a sacred animal and throw it into the sea as though it were nothing—it is akin to "throwing part of the power of [his] people away." But for the *Wasichu*, a bison is simply an object to be used and disposed of. Overall, *Black Elk Speaks* criticizes the *Wasichus'* dispassionate relationship with nature, which fuels their greed and allows them to destroy symbols that are central to Lakota spirituality and daily life. Their perceived superiority to the natural world pardons the destruction of nature that would be morally and spiritually unforgiveable to the Lakota people.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF CEREMONY

Publicly performed ceremonies are an important part of Lakota culture: ritualized ceremonies like the sun dance are critical ways for Lakota people to acquire spiritual "power" and "endurance." *Black Elk Speaks* frames ceremonies as more than symbolic, spiritual gestures, however. The ceremonies that Black Elk highlights in his narrative suggest that ceremony can elicit real change on the world by allowing its participants and observers to form new perspectives of reality, ultimately inspiring them to engage in actions that have lasting consequences.

One example of a ceremony that is performed to bring about understanding is the horse dance. As Black Elk grows older, he becomes increasingly troubled by his inability to understand and act on the vision he had as a child. As a result, he continues to isolate from others and grow ill. His parents consult a medicine man named Black Road to help. At this point, Black Elk is so frightened and troubled by his inability to act on his vision that he tells Black Road everything. Black Road tells Black Elk, "Nephew, I know now what the trouble is! You must do what the bay horse in your vision wanted you to do. You must do your duty and perform this vision for your people upon earth. You must have the horse dance first for the people to see." Black Road's advice emphasizes the critical role that the horse dance—or, the ceremonial performance or display of Black Elk's vision—plays in Black Elk's path toward understanding and ultimately acting on his vision. After Black Elk and other members of his band perform the horse dance, reenacting Black Elk's initial vision, he has another vision. He sees the "tepee built of cloud and sewed with lightning, the flaming rainbow door and, underneath, the Six Grandfathers sitting, and all the horses thronging in their quarters, and also [himself] upon the bay before the tepee." Performing the ceremonial horse dance allows Black Elk to revisit the forces at play in his initial vision, which allows him to better make sense of them and know exactly what he has to do for his people. Black Elk explains, "I looked about me and could see that what we then were doing was like a shadow cast upon the earth from yonder vision in the heavens, so bright it was and clear. I knew

the real was yonder and the darkened dream of it was here." Here, Black Elk deems the ceremonial horse dance as a "darkened dream" and his vision as "the real." Performing the ceremony allows Black Elk to realize the connection between ceremony and higher spiritual truths. The "darkened dream" of higher knowledge that ceremonies represent is gate to higher understanding. Performing the horse dance allows Black Elk to communicate his vision to his people in a way he hadn't been able to before, as well as better understand his vision than he did before. As a result of the horse dance ceremony, Black Elk and his people are more understanding and accepting of his vision.

Another example of a ceremony that has real consequences is the Ghost Dance movement that develops among various tribes in the late 19th century. The Ghost Dance creates both positive and negative results: on the one hand, it revitalizes tribes, instilling within them a final hope that they could restore their increasingly stifled cultures and traditional way of life. But on the other hand, this resurgence of hope makes Wasichus (white people) feel threatened, and they respond with force to stop the Ghost Dance, culminating in the Wounded Knee Massacre. The Ghost Dance movement is started by a man from the Paiute tribe whom the *Wasichus* call Jack Wilson and the Indians call Wovoka. According to Wovoka—whom the Indians believe is a Wanekia, or messiah—the end of the world is near, and if the people put "sacred red paint" on their faces and "dance a sacred ghost dance," then they will be able to access a better world, in which "there was plenty of meat, just like old times," and in which "all the dead Indians were alive, and all the bison that had ever been killed were roaming around again." In other words, by performing this ceremonial Ghost Dance, the culture, people, and animals that were all casualties of westward expansion could be restored, and the people could live in paradise. Black Elk first hears about Wovoka in 1889, after Black Elk's father, brother, and sister have died, and by which point the Lakota people's situation is dire: they have less land than ever before, they are ravaged by disease, and they are starving. For these reasons, the possibilities that Wovoka's Ghost Dance ceremony represent—to save the Indians and resurrect their dead and their culture—are especially appealing. The Ghost Dance is promising for Black Elk, who comes to see the ceremony and its sacred symbols and thematic goals as parallel to those of his own grand vision.

Participating in the Ghost Dance movement gives Black Elk and many others a renewed sense of hope in their ability to restore their vanishing old way of life—but the Ghost Dance movement has dire consequences, as well. As the movement spreads across different tribes, the *Wasichu* strive to put an end to the ritual dance movement, for fear that it will lead to future revolts. They begin to enforce limits on when and how frequently Indians can participate in ghost dances. Tensions between Indians and *Wasichus* grow, culminating in the death of Sitting Bull, who is killed resisting arrest, and in the Wounded Knee Massacre, in which the U.S. Army massacre hundreds of Lakota after Lakota men refuse to give up their guns. The grim aftermath of the Ghost Dance movement shows that while ceremony offers the possibility of deeper understanding and community engagement, it can also lead to dire, unanticipated consequences.

THE LOSS OF CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

At the time of *Black Elk Speaks*'s initial publication in 1932, westward expansion was still perceived as a heroic and admirable period of American history. Neihardt's narrative rendition of Black Elk's experience with the growing influence of Wasichu (white) culture complicates this prior narrative, explaining it from the perspective of the Lakota people who experienced subjugation as a result of westward expansion. Black Elk's perspective paints westward expansion as a wholly negative force that robbed the Lakota people of their traditions and sense of community.

American westward expansion resulted in the depletion of natural resources that were central to Lakota people's way of life. One example of this is the depletion of the country's bison population. Prior to the arrival of the *Wasichus*, the bison that roamed the plains "were so many that they could not be counted." Not only did bison provide the Lakota people with a steady food supply, the "great bison hunt" that Black Elk recounts in Chapter 4 presents the hunt as a culturally significant event in which young men can demonstrate their bravery and hunting prowess. Black Elk reinforces the bison hunt's significance by emphasizing how it brings the village together: the hunters sing songs together as they return to camp with their butchered meat, and the women make drying racks on which to hang the meat. Little boys have a "war" and "endurance" games that they traditionally engage in after a hunt. In one such game, boys form their own play "village" away from camp and are tasked by a lead boy or "advisor" with stealing small pieces of drying meat from the adults' village. Black Elk describes the traditions associated with the bison hunt to show that bison were not just a food source for his people: they were integral to important cultural and social practices of his people. Thus, when the *Wasichu* moved westward and began killing large numbers of bison for sport or to make money from their hides, the Lakota were deprived not only of food but of a key cultural component.

The dwindling bison population resulted in the loss of the Lakota people's nomadic lifestyle, as well, emphasizing the negative domino effect of the *Wasichus*' westward expansion. Black Elk states that by 1883, "the last of the bison herds were slaughtered by the Wasichus." Prior to the *Wasichus*' arrival in the west, the Lakota had practiced a nomadic lifestyle, moving camp to follow the bison herds and other primary food sources.

After they could no longer rely on bison for food—and after the *Wasichus* had confiscated their horses, limiting their ability to travel great distances to hunt—the *Wasichus* were forced to rely on the *Wasichus* for food, which meant that they had to live on government-run agencies and give up their nomadic lifestyle.

Life on government agencies—the parcels of land that the U.S. government allotted to Native American tribes to live on after colonizers stole Native lands in the process of westward expansion— resulted in the loss of important spiritual symbols, as well. The Lakota used to live in tepees, whose circular bases reflected the larger symbolic, spiritual importance the Lakota people place on the circle. According to Black Elk, "everything an Indian does is in a circle [...] because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round." The Lakota people form this idea from their culture's interdependence on nature, citing, for example, the roundness of Earth and the moon, the circular shape of bird nests, and the circular movement of the changing seasons as evidence that all of nature—including humans, who are part of the larger natural world—is meant to live and act in circles. As the *Wasichus* killed off the bison upon which the Lakota depended for food and bought more of their rightful land, the Lakota people were forced to live on government agencies if they wanted to survive and, subsequently, forced to abandon the symbols, such as the circle, that had been integral to their culture and spiritual beliefs. That the Indians had to give up their circular homes for "square boxes" favored by the *Wasichus* represents a loss of tradition and spiritually significant symbolism.

Beyond the loss of cultural practices and traditional symbols, westward expansion also resulted in the loss of a unified Lakota people. Black Elk foresees the destruction of his culture and the splintering of his people in his "great vision" in Chapter 3, in which he is transported to a cloud world and witnesses his people forced to walk down a "black road" of war and violence. When Black Elk's people walk down this road in the vision, Black Elk sees that the "**nation's hoop**," which symbolizes the unity of his people, is "broken like a ring of smoke that spreads and scatters and the holy tree seemed dying and all its birds were gone." Black Elk's vision anticipates the literal splintering of his people across different government-run agencies and across different, opposing alliances. While some Lakota leaders like Crazy Horse remain resistant to *Wasichu* forces (Crazy Horse is ultimately killed resisting arrest in 1877), other leaders, like Red Cloud, decide to stop fighting, give up their rightful land, and yield to the invading *Wasichu* forces. This example illustrates a dual loss of community and culture: because of the *Wasichus*' westward expansion, the Lakota lost both their traditional sense of unity as well as the cultural symbol—the "nation's hoop"—used to portray that unity.

ALIENATION

Alienation was a central feature of the Native American experience in the 19th century. As Wasichu (white) colonizers violently forced their ideologies and way of life on Native peoples, Sioux like Black Elk found it increasingly difficult to adhere to the cultural practices that gave their communities a sense of purpose and spiritual meaning. As *Wasichu* culture became the dominant culture, Indians felt like outsiders in their own land. *Black Elk Speaks* explores the idea of alienation from a more literal perspective through Black Elk's homesickness for his people and their familiar way of life, as well as intellectually or symbolically, through the estrangement Black Elk feels when he is unable convey the full meaning of his spiritual vision to his closest family and friends. Neihardt's literary examination of Black Elk's life shows how internal and external forces contributed to Black Elk's alienation, which frames alienation as the cost of a higher calling or social leadership.

The wisdom and higher level of understanding that Black Elk achieves through his spiritual vision separates him from others intellectually. Neihardt highlights how few people Black Elk has told of his vision early in the narrative. Black Elk explains that he didn't tell people about his vision for two primary reasons: out of the fear that nobody would believe a child could have such a powerful vision—he was only nine years old at the time of his first, most significant spiritual vision—and that it was impossible for him to put such a significant vision into words. As soon as Black Elk returns from his spiritual journey, he recalls: "I was sad because my mother and father didn't seem to know that I had been so far away." The knowledge and wisdom Black Elk gains in his vision alienates him from others. Black Elk should be happy to be back with his family, but he can't help but feel sad, knowing that his knew knowledge creates an intellectual, experiential barrier between him and his loved ones. This barrier is strengthened when Black Elk realizes he can't tell anyone about his vision out of fear that they won't believe him. Black Elk says: "I was very sad; for it seemed to me that everybody ought to know about [my vision], but I was afraid to tell, because I knew that nobody would believe me, little as I was, for I was only nine years old." In other words, his reluctance to talk candidly with his family about his vision perpetuates his alienation. In addition to fear, inability also prevents Black Elk from sharing his vision with others. He states: "I could see [my vision] all again and feel the meaning with a part of me like a strange power glowing in my body; but when the part of me that talks would try to make words for the meaning, it would be like fog and get away from me." Black Elk's vision imbues him with a wisdom that transcends language. The higher level of understanding that Black Elk has access to and others do not further exacerbates his alienation.

Black Elk also recalls feeling like he "did not belong to [his] people" after experiencing his vision. He recalls that they

seemed "almost like strangers." Others speak to the transformation Black Elk seemed to undergo after his childhood illness and vision. A friend of Black Elk, Standing Bear, recalls that, after Black Elk recovered from what everyone else saw as his illness (but what Black Elk maintains was his vision), "he was not like a boy." Standing Bear remembers hearing Black Elk's father remarking that Black Elk "ha[d] queer ways and he [did] not like to be at home." Black Elk's vision might have given him greater power and a higher purpose in life, but the fear and inability to discuss these things with others resulted in Black Elk's alienation.

A more concrete way that Black Elk Speaks explores alienation is through the homesickness Black Elk feels for his people when he is touring with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Black Elk decides to travel with Buffalo Bill in the first place to learn more about *Wasichu* culture so that he can help his people; in this way, his homesickness may be seen as the direct result of the obligation he has to help his people. Black Elk recalls that, once he became used to performing in these shows for *Wasichus*, he "was like a man who had never had a vision." He continues, "I felt dead and my people seemed lost and I thought I might never find them again." Being so physically and emotionally detached from his home alienates Black Elk from the people and cultural customs with which he is familiar. On a larger scale, Black Elk's homesickness also reflects the alienation that the Lakota feel when they were forced to adapt to the new, unfamiliar customs of the *Wasichus* as they gained control of the lands that had once been the Lakota's own. Black Elk explains how foreign and incomprehensible *Wasichu* culture is to him when he observes the greed inherent in it. He states: "I could see that the Wasichus did not care for each other the way our people did before the **nation's hoop** was broken. They would take everything from each other if they could, and so there were some who had more of everything than they could ever use, while crowds of people had nothing at all and maybe were starving. They had forgotten that the earth was their mother." This statement positions the Lakota culture as opposite that of the *Wasichu* culture. It emphasizes how out of place the *Wasichu* culture makes Black Elk feel when he realizes that the *Wasichu* culture in which he now finds himself immersed—and which continues to threaten the very existence of his own people and culture—has nothing in common with his own culture and beliefs.

UNREALIZED DREAMS

Black Elk's status as a visionary and medicine man made him something of a mediating figure between the physical world and the spiritual world, but the growing physical presence of white settlers and colonizers on Indian land complicated this role. Repeatedly, *Black Elk Speaks* suggests that the Wasichus' (white peoples') presence, and the violence and setbacks that accompanied it, stood in the way of Black Elk's task of realizing his vision and restoring peace to his people and their dying culture. In detailing Black Elk's failure, the book underscores the tragedy of unrealized dreams, which for Black Elk is detrimental on both a personal and a societal level.

Black Elk's initial vision bestows upon him the higher purpose to restore his people to the way they had been prior to the arrival of the *Wasichus*. Because Black Elk is so young when he receives his vision, however, he lacks the understanding and experience necessary to act on his vision meaningfully; in other words, Black Elk's youth is a psychological obstacle that prohibits him from understanding his dream and fulfilling his duty. In his first vision, Black Elk is transported to a cloud world where "Six Grandfathers" show him the destruction of the once-prosperous Lakota people. He sees his people forced to march down a "black road" paved with violence and suffering. In Black Elk's vision, the Grandfathers grant him the power he needs to restore his people. Before his vision ends, the oldest Grandfather tells Black Elk to "go back with power to the place whence you came, and it shall happen yonder that hundreds shall be sacred, hundreds shall be flames! Behold!" The vision provides Black Elk with foresight into the grim fate that awaits his people, but because Black Elk is so young at the time, he initially lacks the ability and experience to understand fully what was asked of him and how he was supposed to use his powers to restore his people. He recalls being unable to find the words to explain the meaning of his vision: "I could see it all again and feel the meaning with a part of me like a strange power [...] but when the part of me that talks would try to make words for the meaning, it would be like fog and get away from me." Black Elk's youth prevents him from articulating his vision to himself and to others, subsequently preventing him from fulfilling the destiny prescribed to him in the vision.

Even as Black Elk grows older and can grasp what the Grandfathers asked of him in his vision, his inability to use the powers the Grandfathers gave him in his vision to save his people in a meaningful, permanent way weighs heavily on him. Black Elk presents multiple occasions in which a strange feeling or "voice" alerts him to looming dangers. He recalls one instance in which voices alert him to the presence of Crows (enemies of Black Elk's Ogalala band) in the vicinity of his people's camp. He tells his people to flee. As they leave, they hear their enemies shooting into their abandoned tepees. Black Elk states: "I knew better than ever now that I really had power, for I had prayed for help form the Grandfathers and they had heard me and sent the **thunder** beings to hide us and watch over us while we fled." Instances like these reaffirm Black Elk's belief that he *has* power, but he remains unable to save his people from their gravest concern: being repeatedly forced off their land by the greedy *Wasichus*, having their community splintered, and witnessing the destruction of their most important cultural symbols and institutions. Black Elk might be

able to save his people from small-scale attacks like these, but his people are still walking down a "black road" leading toward suffering and destruction.

Despite Black Elk's eventual ability to assume his role as a medicine man and healer, the *Wasichu* forces are too strong, and his people's situation is too dire, for Black Elk to fully realize his powers. In the end, the *Wasichus* are successful in stealing Native American lands and minimizing the presence of their culture in the mainstream. Increasingly, *Wasichu* soldiers have forced Indians off their native land, cut off their food supply and ability to live traditional nomadic lifestyles by killing of the nation's once thriving bison population, and forced them to live on government agencies if they don't want to risk starving to death. Black Elk sees how the once-united Lakota nation, unified around the sacred, symbolic "nation's hoop" have broken apart, and feels despair. "I looked back on the past and recalled my people's old ways, but they were not living that way any more. They were traveling the black road, everybody for himself and with little rules of his own, as in my vision." Black Elk sees that his vision has come true and that he has done nothing about it.

Black Elk's narrative ends after the Wounded Knee Massacre, a particularly bloody battle that resulted in the death of hundreds of Lakota people, most of whom were civilian women and children. In the final lines of his narrative, Black Elk laments his inability to realize his destiny and save his people from destruction: "And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth,—you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the **sacred tree** is dead." These final lines reinforce the anxiety and burden that has plagued Black Elk throughout the entirety of his narrative: that the powers the Great Spirit gave to him have been for nothing, and that he is defenseless in the face of evil, more powerful *Wasichu* forces. Because of circumstances that are beyond his control, Black Elk is ultimately unable to fulfill the higher purpose assigned to him in his vision, and he fails both himself and his people.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THUNDER

The prevalence of thunder and other weather events in Black Elk's visions and daily life reflects the significant role that nature plays in Lakota culture and spirituality. Thunder's spiritual associations—particularly as they pertain to Black Elk's initial vision—also highlight the book's themes of unrealized dreams and alienation. For Black Elk, thunder is both a comfort and a source of immense anguish and frustration. On the one hand, thunder comforts Black Elk because it brings him back to his vision and reminds him that the spiritual world's "thunder beings" are looking over his people; in this way, thunder affirms his faith in the spiritual world and validates him as a holy man and visionary. On the other hand, thunder's association with his vision and the spiritual world frustrates him, because it is a constant reminder of his failure to enact the powers granted to him in his vision. When Black Elk hears thunder, he is overwhelmed by feelings of fear and unworthiness because it reminds him that he has done little to improve his people's situation, despite his spiritual obligation to do so. Eventually, Black Elk's fear of thunder and, by extension, the fear of failing his people, leads Black Elk to feel lonely, depressed, and alienated from his people. In this way, thunder symbolizes Black Elk's higher calling as well as the psychological burden that this calling places on him.

THE NATION'S HOOP AND THE BLOOMING TREE

The nation's hoop—a sacred image that is central to Black Elk's great vision—symbolizes the former unity of the Lakota people. After white settlers move west in search of **gold** and wealth, the Lakota are forced off their land and scattered across different agencies. Others, like Sitting Bull and Gall, flee to Canada to live in exile. The message Black Elk receives in his vision is to restore the nation's hoop—in other words, the Spirits have called upon him to restore his people's strength and unity, their culture, and their sense of community. Thus, when Black Elk mentions the nation's hoop, he is gesturing not only toward his vision, but toward the compromised unity of his people as a whole.

More generally, the nation's hoop also evokes the circle, which is an important symbol in Lakota culture, representing eternity and unbrokenness. The Lakotas turn to nature as proof of the circle's sacredness, citing the circular shape of birds nests and the moon's rotation, and they incorporate circles into many of their rituals, like the sun dance. The nation's hoop has personal significance for Black Elk as well, as it emphasizes the book's overarching themes of unrealized dreams. Black Elk frequently laments his failure to restore the nation's hoop, which his vision calls on him to do. In this way, Black Elk's frequent references to the nation's hoop reinforce his anxieties about not fulfilling his higher purpose.

The blooming tree functions in a similar way, symbolizing both tribal unity as well as Black Elk's anxieties about not being able to restore his people's culture. The blooming tree, another key symbol in Black Elk's initial vision, symbolizes the Lakotas' unity prior to their displacement. In his vision, Black Elk plants a stick in the center of the unbroken nation's hoop, and the stick turns into the blooming tree. Thus, the tree blooms and is sacred when the hoop is unbroken—that is, when the Lakotas are

united. Outside of his dream, Black Elk evokes the image of the blooming tree—or the tree that should have bloomed but did not—to express his remorse for not saving his people and for the death of their culture.

YELLOW METAL / GOLD

"Yellow metal," or gold, symbolizes the Wasichus' (white peoples') greed and, by extension, the looming threat that this greed poses to the Lakota people. When gold is discovered in the Black Hills during an expedition led by Custer in 1874, hundreds of *Wasichu* miners flock to the Hills in search of wealth, despite a 1868 treaty that reserved this land for the Lakotas. When Black Elk mentions the "yellow metal that makes the Wasichus crazy," he expresses disdain for the specific problems this craziness for gold causes for his people (stolen land and broken treaties), as well as a more general disapproval of the *Wasichus*' worldview: to Black Elk, the *Wasichus* obsession with gold symbolizes their disrespect of his people and their disregard for the earth.

By extension, objects that Black Elk describes as "bright" or "shining" also evoke gold and greed. For example, when Black Elk visits London while touring with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, he meets Grandmother England (Queen Victoria of Great Britain) who, he notes, wears a "shining" dress and hat, which presumably refers to the gold or jewels with which the garments are adorned. Although Grandmother England is arguably one of the kinder *Wasichus* with whom Black Elk interacts, the "shining" quality of her attire evokes the greed and excess of *Wasichu* culture that the British Crown epitomizes.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the University of Nebraska Press edition of *Black Elk Speaks* published in 2014.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ It is the story of all life that is holy and good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and of green things; for these are children of one mother and their father is one Spirit.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker), John Neihardt

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs at the beginning of the book, as Black Elk addresses his audience (namely John Neihardt, the author, though other tribal members were present for Neihardt's interviews with Black Elk) and introduces them to the story he will tell. Black Elk makes it clear that the narrative is not only his own, but "the story of all life that is holy and good to tell." This disclaimer is important for a few reasons: first, by not taking ownership of his story, and by not gloating mercilessly about his accomplishments, Black Elk establishes himself as a humble, unassuming character. Black Elk's opening remarks also give the reader an idea about the type of narrator they are faced with: Black Elk's assurance that the book won't be all about him, but about "all life," implies that he will present an authentic narrative with a broad perspective.

Additionally, these opening remarks are important because they give the reader insight into the Lakotas' sense of their place within the world around them. When Black Elk talks about "us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and of green things," grouping humans (two-leggeds) together with both animals (four-leggeds) and the rest of the natural world (green things), he shows that the Lakota have an interdependent relationship with nature. In other words, they see themselves as part of a larger, universal picture. Black Elk drives this point home with the remark that all living things on Earth are "children of one mother and their father is one Spirit," which conveys the idea that all living things are the children of mother nature, looked after by a universal spiritual presence.

❝ But now that I see it all as from a lonely hilltop, I know it was the story of a mighty vision given to a man too weak to use it; of a holy tree that should have flourished in a people's heart with flowers and singing birds, and now is withered; and of a people's dream that died in bloody snow.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, taken from Black Elk's introductory remarks to his audience, is important because it introduces the theme of unrealized dreams that unfolds across the

narrative. As Black Elk introduces his audience to the story he will tell, he reflects back on his past, portraying his life as "the story of a mighty vision given to a man too weak to use it." Black Elk regards himself as a failure and, by extension, his life, an unfinished journey. Black Elk's remarks show that he attributes his inability to realize his "mighty vision" to personal shortcoming rather than the extenuating circumstances—namely, white settlement—that threatened his people and their way of life in the first place. This quote shows that Black Elk blames himself for his people's demise, and that he defines his life in terms of having to live with the great guilt he feels for the perceived role he played in his people's way of life "that died in bloody snow."

The passage also introduces a symbol that is central to Black Elk's dream, and to the book, as whole: the "holy tree that should have flourished […] and is now withered." Throughout the book, the holy tree—a sacred object used in Lakota ritual, as well as a key element in many of Black Elk's visions—symbolizes the unity of the Lakota people and the preservation of their culture. Black Elk's description of "a people's dream that died in bloody snow" is both literal and figurative: on the figurative level, the phrase denotes the symbolic death of Lakota culture as a result of colonization and westward expansion. On a literal level, Black Elk's use of the phrase "died in bloody snow" alludes to the Wounded Knee Massacre, a gruesome conflict between the Lakota and the U.S. Army that ended with a snow storm covering the remains of Lakota victims (over half of whom were women and children) in a blanket of "bloody snow." Thus, Black Elk's final line simultaneously conveys the symbolic and literal last breaths of his people and their culture.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Once we were happy in our own country and we were seldom hungry, for then the two-leggeds and the four-leggeds lived together like relatives, and there was plenty for them and for us. But the Wasichus came, and they have made little islands for us and other little islands for the four-leggeds, and always these islands are becoming smaller, for around them surges the gnawing flood of the Wasichu; and it is dirty with lies and greed.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Black Elk describes what his boyhood was like before his life was full of troubles, and then he establishes what lies at the root of those troubles: "the gnawing flood of the Wasichus." Before the *Wasichus* (white people) arrived, Black Elk and his people "were happy in [their] own country," living harmoniously with "the four-leggeds […] like relatives," with humans and animals alike only using the natural resources they needed so that "there was plenty for them and for us." The Lakotas' relationship with the natural world was harmonious because they weren't trying to control it—they only coexisted with nature, which they treated as sacred. This chapter of the book represents something of a calm before the storm: it is a period of Black Elk's life before he must deal with the physical and existential threat that the *Wasichus* pose to his people, and before he has his great vision and, as a result, must shoulder the psychological burden being a visionary entails.

One of the most significant ways in which the *Wasichus* disrupted the Lakotas' lives was through their forced displacement: white colonizers ultimately gave American Indians the choice between starving to death on lands that no longer housed bison or on which crops couldn't grow, or moving to government-allotted agencies. Before the *Wasichus'* arrival, the Lakota "were happy in [their] own country," but this changed when the *Wasichus* forced them onto the "little islands" of land they allotted for them to use. Black Elk's lament goes beyond physical displacement, however—it also addresses the cultural displacement his people incurred as a result of colonization. Prior to Wasichu settlement, the Lakota lived harmoniously with the rest of the natural world. But the Wasichus, "dirty with lies and greed," didn't share the Lakotas' reverence for the natural world, wanting only to exploit it for financial gain. By killing off the bison population to sell their hides, the Wasichus took away the cultural connection the Lakota had with the bison and with the natural world more generally.

❝ Sometimes dreams are wiser than waking.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker), Drinks Water, Black Elk's father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Black Elk recalls a story his father told him about a Lakota holy man named Drinks Water who had a vision that predicted the *Wasichus'* (white people's) arrival and his people's resultant suffering. Shortly after witnessing this vision, Drinks Water died—some say, of sorrow. In response to Drinks Water's vision and tragic end, Black Elk remarks, "sometimes dreams are wiser than waking," implying that Drinks Water died intentionally, knowing that his dream would come true and not wanting to live in a world of so much suffering. Black Elk is also referring to himself and his own vision, however. Like Drinks Water, Black Elk also had a vision that prophesied the displacement and cultural destruction his people would suffer as a result of U.S. western expansion.

The vision also suggested to Black Elk that he would have the power to restore his people to their old way of life. While Black Elk spends the earlier part of his life believing that he will be able to fulfill the higher purpose given to him in his vision, the strength of the forces that threaten his people—namely, the U.S. government, their deadly and abundant weapons, and their tricky and ruthless aggression—ultimately prevent him from doing so. At the end of his story, Black Elk has failed to preserve his land, his people, and their old way of life. Black Elk's remark that "sometimes dreams are wiser than waking" implies that he has come to terms with his inability to fulfill his vision in reality. He recognizes that the only place in which his people will be safe, happy, and unified is in the dream world of his vision; there is no universe in the "waking" world in which his people and their culture will thrive.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ So I took the bright red stick and at the center of the nation's hoop I thrust it in the earth. As it touched the earth it leaped mightily in my hand and was a waga chun, the rustling tree, very tall and full of leafy branches and of all birds singing. And beneath it all the animals were mingling with the people like relatives and making happy cries. The women raised their tremolo of joy, and the men shouted all together: "Here we shall raise our children and be as little chickens under the mother sheo's wing."

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker), The Six Grandfathers

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is taken from a scene of Black Elk's great vision. It describes the appearance of two symbols that become critical to Black Elk's visions and to the book, as a whole: the blooming tree, or *waga chun* (the Lakota word for "cottonwood") and the nation's hoop. The tree comes from a "bright red stick" given to Black Elk in his vision by the fourth Grandfather. The nation's hoop represents the unity of Black Elk's people. Together, these two symbols symbolize the possibility of a thriving and cohesive Lakota people, and thus the tragedy of the fragmentation and displacement that they have endured.

This scene is important because it describes the great responsibility inherent in Black Elk's higher calling. Black Elk is called by his vision to restore natural balance to the Lakota way of life, such that "all the animals [...] mingl[e] with the people like relatives and mak[e] happy cries" and that all living are as interconnected as the limbs and roots of the blooming tree. He is likewise called to restore a society as flourishing and full of life as the tree's blooms, where women celebrate with "their tremolo of joy," and men proudly proclaim that it is "here" in this place of unity and harmony, that they "shall raise [their] children" and be safe and interconnected, like "little chickens under the mother sheo's wing." This passage reaffirms Lakota spiritual beliefs about nature while also vibrantly illustrating the end goal of Black Elk's destiny: to reunite his people so that they are as unbroken as the nation's hoop and as one with nature as the flowering tree.

❝ Then I was sitting up; and I was sad because my mother and my father didn't seem to know I had been so far away.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker), White Cow Sees / Black Elk's mother, Black Elk's father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Black Elk regains consciousness after experiencing his great vision. He awakes in his tepee, surrounded by his concerned parents. Black Elk was homesick at the end of his vision, but when he wakes, he finds that his earlier homesickness for his people is replaced by a new kind of homesickness, namely the sadness he feels

upon realizing that his parents "[don't] seem to know [that he] had been so far away." Black Elk has just experienced an awe-inspiring visionary experience, but he can't share the experience with his parents because they weren't there, and because he thinks they aren't likely to believe him.

The sadness Black Elk feels once he regains consciousness conveys the emergence of an overwhelming sense of alienation or strangeness that will engulf him as he grapples with the responsibility and psychological weight that comes with being a visionary and having a higher purpose. As the narrative unfolds, Black Elk will repeatedly mention feeling like a stranger around his people because he knows things that they do not (things that are revealed to him in his vision) and because he has no real way of expressing these things to them, as his visions are often so fantastic that words cannot convey their meaning. Eventually, Black Elk learns that he must perform his ceremonies publicly to be accepted by and feel at home with his people. This passage lays the groundwork for the alienation that Black Elk suffers before he knows to use ceremony and ritual to bridge the psychological and spiritual gap between him and his people.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ The next morning all the swelling had left my face and legs and arms, and I felt well as ever; but everything around me seemed strange and as though it were far away. I remember that for twelve days after that I wanted to be alone, and it seemed I did not belong to my people. They were almost like strangers. I would be out alone away from the village and the other boys, and I would look around to the four quarters, thinking of my vision and wishing I could get back there again. I would go home to eat, but I could not make myself eat much; and my father and mother thought that I was sick yet; but I was not. I was only homesick for the place where I had been.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker), White Cow Sees / Black Elk's mother, Black Elk's father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

The day after Black Elk "returns" home from his great vision, he reflects on how "strange" and out of place he feels among his people. The things he saw and learned in his vision make him feel "far away," as though he is among "strangers." When Black Elk talks about spacing out, "thinking of [his] vision and wishing [he] could get back there again," he implies that he feels more at home in this spiritual place than he does among his people. He ultimately doubles down on this, finally, describing himself as feeling "homesick for the place where [he] had been" in the passage's final line. That Black Elk is "homesick" for the cloud world of his vision implies that he feels more comfortable and at ease in this spiritual world than he does with his people.

This passage emphasizes the sense of alienation Black Elk's visionary powers bring about, in addition to the pressure he feels to fulfill the duty of saving his people that the vision laid out for him. Black Elk's alienation, and the psychological burden that not being able to fully understand or return to his vision has over him, is so intense that it manifests itself physically: he's is so mentally troubled that his parents believe he is "sick" once more.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Our people knew there was yellow metal in little chunks up there; but they did not bother with it, because it was not good for anything.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Black Elk and his people hear that there are *Wasichus* (white people) in his people's land in the Black Hills. The *Wasichus* are in the Hills because they found "yellow metal in little chunks up there." The "yellow metal" to which Black Elk refers is gold. "Yellow metal" is a central symbol in *Black Elk Speaks* that illustrates the *Wasichus*' greed: Black Elk explains that his people "knew that there was yellow metal in little chunks" in the Black Hills, but hadn't bothered to unbury it themselves, as "it was not good for anything." By this, Black Elk means that the Lakota didn't care about the gold because they had no direct use for it. The Lakotas' relationship to the earth and the natural world is such that they only take what they need.

The *Wasichus*, in contrast to the Lakota, have a relationship to the earth based largely on greed and how they can exploit the earth for financial gain. Even though the *Wasichus* have no direct use for gold, they are interested in it because they know that they can sell it and amass material wealth. This passage is important because it shows the

reader one of the reasons why *Wasichus* were interested in Lakota land in the first place, as well as the problematic motivations—greed and a fixation on amassing material wealth—that fueled that interest. The passage also establishes the Lakota as having a fundamentally different conception of their relationship with the natural world than the *Wasichus* do, as they respect and revere nature rather than seeking to exploit it.

❝ He was a queer man. Maybe he was always part way into that world of his vision. He was a very great man, and I think if the Wasichus had not murdered him down there, maybe we should still have the Black Hills and be happy. They could not have killed him in battle. They had to lie to him and murder him.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker), Crazy Horse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Black Elk describes Crazy Horse, whom he regards as the greatest chief of all time. Black Elk presents Crazy Horse as a kindred spirit, a man who also felt the alienating psychological impact of having a vision and higher purpose, of being "always part way into that world of his vision." Black Elk also connects the deceitful murder of Crazy Horse to the equally unjust destruction of his people and the failure of his spiritual quest.

Further, this passage highlights the deception and immorality with which the *Wasichus* treated the Lakota. The disdain with which Black Elk describes Crazy Horse's unjust death—"they had to lie to him and murder him"— reflects Black Elk's admiration of Crazy Horse and, more generally, his reverence toward his people and their culture. It also shows the remorse that he feels when remembering how his people were systematically lied to and destroyed by the *Wasichus*.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ But only crazy or very foolish men would sell their Mother Earth. Sometimes I think it might have been better if we had stayed together and made them kill us all.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker), Crazy Horse, Red Cloud

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

The Sioux have a significant victory against the U.S. government in the Battle of Little Bighorn, but a harsh winter follows, and their situation worsens in other ways, as well. One notable setback Black Elk mentions is how the *Wasichus* (white people) apparently gave some of the Sioux chiefs whiskey and tricked them into signing the 1876 Black Hills Agreement, a treaty that gave the Black Hills, as well as other lands outside of the Great Sioux Reservation, to the U.S. government.

This passage addresses the remorse and disbelief that Black Elk feels in response to learning about this new, unsettling development in his people's quest to hold on to their old way of life. Black Elk believes that "only crazy or very foolish men would sell their Mother Earth." Given how central a reverence toward nature is in Lakota culture, signing away land—particularly land like the Black Hills, which are considered sacred to the Lakota, is irredeemably foolish to Black Elk. Black Elk's disdain for the "very foolish men" also points to the growing division within Black Elk's community. Within the Lakota tribe, Black Elk makes a distinction between people like Crazy Horse, a prolific warrior who refuses to relinquish his people's land and way of life to the U.S., and chiefs like Red Cloud, who voluntarily cede their lands and facilitate the transition to life on agencies. Black Elk finds chiefs like Red Cloud to be too cooperative with their people's oppressors.

The final remarks of this passage expand on this growing division within the Sioux people: "sometimes I think it might have been better if we had stayed together and made them kill us all." In this statement, Black Elk posits that the Sioux's internal division weakened the collective strength of their people, which ultimately resulted in the defeat and the subsequent erasure of their culture. Finally, this remark takes on the lamenting tone that is characteristic of Black Elk when he grieves the loss of his culture. When he wishes that his people "stayed together and made them kill us all," he means that he would rather be dead and unified with his people than alive, fragmented, and devoid of culture.

❝ How could men get fat by being bad, and starve by being good? I thought and thought about my vision, and it made me very sad; for I wondered if maybe it was only a queer dream after all.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker), Crazy Horse, Spotted Tail

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

When Black Elk wonders whether his vision is "only a queer dream after all," he reflects on the vision's incompatibility with the real world. The logic of his vision—in which the good are rewarded and the evil defeated—is illogical in the real world, in which people like Spotted Tail, who wrongly cooperate with the *Wasichus* (white people), are rewarded with food. At the same time, people like Black Elk's family, who honorably struggle to maintain their way of life, are left to starve.

Black Elk's reflection here also emphasizes the growing divide between American Indians who benefited in the short term for their cooperation with the colonizing *Wasichus*, and those like Black Elk and Crazy Horse, who suffered as they defended their people's way of life. Black Elk is overcome by the unfairness of his world and what this unfairness means in terms of his vision's legitimacy, and the likelihood of his being able to fulfill his duty. Black Elk's growing doubts foreshadow his ultimate failure to manifest his vision, and his eventual acceptance that his people's demise is outside of his ability to control.

Chapter 11 Quotes

It does not matter where his body lies, for it is grass; but where his spirit is, it will be good to be.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker), Crazy Horse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Black Elk and the other Lakota mourn Crazy Horse, who has just been killed by U.S. soldiers while resisting arrest. Black Elk explains that Crazy Horse's parents laid their son's body in a box and carried it away. Nobody is sure of the exact location of Crazy Horse's body, though they suspect it is either near Pepper Creek or in the Badlands. This uncertainty doesn't bother Black Elk, for "it does not matter where his body lies, for it is grass." This line downplays the significance of Crazy Horse's physical body and the physical space in which his parents placed his body: "it is grass," explains Black Elk, meaning it is inconsequential. What is important and memorable about Crazy Horse isn't his body or his grave—Crazy Horse's legacy is larger than his physical body or his physical resting place.

Black Elk continues, "but where his spirit is, it will be good to be." Black Elk's words separate Crazy Horse's physical body from the essence of his spirit. To Black Elk, it doesn't matter that the location of Crazy Horse's body is a mystery, because his spirit isn't confined to that one, arbitrary place—wherever his spirit goes "will be good to be." This line speaks to the ideas of unity and universality that are prevalent throughout the book. That "where his spirit is, it will be good to be" suggests that it doesn't matter where Crazy Horse's body is because his existence—his spirit—is part of the larger, unified world of all living things. In this sense, his spirit can be anywhere, because it has become part of a larger picture, created and cared for by one Great Spirit.

Chapter 12 Quotes

I was fifteen years old that winter, and I thought of my vision and wondered when my duty was to come; for the Grandfathers had shown me my people walking on the black road and how the nation's hoop would be broken and the flowering tree be withered, before I should bring the hoop together with the power that was given me, and make the holy tree to flower in the center and find the red road again. Part of this had happened already, and I wondered when my power would grow, so that the rest might be as I had seen it in my vision.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker), Crazy Horse, The Six Grandfathers

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Black Elk and his family have just fled from their homeland to Canada to escape the restrictions that they would have to endure if they stayed and were forced to live on an agency. Living in a strange land away from most of his people is jarring for Black Elk, and it makes him reflect more seriously on his vision, his higher calling, and the responsibility he has to restore his people to the prosperity and cultural unity they had prior to *Wasichu* (white)

settlement.

Black Elk knows that his vision is legitimate, for he can see the events that it foretold happening all around him: "the Grandfathers had shown me my people walking on the black road and how the nation's hoop would be broken and the flowering tree be withered." Black Elk's people have thus far been "walking on the black road" of suffering and hardship, evidenced by the harsh conditions they suffer after the Battle of Little Bighorn, Crazy Horse's death, and the loss of additional land. The relocation of tribes onto separate agencies is a sign that the nation's hoop (an ongoing symbol of cultural unity) has been broken. All of these events make it very clear to Black Elk that the first part of his vision is coming true.

A key aspect of Black Elk's vision that continues to perplex him, however, is the latter part of it—of how and when he is meant to save his people. "I wondered when my power would grow, so that the rest might be as I had seen it in my vision," states Black Elk. "The rest" refers to the final portion of Black Elk's vision, in which his people lived in harmony around the happy, unbroken nation's ring, in the center of which the sacred tree blooms. Black Elk remains uncertain how to restore his people to the blissful state his vision outlined, and this uncertainty weighs on him as a heavy psychological burden.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ I could not get along with my people now, and I would take my horse and go far out from camp alone and compare everything on earth and in the sky with my vision. Crows would see me and shout to each other as though they were making fun of me: "Behold him! Behold him!"

When the frosts began I was glad, because there would not be any more thunder storms for a long while, and I was more and more afraid of them all the time, for always there would be the voices crying "Oo oohey! It is time! It is time!"

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Black Elk and his family have returned to their homeland from Canada. Black Elk's people's situation continues to worsen, and Black Elk is troubled by the fact that he has yet to act on his vision and save them and their culture from destruction. In this passage, Black Elk articulates the psychological torment he feels as a result of his unrealized vision: "I could not get along with my people now, and I would take my horse and go far out from camp alone and compare everything in earth and in the sky with my vision." This statement shows that Black Elk's alienation comes from fixating on his vision—in constantly "compar[ing] everything […] with [his] vision," he cuts himself off from the physical world and the people who inhabit it.

In addition to alienation from his people, the psychological burden of having a higher calling also takes a toll on his previously happy relationship with nature. Black Elk's vision transforms nature from a source of comfort to a source of dread. He begins to look forward to "when the frosts [begin]," because it means there will be no more thunder storms: "I was more and more afraid of them all the time, for always there would be the voices crying 'Oo oohey! It is time! It is time!'" Black Elk is afraid of thunder storms because their cries remind him that he has yet to enact the powers granted to him in his vision.

❝ "Nephew, I know now what the trouble is! You must do your duty and perform this vision for your people upon earth. You must have the horse dance first for the people to see. Then the fear will leave you; but if you do not do this, something very bad will happen to you."

Related Characters: Black Road (speaker), Black Elk

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Black Elk and his family return to their native land from Canada, but Black Elk continues to anguish over his inability to enact his vision and restore his people's unity. He finally gets a breakthrough after confiding in a medicine man named Black Road. Black Road explains to Black Elk that, if he wants to relieve his internal suffering, he "must do [his] duty and perform this vision for [his] people upon earth," specifically, in the form of a horse dance. If Black Elk does this, "the fear will leave [him]." Black Road's guidance emphasizes the importance of ceremony and public ritual in Black Elk's culture.

Not only will the ceremony help Black Elk better understand his vision, it will also renew the sense of

community and togetherness with his people that he lost after having his vision. After returning from his great vision, Black Elk felt alienated from his people because of his constant obsession with his vision. He longed to be back in that visionary world, as he's able to talk about any of these things with his people. Black Road's advice offers Black Elk the hope that, in performing his vision publicly, he will be able to forge a common ground with his people by sharing in a communal, ritual experience with them.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ I looked about me and could see that what we then were doing was like a shadow cast upon the earth from yonder vision in the heavens, so bright it was and clear. I knew the real was yonder and the darkened dream of it was here.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker), The Six Grandfathers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

As Black Elk and other members of his tribe perform the horse dance—a ritual reenactment of his great vision—he sees his vision once more, specifically, the cloud tepee with the flaming rainbow door, the Six Grandfathers sitting within it, and himself, sitting upon the bay horse. In this passage, Black Elk compares the vision he sees before him to the reenactment that is going on around him. His comparison reflects on the similarities between the vision and the reenactment, while also describing what of the vision's essence the reenactment fails to capture.

Black Elk's comparison explores the relationship between the private, spiritual vision, and the public, ritual performance. By comparing the horse dance to "a shadow cast upon the earth from yonder vision in the heavens," he acknowledges that the horse dance bears a real, direct likeness to the spirit world of his vision: the horse dance is the vision's "shadow cast upon the earth." In this way, the two are connected, and the horse dance may be seen as a variant of the original, pure vision.

But Black Elk's observation also gets at how the horse dance differs from the spiritual vision it strives to emulate. By stating that the horse dance is the vision's "darkened dream," he suggests that while the horse dance presents the public with a satisfying idea of what his vision and the spiritual realm is like, it is not an exact replica, but a "darkened dream" of the vision's comparable purity. Black Elk's observation grasps at the infinitely large and inarticulable nature of the universe. It also situates public ceremony as an imperfect but adequate way of making the mysteries of the spiritual realm public and relatable.

❝ The fear that was on me so long was gone, and when thunder clouds appeared I was always glad to see them, for they came as relatives now to visit me. Everything seemed good and beautiful now, and kind. Before this, the medicine men would not talk to me, but now they would come to me to talk about my vision. From that time on, I always got up very early to see the rising of the daybreak star. People knew that I did this, and many would get up to see it with me, and when it came we said: "Behold the star of understanding!"

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

After Black finishes performing the horse dance, he reflects on how the ritual has changed his relationships with his people, his vision, and the world around him. Performing the horse dance allows Black Elk to better understand his vision and convey its meaning to his people. As a result, his people accept him, the vision becomes less of a psychological burden to him, and the negative associations he held are replaced by feelings of community and acceptance: "the fear that was on me so long was gone, and when thunder clouds appeared I was always glad to see them, for they came as relatives now to visit me," explains Black Elk. By calling the thunder clouds "relatives," he implies that there is a renewed closeness between him and thunder, where there had previously been only fear. By extension, Black Elk's power is no longer something he misunderstands and dreads, but rather something he feels confident that he can enact.

Black Elk also talks about how the medicine men talk to him after the ceremony. This shows that he is now accepted among his people as someone with visionary powers. Another instance of transformation that Black Elk describes here is how he now gets up to greet the "daybreak star," or morning star. The daybreak star symbolizes knowledge, so

the fact that Black Elk greets the daybreak star implies that he now greets and accepts the spiritual wisdom that his vision gave to him. That others join him to greet the daybreak star suggests that, as a result of the horse dance, others also now accept and embrace Black Elk's wisdom and visionary powers.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ And now when I look about me upon my people in despair, I feel like crying and I wish and wish my vision could have been given to a man more worthy. I wonder why it came to me, a pitiful old man who can do nothing. Men and women and children I have cured of sickness with the power the vision gave me; but my nation I could not help.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Black Elk digresses from his narrative to reflect on the remorse he feels about not being able to save his people. He expresses this remorse using language that recurs throughout the narrative, namely calling himself a "pitiful old man." He is "pitiful," he believes, because he was given a gift, a higher calling, in his vision, yet failed to bring that higher calling to fruition and prevent the Lakotas' erasure.

When he says that "men and women and children I have cured of sickness with the power the vision gave me," he acknowledges the smaller-scale ways in which he has managed to fulfill his duty. Black Elk's relationship to his healing capabilities is complex. On the one hand, he is grateful to be able to help his people in this way. On the other hand, his success as a medicine man confirms that he has power, which is difficult for Black Elk to reckon with. This is because it positions his people's demise as a consequence of a failure to apply his powers rather than a consequence of being helpless and without spiritual resources. In short, Black Elk shoulders the blame for the Lakotas' destruction.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ But in the heyoka ceremony, everything is backwards, and it is planned that the people shall be made to feel jolly and happy first, so that it may be easier for the power to come to them. You may have noticed that the truth comes into this world with two faces. One is sad with suffering, and the other laughs; but it is the same face, laughing or weeping. When people are already in despair, maybe the laughing face is better for them; and when they feel too good and are too sure of being safe, maybe the weeping face is better for them to see. And so I think that is what the heyoka ceremony is for.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Black Elk explains the logic behind the *heyoka* ceremony, a ritual in which *heyokas*—"sacred clowns"—publicly perform their visions in an entertaining, "backwards" style. According to Black Elk, the idea behind a *heyoka* ceremony is that people are "made to feel jolly and happy first, so that it may be easier for the power to come to them." Put simply, a *heyoka* ceremony gives people good news first, so that they are in a better and more receptive mood to receive bad news, and vice versa: "when people are already in despair," reasons Black Elk, "maybe the laughing face is better for them." The *heyoka* ceremony balances positive and negative to deliver people a balanced, palatable presentation of the truth.

The *heyoka* ceremony's logic also helps the reader understand why Black Elk continues to have faith in his vision despite his lingering fear that he will never be able to help his people and restore the nation's hoop. To Black Elk, the vision is like the "laughing" face that represents the "jolly and happy" side of the truth, whereas the possibility of his culture's destruction is like the "weeping" face that is "sad with suffering." When Black Elk hangs on to his vision, it is because he is "already in despair" and needs the "laughing face" of hope that his vision represents.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ It is from understanding that power comes; and the power in the ceremony was in understanding what it meant; for nothing can live well except in a manner that is suited to the way the sacred Power of the World lives and moves.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker), The Six Grandfathers

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

Black Elk explains the significance of ceremony to Lakota culture, specifically addressing the connection between understanding, power, and ceremony. "It is from understanding that power comes," explains Black Elk. In other words, power is useless if one doesn't know what it is for. For example, Black Elk receives powers from the Six Grandfathers in his vision and the directive to restore the nation's hoop, but because he doesn't fully understand how to use these powers, he remains unable to enact them and fulfill his duty to his people.

Black Elk continues, explaining the particular power that ceremony holds: "the power in the ceremony was in understanding what it meant." What this means is that ceremonies are powerful because they create understanding. In Black Elk's case, performing the horse dance, *heyoka* ceremony, bison ceremony, and elk ceremony was necessary to be able to use his powers. In each of these ceremonies, Black Elk reenacts parts of his visions publicly and, in so doing, attains a deeper level of understanding about the essence of each vision, and what they call on him to do.

That ceremonies are a critical component of understanding also speaks to the importance of unity in Lakota culture. Black Elk is unable to understand his vision when it is only a private experience but, once he reenacts the vision publicly, everything starts to make sense. This suggests that the world cannot be understood solely within the context of one's individual perspective; rather, it can only be understood in terms of the larger, cohesive whole: "nothing can live well except in a manner that is suited to the way the sacred Power of the World lives and moves." Black Elk's final remark means that no one person can "live well" on their own. To "live well," one must live, act, and understand the world as one, universal thing operating under "the sacred Power of the World." This is why ceremonies are so important for understanding: because they shift one's understanding away from the individual experience and toward an experience of the collective picture.

Chapter 19 Quotes

I can remember when the bison were so many that they could not be counted, but more and more Wasichus came to kill them until there were only heaps and heaps of bones scattered where they used to be. The Wasichus did not kill them to eat; they killed them for the metal that makes them crazy, and they took only the hides to sell. Sometimes they did not even take the hides to sell. Sometimes they did not even take the hides, only the tongues; [...] they just killed and killed because they liked to do that. When we hunted bison, we killed only what we needed. And when there was nothing left but heaps of bones, the Wasichus came and gathered up even the bones and sold them.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

Black Elk explains that shortly after he performed the ceremony of the elk, the *Wasichus* killed off the last of the country's bison population. He compares the bison population before and after the *Wasichus*' (white people's) arrival, noting that while before, "the bison were so many that they could not be counted," the population dropped immediately as *Wasichus* killed them in droves "for the metal that makes them all crazy." Unlike the Lakota, who only hunted bison for what they "needed," the *Wasichus* slaughter bison to amass material wealth.

Further, because the *Wasichus* don't have the Lakotas' reverence for nature, they are more wasteful with the parts of the bison that cannot earn them money: "sometimes they did not take the hides, only the tongues," explains Black Elk, "sometimes they did not event take the tongues; they just killed and killed because they liked to do that." Black Elk's critique of the way the *Wasichus* treated the bison underscores the *Wasichus*' disrespect for nature, their disrespect for Lakota culture and wellbeing (diminishment of the bison population cost the Lakota important cultural practices and deprived them of a major food source), and their preoccupation with greed.

Chapter 22 Quotes

❝ I was in the air, with outstretched arms, and floating fast. There was a fearful dark river that I had to go over, and I was afraid. It rushed and roared and was full of angry foam. Then I looked down and saw many men and women who were trying to cross the dark and fearful river, but they could not. Weeping, they looked up to me and cried: "Help us!" But I could not stop gliding, for it was as though a great wind were under me.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker), Wovoka ("The Wanekia")

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

Black Elk leads a Ghost Dance and has a vision in which he sees people living in paradise which, presumably, is the better world that Wovoka (the *Wanekia*) prophesied in his vision. Near the end of his vision, Black Elk flies through the air and sees people beneath him, drowning in a fearsome river. Black Elk's flight seems to represent an idealized spiritual world: a world devoid of external circumstances like colonization, hunger, and oppression. This world is one in which Black Elk's vision is realized. The people in the river below him represents the physical world—a world of real, inescapable hardship so thick it drowns the people in a "dark and fearful river."

Try as Black might to help these suffering people, he cannot, "for it [is] as though a great wind were under" him. Black Elk's inability to help these people suggests an unavoidable separation between the spiritual world and the physical world. This separation is the reason why he is never able to fulfill his duty to his people: because no matter how diligently he tries to enact his vision—in this instance, through participating in the Ghost Dance—he cannot breach the physical world's border. Throughout the story, Black Elk refers to himself as a pitiful old man unworthy of having such a higher calling. This scene illustrates why Black Elk's criticisms are misplaced: it isn't that Black Elk is pitiful, but rather that his spiritual powers are futile against the heavy, oppressive world of the physical realm.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ I did not depend upon the great vision as I should have done; I depended upon the two sticks that I had seen in the lesser vision. It is hard to follow one great vision in this world of darkness and of many changing shadows. Among those shadows men get lost.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker), The Six Grandfathers

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Black Elk receives another vision while dancing the Ghost Dance. In the vision, he sees a lot of imagery from his initial great vision—namely, the flaming rainbow, the cloud tepee, and an eagle, who cautions Black Elk to "remember." Black Elk reflects on the vision and decides, in retrospect, that the eagle's advice to "remember" was a warning to him not to depend on his "lesser vision" and to stay focused on the higher calling that the Six Grandfathers gave to him in his initial vision of restoring the nation's hoop and saving his people. He laments how difficult it is "to follow one great vision in this world of darkness and of many changing shadows." On a more specific level, Black Elk means that it is difficult to recognize his calling when he receives so many complicated, detailed visions.

One can also interpret Black Elk's words as commentary on the Lakotas' increasingly dark and challenging world. While Black Elk repeatedly tries to "to follow one great vision," repeatedly seeking out spiritual guidance, participating in battles against the *Wasichus* (white people), and joining the Ghost Dance movement in an effort to restore his people, external circumstances of oppression repeatedly stand in his way, preventing him from fulfilling his duty to his people. The mandated relocation of tribes onto separate agencies, and actions the government takes to stop Ghost Dances from happening—such as arresting Ghost Dance leaders—are both examples of how a more powerful, physical force stands in the way of Black Elk fulfilling his spiritual duty to his people. In other words, the "many changing shadows" of the physical world makes even determined, spiritually conscious people like Black Elk "lost" and unable to perform their duties.

Chapter 24 Quotes

❝ The snow drifted deep in the crooked gulch, and it was one long grave of butchered women and children and babies, who had never done any harm and were only trying to run away.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

Black Elk describes the aftermath of the Wounded Knee Massacre. He depicts a gruesome scene of Lakota civilians murdered by the U.S. Army, their scattered bodies appearing as "one long grave of butchered women and children and babies." The Wounded Knee Massacre is particularly troubling to Black Elk because its victims aren't warriors who willingly offered up their lives for the greater good of their tribe: they are innocent women, children, and babies "who had never done any harm and were only trying to run away." The Wounded Knee Massacre is a critical point in Black Elk's story because it is the final tragedy he observes before deeming himself a failed visionary and before concluding that his people's ruptured culture is unsalvageable.

One may also interpret the final line of this passage as a metaphor for the Lakotas' plight, as a whole: "it was one long grave of butchered women and children and babies, who and never done any harm and were only trying to run away." Throughout the book, Black Elk repeatedly portrays his people as innocent. They engage in gruesome battles against the *Wasichus* (white people)—but only because the *Wasichus* initiate these battles first, unprovoked. The tragedy of the Lakota is not one of a people who got what was coming to them—it is one of a people "who had never done any harm and were only trying to run away" from the colonizing forces that threatened their traditional way of life.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth,—you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.

Related Characters: Black Elk (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

These lines conclude Black Elk's story. Rhetorically, this passage is significant because it frames the story, as Black Elk's story begins and ends with this same sentiment: that he was given a "great vision," failed to fulfill what the vision asked of him and, as a result, "the nation's hoop is broken and scattered." Somber and mournful in tone, these lines establish Black Elk's story as a tragedy about his failed quest to realize the duty to save his people that was given to him in his vision.

Black Elk's frank delivery of these lines implies his reluctant acceptance of the Lakotas' fate: "there is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead." Black Elk delivers his message without flourish or style, stating it as a cold, unchangeable fact. This frank tone should stand in stark contrast to earlier passages in the narrative where, despite the increasingly harrowing odds stacked against the Lakota—and the Sioux more generally—Black Elk held onto the hope that he would one day be able to execute what his vision asked of him. This quote conveys two phases of Black Elk: the young boy who was granted a spectacular vision, and the "pitiful old man who has done nothing" with it. The latter Black Elk—the old man—has no choice but to accept failure and to mourn the loss of his nation, their broken hoop, and the tree that failed to bloom.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: THE OFFERING OF THE PIPE

Black Elk is going to tell his audience (whom he directly refers to as "you") the story of his life. He'll focus on his vision, which he failed to realize, and on "a holy **tree** that should have flourished […] and now is withered" that belonged to his people, who have been destroyed.

The "you" that Black Elk addresses refers to Neihardt, the book's author, who wrote the book based on a series of conversations he had with Black Elk. Other tribal members were also present during their conversations. Neihardt's decision to present Black Elk Speaks *as a first-person narrative gives the account a layer of authenticity. In theory, the reader can trust that* Black Elk Speaks *is authentic because it is presented as Black Elk's own words (though the conversations were translated from Lakota to English by Black Elk's son and transcribed by Neihardt). Black Elk addresses a specific audience when he tells his story, but the narrative perspective (addressing his audience as "you") can also give the reader the impression that Black Elk is telling his story directly to them. The story's first-person narrative perspective also emphasizes the significance of oral tradition (cultural ideas and stories passed down through spoken word) in Lakota culture. Lastly, Black Elk introduces the "holy tree" as a symbol of his culture's destruction.*

Black Elk asks for help from the "Spirit of the World" to see the truth. He gestures toward a sacred pipe, which he fills with red willow bark. He explains the pipe's meaning, noting its four ribbons, which symbolize the four quarters of the universe. Black is for the west, where the "**thunder** beings" live. White for the north and the "cleaning wind." Red for the east, where light comes from and where the morning star, who gives men wisdom, lives. Yellow symbolizes summer and growth. Black Elk gestures toward an eagle feather on the pipe that also gives humans wisdom. He points to the bison hide on the pipe's mouthpiece, which symbolizes the earth, where all living beings originate.

The "Spirit of the World" is a collective term that designates all that the Lakota believe to be sacred. Black Elk's offering of the sacred pipe introduces the reader to the important role that sacred objects and gestures play in Black Elk's people's culture. That the four quarters of the universe are represented as wind, and have natural connotations attached to them, shows the reader how largely nature factors into Lakota culture. The presence of the eagle feather and bison hide also reinforces nature's importance.

Black Elk discusses the pipe's origins: a long time ago, two scouts were looking for bison when a woman approaches them from the north. The first scout speaks inappropriately of the woman. The second scout scolds him for speaking this way about a "sacred woman." As the woman approaches the scouts, they see that she is very beautiful and wears a white buckskin dress. The woman can hear their thoughts and tells the inappropriate scout to come forward. He does so, and a white cloud appears, engulfing them both. The woman steps out of the cloud and blows it away to reveal that scout is now only a skeleton crawling with worms.

When Black Elk tells Neihardt about the sacred pipe's origins, he further emphasizes the importance of oral tradition to Lakota culture. This story also gives the reader insight into which objects and elements are important to Lakota culture. For example, Black Elk specifies that the woman approaches from the north, which reinforces to the reader the significance of the four quarters of the world and the natural elements they represent.

The woman turns to the remaining scout and tells him to have his village build her a tepee. Later, the woman enters, singing a sacred song. A white cloud appears as she sings, and she gives a sacred pipe to the chief. The woman promises that the pipe will bring good fortune to the nation. As the people watch her go, she transforms into a white bison. Black Elk doesn't know if any of this really happened, but he knows that it is nonetheless true. He lights the pipe, offers it to the Great Spirit, or "Grandfather," and asks for the strength to understand the world. Then, Black Elk and his audience smoke the pipe.

The woman's sacred song shows how important public performance and ceremony are to Lakota culture. According to the Lakota, smoking the sacred pipe connects its participants to one another and makes their relationship good-spirited. By passing around the pipe, Black Elk establishes an environment of unity among his listeners. Neihardt uses the terms "Great Spirit" and "Spirit of the World" interchangeably.

CHAPTER 2: EARLY BOYHOOD

Black Elk begins his narrative, providing his audience with background on his family: he is a Lakota of the Ogalala band, and he is the fourth person of his family to be named Black Elk. He comes from a family of medicine men, and Black Elk's father and Crazy Horse's father were cousins. His mother's name is White Cow Sees. Her father's name is Refuse-to-Go, and her mother's name is Plenty Eagle Feathers. Black Elk's father's father was killed by the Pawnees, and his father's mother, Red Eagle Woman, died soon after. Black Elk was born in the Moon of the Popping Trees (December) on the Little Powder River in the Winter When the Four Crows Were Killed (1863). When he was three years old, his father broke his leg in the Battle of the Hundred Slain.

The Lakota are the western division of the Sioux nation, and the Ogalala are one of seven Lakota bands. Black Elk's family history—notably, that his people are healers and warriors—informs his own experiences and gives further validity to his words. The Lakota refer to each month by moons named according the seasonal changes that occur within that month, which shows how extensively the Lakota orient their sense of the world around nature. Years are referred to as "winters" and are named after significant events that occurred within that year. The "Battle of the Hundred Slain" refers to the Fetterman Fight (1866), a battle during Red Cloud's War (a conflict between allied Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes versus the U.S. in the Wyoming and Montana territories). In this battle, a group of warriors led by Crazy Horse and Red Cloud, among others, defeated a detachment of the U.S. Army stationed at Fort Phil Kearny in Wyoming.

As a young child, Black Elk hears much talk of how they must fight the Wasichus, who are going to take over their country. He later learns that the *Wasichus* and his people are fighting over "the **yellow metal** that makes [the *Wasichus*] crazy." The *Wasichus* wanted to build a road through Black Elk's people's country to where they'd found the yellow metal, but the Ogalalas fear that a road would scare away the bison and attract even more *Wasichus*. The *Wasichus* insist that they don't want much of the Oglala's land, but the Ogalalas know better than to trust them.

The Wasichus' *(white people's) fixation on "yellow metal," or gold, is indicative of their greed and obsession with monetary gain. By describing the* Wasichus' *obsession with gold as "crazy," Black Elk implicitly criticizes the inherent greediness of* Wasichu *culture. The road that Black Elk refers to is the Bozeman Trail, a branch of the Oregon Trail that passed through Lakota hunting grounds along the Platte River and through Wyoming, and that was built to access Montana's gold fields.*

Once, Black Elk recalls, the "two-leggeds" and the "four-leggeds" had lived together harmoniously, and there had been much to eat—but this changed after the Wasichus arrived and destroyed and stole the land out of greed. Black Elk tells a story his father told him about Drinks Water, a Lakota holy man, who had a premonition of the future in which the four-leggeds go back to the earth and a "strange race" disrupts the harmony and community of the Lakota people. In Drinks Water's dream, the Lakotas go to live in a "barren land" in "square gray houses" and starve. After his witnessing his vision, Drinks Water died of sorrow, which confirmed for the Lakota people that the grim fate Drinks Water foresaw in his dream will come true.

That the "two-leggeds" (humans) and "four-leggeds" (animals) could no longer live in harmony after the Wasichus' *arrival denotes the stark differences in the way the Lakota and the* Wasichus *regard nature. While Lakota see themselves and nature as interdependent parts of a larger picture, the* Wasichus *only see nature in terms of how they can exploit for financial gain. Drinks Water's dream foreshadows the diminishment of American Indian food supplies and the displacement of America Indian peoples from their rightful lands to government agencies, where they'll be forced to abandon their traditional lodging for the "square gray houses" of the* Wasichus.

Black Elk introduces the audience to his older friend, Fire Thunder, to describe fighting in the Battle of the Hundred Slain. Fire Thunder explains that Chief Red Cloud had called together the dispersed Lakota bands in the Moon of the Changing Season (October) to wage war against the growing mass of Wasichu settlers. Fire Thunder describes a bloody battle in which even a dog is shot full of arrows. He notes that this is the battle in which Black Elk's father injured his leg.

When Black Elk turns to Fire Thunder to verify certain parts of his narrative, he imbues his narrative with a heightened authenticity. The Lakotas' success during the Battle of the Hundred Slain was due to their unity—something that has since been lost. This success also alerts the reader to the warrior culture for which the Sioux are famous.

After this battle, Black Elk recalls his mother warning him not to play too far away from their tepee, or else the Wasichus would find him. There isn't much to eat that winter, and many of the bands migrating west, away from the *Wasichus*, get lost from the others, having gone snowblind.

It was common for Lakota parents to portray Wasichus *as bogeymen to deter their children from misbehaving. The threat of white settlers causes Lakota tribes to disperse, which leads to the fragmentation of a once-unified community.*

That summer, Black Elk's people camp along the Rosebud. They are far away from the Wasichus, and things seemed peaceful. Black Elk and the other boys play war games, and he dreams of going into battle when he is older to defeat the *Wasichus*. Around the Moon When the Cherries Turn Black, another battle, the Attacking of the Wagons, occurs. Fire Thunder was in this battle, as well, and he tells the audience about how the Indian were unsuccessful, unable to compete against the *Wasichus'* new, powerful guns.

From an early age, Black Elk feels a desire and sense of duty to defeat the Wasichus, *recognizing the threat they pose to his people's unified community and culture. As before, Fire Thunder's interjection imbues Black Elk's narrative with a verifiable authenticity.*

Standing Bear, Black Elk's friend who is four years older than him, tells the audience that they camped on the Powder that winter. Black Elk then explains that the following summer, when he was five years old, he first heard the voices, which scared him. He remembers this period as a time of relative peace: the Wasichus had retreated, and in the Moon of Falling Leaves (November), Red Cloud signed a treaty with the *Wasichus* that said the Indians could keep their land.

Black Elk sets up his early boyhood as something of a calm before the storm: he has very little to report from this time because the Wasichus' *presence has yet to disrupt the Lakota way of life or destroy the unity of their people in irreversibly destructive ways. The young Black Elk seems to regard the treaty that Red Cloud signs with the* Wasichus *optimistically. The reader should recall Black Elk's somber opening remarks in Chapter 1, however, and know that the peaceful time Black Elk describes now won't last for long.*

When Black Elk is five, he is out shooting with a bow and arrows his grandfather made for him. Just as he is about to shoot a bird, the bird speaks to him and says "the clouds all over are one-sided." Suddenly, from the clouds, Black Elk sees two men singing a sacred song and calling to him from "the place where the giant lives." They came close to Black Elk before turning toward the setting sun and turning into geese. Black Elk is afraid to tell anyone about his vision.

"The clouds all over are one-sided" is a metaphorical message foretelling Black Elk's victories in battle: the Lakota word for "one-sided: is wasánica, *which also connotes "success." In Lakota culture, geese are seen as messengers of the power of the north. Black Elk's fear of telling others about his vision frame his visionary powers as an alienating force that makes it harder for him to connect with others.*

CHAPTER 3: THE GREAT VISION

Very little happens to Black Elk until he's nine years old, and his people observe a relatively peaceful time: the Wasichus build their road along the Platte river and move away, and though the road causes the bison population to diminish, there remains enough for the Lakotas to hunt. Black Elk continues to hear the voices, though he doesn't know what they want from him. The summer he is nine, his people move west, toward the Rocky Mountains.

The Wasichus' *road refers to the Union Pacific Railway, which was part of the First Transcontinental Railroad. By 1869, the line extended as far west as Promontory Point, Utah. The diminishment of the bison population (one of the Lakotas' major food sources, as well as an important cultural symbol) that this project brings about is an example of one of the ways in which the* Wasichus' *growing presence affects the Lakota's ability to practice their culture.*

One day, while eating with a man named Man Hip in his tepee, Black Elk hears voices calling to him. He leaves the tepee and his legs begin to hurt, and then the voices stop. The next day, his body begins to swell and he feels sick and in pain. One night, he sees the two men coming from the clouds that he had seen when he was four. The men tell him that his Grandfathers are calling him. Black Elk follows the men, and his legs stop hurting. A small cloud appears before him, scoops him up, and carries him away to a cloud world.

Given the important role that nature plays in Lakota culture and spirituality, Black Elk's journey into a cloud world seems to have spiritual implications. The "Grandfathers" Black Elk is to meet are likely also beings that possess spiritual power. In this way, Black Elk seems to be somehow divine or chosen among his people, which could further exacerbate his feelings of alienation from them. The two men who summon forth Black Elk are the akichita *of the north, or messenger geese turned into men.*

The two men gesture toward a bay horse, who speaks to Black Elk. The bay horse points to the west where there are 12 black horses, to the north where there are 12 white horses, to the east where there are 12 sorrel horses, and to the south where there are 12 buckskin horses. All of the horses assemble behind the bay horse, who turns to the west and neighs, and the other horses respond with a storm of **thunderous** neighing. After this, the bay horse turns to the north, east, and south, and the other horses whinny and create colors in the air with their joyous sounds and dancing.

There are four groups of horses in Black Elk's vision—four is an important ritual number in Lakota culture, as well as in other Native American tribes. Here, for instance, the four bands of horses are connected to the four directions of the world, and to four sacred colors: black, white, red (sorrel), and yellow (buckskin). The fact that these horses are central to Black Elk's spiritual vision further emphasizes the Lakota's reverence for nature.

The horses transform into many different kinds of animals before disappearing. Black Elk and the bay horse approach a cloud which transforms into a tepee with a rainbow for a door. There are six old men—the Grandfathers—in the tepee. The oldest Grandfather explains that they have summoned Black Elk to this council to teach him. Black Elk understands these men to be the Powers of the World. One by one, the Grandfathers present Black Elk with their powers and give him a sacred object.

The image of a tepee made of clouds is common in Lakota visions. The rainbow at the tepee's door is a wígmuke, *or "trap," and is supposed to suppress rain. By presenting Black Elk with powers and sacred gifts, it seems that the Grandfathers are giving Black Elk some kind of spiritual responsibility or duty.*

The first Grandfather presents Black Elk with a wooden cup of water that "[is] the sky," which gives him the power to "make live," and a bow, for the "power to destroy." He tells him that "his body and his name is Eagle Wing Stretches" before transforming into an emaciated black horse.

The wooden cup of water gives Black Elk the power to "make live," or to heal. The bow gives him the power to fight. When the first Grandfather tells Black Elk that "his body and his name is Eagle Wing Stretches," he is giving his power—which, significantly, is tied to nature through the symbol of the eagle—to Black Elk.

The second Grandfather gives Black Elk a sacred herb. Black Elk feeds the herb to the black horse. The horse fattens and turns back into the first Grandfather. The second Grandfather explains to Black Elk that with "the power of the white giant's wing, cleansing wind," he will make the nation live. The second Grandfather then turns into a goose.

The four-rayed herb also has healing powers, as evidenced by its ability to restore the black horse. The second Grandfather gives Black Elk the herb and "the power of the white giant's wing, cleansing wind" so that Black Elk may restore his nation to health. This may be taken literally, as in healing from sickness, or metaphorically, as in the collective healing of a nation from a state of fragmentation and displacement to a state of unity and cultural richness.

The third Grandfather gives Black Elk a peace pipe with an eagle on its stem, and he tells Black Elk that it will heal sicknesses on Earth. He points to a man painted red. The man turns into a bison and gallops away with the herd of sorrel horses, which have also turned into bison.

The prevalence of bison in this vision and elsewhere in the book shows that they are spiritually significant to the Lakota. In giving Black Elk the peace pipe that can heal sickness, the third Grandfather gives Black Elk the power to heal sickness and, subsequently, a higher calling to help his people.

The fourth Grandfather gives Black Elk a red stick with branches sprouting from it. He tells Black Elk that the stick represents "the living center of a nation." Black Elk suddenly sees a happy village circled around the stick, which has become a **tree**. Two roads diverge from the tree, one red and one black. The fourth Grandfather explains to Black Elk that the red road, which goes from north to south, is a good road. The black road goes from the west, where the **thunder** beings live, to the east, where the sun shines—this road is one of war. Black Elk will walk on both roads, says the Grandfather, and it will bring him the power to defeat his enemies in battle The Grandfather grows very tall and turns into an elk.

The red stick/blooming tree is important because it resonates with Black Elk's remarks in Chapter 1 about "a holy tree that should have flourished [...] and now is withered." At this point, the tree is still alive and at the center of the village, so the reader might anticipate that it may "wither" or die later in Black Elk's vision. The black and red roads—which represent a path of adversity and a path of fortune, respectively—represent the future of Black Elk's people, as well as the paths he must go down to save them.

The fifth Grandfather—the oldest of them all and the one who sent for Black Elk—transforms into an eagle before telling Black Elk that birds will "be like relatives" to him. The sixth Grandfather has long, white hair. Black Elk watches as the Grandfather transforms from an old man into a young boy, who is Black Elk himself. He also gives Black Elk his power, which Black Elk he will need, as his nation is in trouble. The Grandfather exits through the tepee's rainbow door, and Black Elk follows, riding the bay horse. A voice summarizes all the powers the horses have given Black Elk.

The Lakota already have a close bond with nature, and the fifth Grandfather strengthens this bond when he tells Black Elk that the birds will "be like relatives" to him. He seems to imply that Black Elk will have the power to have special, more nuanced relationships with birds and communicate with them better than other people in his tribe. The sixth Grandfather explicitly tells Black Elk what he can expect of his people's future when he says that Black Elk's nation is in trouble.

Black Elk hears a voice tell him to walk on the black road, and that all nations will fear him. Black Elk walks east down the road, followed by other troops on the backs of black, white, sorrel, and buckskin horses. The group approaches a blue man surrounded by flames, whom the troops try and fail to charge. Armed with the wooden cup of water in one hand and a spear in the other, Black Elk charges and kills the blue man, an act which he understands symbolizes rain killing the drought.

Black Elk's position at the front of this procession suggests that his vision is telling him to be a leader among his people—in other words, his vision is giving him the duty to guide and protect his people as they fall upon harrowing times. Black Elk defeats the blue man with the aid of the wooden cup of water and the sphere that the first Grandfather gave to him, which proves that the objects are sacred.

After this, Black Elk approaches a village in a valley, which a voice tells him is his. The village is full of dead and dying people, but as Black Elk rides through the village, the people recover. A voice tells Black Elk that they have given him "the center of the **nation's hoop**" to make the people live. Then, the voice instructs him to give the people the red stick, the sacred pipe, and the wing of the white giant.

That the sick people recover after Black Elk passes through their village foretells his future as a medicine man. The voice's instruction for Black Elk to give the people the sacred objects outlines what he must use to heal his people. As before, it seems that "healing" can be interpreted to mean the physical healing a medicine man performs, or more symbolically, to mean the cultural healing that Black Elk must do to restore his people's way of life.

Black Elk places the red stick in the middle of the **nation's hoop** and pushes it into the earth. The stick turns into a tree, and the people and animals gather underneath it to live happily. The pipe flies in on eagle wings, and the white wind blows through the tree. The daybreak star rises, and a Voice says that it will bring the people wisdom. The great Voice tells the people to move camp and journey down the red road. The horse riders, the villagers, and the spirits of the dead follow Black Elk down the red road.

When Black Elk places the red stick in the center of the nation's hoop, he enacts the destiny the vision outlines for him: to restore unity and happiness to his people. In Lakota culture, the daybreak star symbolizes wisdom—more specifically, a wisdom that unites all living elements of the world. Thus, the daybreak star's presence highlight's the book's (and this vision's) larger idea of unity, and the harmony of humans and the natural world.

As the group journeys down the red road, the Voice tells Black Elk they are walking on a good road in a "sacred manner." Black Elk looks ahead and sees that they must climb four ascents, each one increasingly steeper and more harrowing. The group passes the first ascent with no difficulties. The people turn into animals; Black Elk is an eagle. The group makes it through most of the second ascent, but they become restless and afraid near the end. Black Elk sees that the leaves are falling from the holy **tree**. The Voice tells the people they will "walk in difficulties" from now on. Black Elk sees the black road before them, and black clouds forming in the sky. The group carries on along the black road, walking the third ascent, and the nation's hoop is broken.

The reoccurrence of the number four is significant, as it further emphasizes the importance of four as a sacred number for the Lakota. These four increasingly difficult ascents represent the increasingly difficult threats that the Lakota will face during Black Elk's lifetime. When the nation's hoop breaks before the final ascent, it symbolizes the rupturing of his people's culture and community. If Black Elk's people are destined to "walk in difficulties," it is Black Elk's responsibility to lead them through those difficulties so that they complete them unscathed—in other words, it is his responsibility to fix the nation's broken hoop.

Black Elk sees that the fourth, final ascent will be difficult. The animals turn back into sickly, starving people. A sacred man, painted all in red, lays down in the center of the people and turns into a bison. A sacred four-rayed herb appears in the place where the **tree** had been before. Black Elk sees that the people below him are crying—it's a chaotic scene. Black Elk transforms back into human form and feeds the herb to his own starving horse, which revives the animal.

The animals' sickly, starving state implies that Black Elk's people will also experience sickness and food scarcity. That Black Elk heals the starving horse with the four-rayed herb is further evidence that he will be a healing force among his people, and it also affirms that the herb is a sacred object.

Next, four beautiful virgins appear: one virgin holds a wooden cup, one holds a white wing, one holds a pipe, and the last holds the **nation's hoop**. They sing and dance in a sacred manner. Black Elk looks at his people, and everyone is happy. He sees the universe as one, and the hoop of his people becomes one of many hoops, all formed around the **tree**. He sees this as holy. The two men from earlier appear and give Black Elk the sacred herb to plant on Earth. The Voice tells Black Elk he will return to his six Grandfathers now. Black Elk follows the men back to the Grandfather's tepee, and the men turn into geese. Black Elk arrives, and the Grandfathers congratulate him and present him with the sacred objects from earlier.

The virgins, who symbolize fertility or growth, present Black Elk with the sacred objects that the Grandfathers gave to him earlier. It seems as though these sacred objects have restored Black Elk's people's former happiness, as evidenced by their joyous singing and dancing. The "many hoops" that form around the tree transforms Black Elk's vision from one concerned solely with the Lakotas' future to one that may be read universally. In other words, the vision proposes the possibility of a harmonious future for humanity as a whole.

The oldest Grandfather tells Black Elk he must return to Earth with the power and wisdom they have granted him. Black Elk looks down and sees his own village below him. He sees his body lying limp and lifeless on the floor, which the Grandfathers see as "a sacred manner." Black Elk leaves the tepee, feeling lonely. An eagle calls to him, and he sees that the tepee has disappeared behind him. Homesick, Black Elk returns to his own tepee, where he finds his parents tending to his sick body. He feels sad because his parents don't seem to know where he's been.

When the oldest Grandfather tells Black Elk to return to Earth, he means that Black Elk should return to Earth with the purpose of sharing his new wisdom with his people and using the powers the Grandfathers gave him to restore their culture's health. The sadness Black Elk feels when he returns home reflects his changed psychological state: he feels lonely because he realizes that his parents cannot understand the place he's been and the things he's learned there.

CHAPTER 4: THE BISON HUNT

Black Elk regains consciousness in his family's tepee, surrounded by his parents. Although his body is still swollen, he's no longer in pain. His parents tell him he'd been sick for 12 days, but that Standing Bear's uncle, Whirlwind Chaser (who is a medicine man) cured him. Everyone is glad that Black Elk has recovered, but he's sad to no longer be in the world he saw in his vision. He's also afraid to tell anyone about it because he doesn't think they'll believe him.

Black Elk's homesickness for the spiritual world he encountered in his vision and his fear of telling anyone about what he saw there shows how having a higher purpose or spiritual calling can alienate the empowered from others. Power becomes a psychologically burdensome responsibility.

Whirlwind Chaser tells Black Elk's parents that there is something special about him. Black Elk is worried that Whirlwind Chaser knows about his visions. By the next morning, Black Elk's swelling is gone. As he walks around his village that day, he feels like a stranger among his people.

Black Elk seems to hold his vision responsible for his physical recovery, implying that the vision gave him some kind of strength. When Black Elk says that he feels like a stranger among his people, he suggests that he can no longer relate to them after having had his vision.

Black Elk goes out one day with the bow and arrows that Refuse-To-Go made him, and he imagines that they are the bow and arrows given to him by the first Grandfather in his vision, which makes him feel foolish. Just as Black Elk is about to shoot a bird, he remembers that the Grandfathers in his vision told him he was to be relatives with the birds, so he doesn't shoot. Black Elk walks down to a creek, shoots a green frog, and feels sad afterward. Standing Bear interjects, verifying that Black Elk was different after he recovered from his illness, that he behaved more like an old man than a boy.

When the Grandfathers tell Black Elk to be relatives with the birds, they mean that he is to treat the birds as equals, again demonstrating the respect and reverence the Lakota have for nature. Black Elk's decision not to shoot the birds shows how seriously he takes his vision. It also shows how often he thinks about the vision and how significantly these thoughts affect the way he interacts with the world around him. Standing Bear's observation that Black Elk behaved like an old man after recovering from his illness is further proof that the spiritual wisdom Black Elk acquired in his vision caused him to feel psychologically distant from his people.

Black Elk continues with his narrative, describing a hunt his people go on that distracts him and the other villagers from his strangeness. One morning, the crier alerts the village that they will break camp because there were many bison nearby. Black Elk rides near the back of the group, and they make their way up a hill. He's reminded of walking up the red road in his vision.

That Black Elk sees the hunting party's road as the red road of his vision is evidence of Black Elk's propensity to project his vision onto the world around him. He is so invested in his vision and in fulfilling the duty it gave to him that he overlooks what's in front of him in the present moment.

Standing Bear recalls killing his first grown bison on this hunt, which occurred in the Moon of Red Cherries (July). Black Elk isn't old enough to hunt, so he watched and cheered on the others. The people butcher the bison and head back to camp. Everyone is happy about the great hunt; they sing and dance all night, and the children play games.

The Lakota follow the bison hunt with singing and dancing, which shows how significantly ceremony and ritual factor into even comparatively mundane practices, like procuring food.

CHAPTER 5: AT THE SOLDIERS' TOWN

After the meat from the hunt is dried, the bands of Lakota that had come together around the time Black Elk had his vision disperse. In the Moon When the Cherries are Ripe (July), Black Elk's band moves toward the Soldiers' Town on the Smoky Earth River, because they have relatives there. They have a big feast on the night of their arrival at War Bonnet Creek. Black Elk's people spend that winter by White Butte, near the soldiers' town. It's during this winter, when Black Elk turns 10, that he sees his first Wasichu.

Until this point, the Wasichus *have been nothing but a bogeyman to Black Elk. The moment that Black Elk sees his first* Wasichu *seems to be a turning point in his narrative, in which his world transforms from one defined by cultural richness and harmony to one consumed by the presence of enemies and conflict.*

One day, a boy in Black Elk's band climbs a flagpole in the Soldiers' Village and chop off the top of it. The Wasichu soldiers surround the pole and want to fight the Ogalalas in retaliation, but their chief at the time, Red Cloud, tells the soldiers that grown men shouldn't fight over a child's foolishness, so nothing comes of it. Red Cloud was a great chief, Black Elk recalls, but after he signed the treaty with the *Wasichu* five years prior, in 1868, he didn't want to fight anymore.

This scene establishes Red Cloud as a chief who cooperates with the Wasichus *and actively strives to dispel conflict in order to ensure the safety of his people. The treaty to which Black Elk refers is the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, which exempted the Black Hills from white settlement.*

In the Moon of the Red Grass Appearing (April), Black Elk's band breaks camp and goes to the Black Hills to cut poles for tepees. One night, Black Elk wanders off on his own and sees an eagle flying above him. For a moment, he feels like he is back in his vision. When they pass by Buffalo Gap near the Hills, Black Elk and Black Elk's father go hunting. When they get to the top of a hill, Black Elk's father tells him to stay back while he goes ahead. Without thinking, Black Elk tells his father to stay, as "they are bringing them to us." Black Elk and his father are both confused by his words, but soon after, the deer come to them.

Seeing the eagle reminds Black Elk that he is supposed to see birds as his relatives. The hunting scene with Black Elk's father demonstrates the capability of Black Elk's visionary powers: they allow Black Elk to know where the deer are. Seeing visible proof of his spiritual power validates Black Elk's vision and gives him hope that he will eventually be able to fulfill the biggest responsibility his vision assigned to him: saving his people.

Black Elk feels sorry as they butcher and eat the animals, so he asks Black Elk's father if they should offer one of them to the earth, and they do so. This is another happy summer for Black Elk. His people cut their new tepee poles and had plenty to eat. While Black Elk's people are living at the Soldiers' Town, a man named Watanye teaches Black Elk how to spearfish. Watanye also tells Black Elk stories, one of which was a funny tale about a Lakota boy named High Horse who had trouble winning over the girl in whom he was interested.

Black Elk's vision seems to heighten his sympathy toward the natural world around him, as evidenced by his desire to offer one of the deer to the earth. When Black Elk's father agrees to his son's requests, it proves that he accepts his son's visionary power or affinity toward nature, even if he doesn't completely understand Black Elk or his extreme reaction to butchering the deer.

CHAPTER 6: HIGH HORSE'S COURTING

Black Elk tells Watanye's story about High Horse: There is a girl in High Horse's village who is so beautiful that High Horse gets sick thinking about her, but the girl's parents are very protective of her. Once the girl's parents hear that High Horse is interested in their daughter, they began to tie her into her bed at night. High Horse's pursuit of the girl is unsuccessful, but one day he manages to talk to her and discovers that she might possibly like him. Invigorated by the possibility of this, he approaches her father and offers him horses in exchange for the girl, but the father rejects High Horse's offers.

High Horse was a real person: a Northern Cheyenne Indian whom Black Elk visited in 1900. This digression from the main narrative in Black Elk Speaks *reinforces the importance of oral tradition in Lakota culture while also presenting the reader with more insight into Lakota values and customs. Black Elk delivers the detail of the girl being tied to her bed noncritically, which suggests that some level of gender inequality is generally accepted in Lakota culture.*

High Horse manages to meet alone with the girl once more and asks her to run away with him, but she refuses because she wants to be bought the way respectable women are. High Horse tells his friend Red Deer about his troubles, and Red Deer suggests they steal her away. Upon entering the girl's tepee to steal her, High Horse becomes nervous and accidentally hits the girl with his knife, which causes her to scream. A group of people chase the two boys away, not knowing who they were.

In Lakota culture, marriages are either elopements (least honorable), by mutual agreement (most common), or by purchase. If a woman was purchased, it implied that she was extra valuable to her husband. The fact that High Horse is willing to steal the girl perhaps suggests that this is a relatively common practice in Cheyenne culture. In this way, the community's safety and unity seems to be threatened by some of their own people in addition to the Wasichus.

High Horse continues to feel sick over the girl. Red Deer comes up with a second plan to paint on High Horse, disguising him as an evil spirit, which will allow him to steal the girl without interference, as the villagers would be afraid of upsetting an evil spirit. Still, as High Horse approaches the girl's bed that night in his disguise, he is scared he will be shot because he looks so frightening. High Horse cuts the leather ties that bind the girl to her bed, but he's so exhausted from his lovesickness that he falls fast asleep before he can free her. He awakes to the girl screaming.

That High Horse disguises himself as an evil spirit to scare away concerned villagers speaks to how seriously the Lakota regard the spiritual world, and the extent to which they believe the spiritual world can affect the physical world. A reader who is unfamiliar with Lakota culture might not realize how literally and seriously Black Elk regards his spiritual vision, and this scene emphasizes how real (as opposed to metaphorical or poetic) Black Elk's spiritual vision is to him.

High Horse runs from the tepee, and the other villagers chase after him with weapons. High Horse escapes and hides in a hollow tree. While he's hiding, the village decide to move camp. Red Deer watches the scene unfold from his tepee, pretending not to know what is going on. When the camp moves, he finds High Horse, who is too embarrassed by his failure to return to the village. He tells Red Deer that he will go on the war path alone, and Red Deer accompanies him. After several days on the war path, they stumble upon a Crow camp. Once it is dark, they steal the Crows' horses. The boys return to their village with the herd of horses. High Horse offers them all to the girl's father, and he gets his girl.

High Horse's story doesn't necessarily add to Black Elk's life story, but it provides the reader with a more informed understanding of Cheyenne culture and values. In addition to the importance of spirituality and storytelling, High Horse's story also shows what personality traits that the Lakota value: High Horse is portrayed as a victorious hero at the story's end, which implies that the Lakota value perseverance and heroic behavior in their men. The story also affirms that the Crow and the Lakota tribes are enemies.

CHAPTER 7: WASICHUS IN THE HILLS

It's now the summer of 1874, and Black Elk is 11 years old. His people have been camping in the Black Hills. One evening, a **thunder** cloud approaches from the west. The cloud reminds Black Elk of his vision, which upsets him. The next day, Black Elk and his friends are hunting squirrels when he hears a voice tell him to go back. When they return to camp, everyone is packing up because Chips, a medicine man, heard a voice telling him to leave, as something is about to happen.

Black Elk is upset by the thunder because it reminds him that he has yet to respond to the higher calling the Grandfathers bestowed upon him in his great vision. In this way, nature seems to act as a kind of higher spiritual authority that can inspire fear and shame in people as well as awe and reverence.

Black Elk and his friends head out around sundown and travel all night toward Spring Creek, and then south along the Good River. Scouts warn them that there were a lot of soldiers in the Black Hills, which was what Chips foresaw. They continue toward Smoky Earth River. Later on, Black Elk learns that it was *Pahuska* (Custer) and his soldiers who were in the Black Hills and who had no right to be there, as it was the Lakota people's country. Custer and his people had broken their promise because they found "**yellow metal**" in the Hills. Black Elk's people already knew there was yellow metal in the Hills, but they left it there, as they had no use for it.

George Custer led an expedition into the Black Hills in 1874, which resulted in the discovery of gold on the land. Pahuska *is a Lakota word meaning "long hair"—use of this name was not exclusive to Custer. Black Elk's people don't care about the "yellow metal" (gold) because they have no immediate use for it: they can't eat it, nor can they make anything useful with it. In contrast, the* Wasichus *are interested in the gold because they can use it to amass more wealth.*

Black Elk's people spend the winter in the Soldiers' Town because more Wasichus are coming from the Missouri River to find the **yellow metal** in the Black Hills. Black Elk's people make plans to put an end to the metal digging. Red Cloud says that the soldiers are keeping the diggers out, but Black Elk's people don't believe him—they call Red Cloud's people "Hang-Around-the-Fort" and accuse them of siding with the *Wasichus*.

Black Elk's people want to put an end to the metal digging because they know that the Wasichus *are "crazy" for it and will stop at nothing to acquire more. The contentious relationship between cooperative chiefs like Red Cloud and more rebellious Lakota like Black Elk's people shows how the growing* Wasichu *presence creates ideological separation between previously unified, ideologically harmonious tribal communities.*

Black Elk's people have a sun dance in the Soldiers' Town that summer, during the Moon of Making Fat (June), though few participate. In the Moon When the Calves Grow Hair (September) there is a council with the Wasichus and people from the Lakota, Shyela, and Blue Cloud tribes to discuss the **gold**-digging. The talk is unsuccessful: Black Elk's father tells him that the Grandfather at Washington wants to lease the Hills to the *Wasichu* to dig for the **yellow metal**, because the *Wasichus* would just take it anyway if the land wasn't given to it to them.

The "Grandfather at Washington" refers to the U.S. president and to the U.S. government, more generally. The government's decision to let the Wasichus *dig in the Hills would represent a severing of the Laramie Treaty of 1868. Black Elk presents the* Wasichus' *need to dig for gold as almost pathological, implying that he sees their fixation with gold—and, by extension, greed—as unnatural and problematic.*

After the council, the Wasichus arrive in droves and build villages in the Hills. In response, Black Elk's people decide to go to Crazy Horse in his camp on the Powder. On their journey, Black Elk sometimes wanders off alone and tries to summon back his vision so that he can figure out a way to save his people's land, though he is repeatedly unable to do so. Black Elk wins some "black medicine" (coffee) from competing in a pony race with a boy named Fat, and he believes that the "white wing of the wind" given to him by the second Grandfather gave him the power to win.

Black Elk develops a conflicted attitude toward his vision. On the one hand, his inability to act on his vision and help his people frustrates him. On the other hand, he also sees the vision as helping him in other, smaller aspects of life, as in this instance, where the "white wing of the wind" helps him win the pony race.

Black Elk's people run into some of the Hang-Around-the-Fort people, who retreat to the Soldiers' Town when they hear that Black Elk's people are going to meet Crazy Horse: they suspect that Crazy Horse will want to fight, and they don't want trouble. Black Elk is anxious to see his cousin Crazy Horse, who is a skilled warrior who can protect his people from their growing troubles.

Specifically, "Hang-Around-the-Fort people" was the name given to an Ogalala and Brule Lakota band formed in the 1850 around Fort Laramie. Many of the women of this band married white soldiers. Black Elk respects Crazy Horse because he sees him as a restorative figure: someone who, unlike the Hang-Around-the-Fort people, will work to preserve his people's way of life.

Crazy Horse was the first chief in Black Elk's family, having become one after he had a vision in boyhood. Crazy Horse's vision gave him power in every battle; in fact, until he was murdered by the Wasichus on White River, he was wounded only twice. Black Elk reflects that if the *Wasichus* hadn't murdered Crazy Horse, his people would probably still have the Black Hills. Everyone is a little afraid and intimidated of Crazy Horse when he's still alive, as he's somewhat strange and secluded.

Black Elk's depiction of Crazy Horse as someone who is tormented by his visions seems to draw a parallel to his own life thus far: both Black Elk and Crazy Horse are from the same family, and both have had visions that cause them to self-isolate. Perhaps some of Black Elk's anxiety about not fulfilling the destiny dictated to him in his vision derives from wanting to live up to Crazy Horse—someone who received a vision and used it to succeed in battle.


When Black Elk's people set up camp on the Powder River, they take extra precautions to protect themselves against the Crows, building a corral for their horses to protect them from the Crows, who were known horse thieves. Still, a Crow tries to steal a horse, and a Lakota horse guard shoots and kills him. Black Elk explains the "counting coup" ritual, in which women cut up and scatter the dead man's body parts and everyone participates in a "kill dance."

The reader should recall the Crow horse thieves from the "High Horse's Courting" story. Here, Black Elk reinforces that the Crow are the Lakota's enemies and known horse thieves. Black Elk's inclusion of the "counting coup" and "kill dance" rituals reinforces ceremony's importance in Lakota culture.

That winter, Wasichu runners come to Black Elk's people to order them to come to the Soldiers' Town immediately, or there will be trouble. Black Elk's people refuse, as they're on their own land and it would be too dangerous to make the journey. In the Moon of the Dark Red Calves (February), the snow thaws, and they head over to the Soldiers' Town. Crazy Horse stays behind with 100 tepees. In the Moon of the Snowblind (March), *Wasichu* soldiers storm Crazy Horse's sleeping camp. They steal horses murder as many people as they can, and light tepees on fire. Crazy Horse assembles warriors and fights back.

This incident refers to the morning of March 16, 1876, in which Colonel Reynolds and six companies of cavalry attacked Crazy Horse's village. This development reinforces Crazy Horse as a character who stands his ground and fights back on behalf of his people and his culture. It also illustrates with new, vivid detail the gruesomeness and inhumanity with which white people treated the Lakota.

CHAPTER 8: THE FIGHT WITH THREE STARS

Black Elk's people stay in the Soldiers' Town until the Moon When the Ponies Shed (May). Black Elk's father tells them they will go back to Crazy Horse and fight with him to keep their country: it's up to them to do so, as "cheap" chiefs like Red Cloud and Spotted Tail would prefer to sell the land to the Wasichus. Black Elk's aunt gives him a six-shooter gun to use in battle. Black Elk feels like a man, even though he is still quite young. Black Elk and a small band set out toward Crazy Horse.

Black Elk and his people align themselves with Crazy Horse, and Black Elk's father explicitly admonishes "cheap" chiefs like Red Cloud and Spotted Tail for being too cooperative with the Wasichus. *These details provide further evidence of how ideologically divided the Lakota are becoming over how to respond to colonization.*

On their way to Crazy Horse, they come across a group of Wasichus on the Bozeman Trail. Black Elk's people attack, and Black Elk resigns to die in battle. When the *Wasichus* see the Indians approaching, they form their wagons into a circle, get inside them, and start shooting. The Indians can't get at the *Wasichus* in their wagons, so they retreat. They head forward, traveling quickly to avoid danger. They meet other small bands as they travel to the Rosebud to meet Crazy Horse. In the Moon of Making Fat (June), the gathered tribes perform a sun dance led by Sitting Bull, an important medicine man.

Black Elk is so committed to his culture, his people, and the duty given to him in his vision that he is prepared to die for them—even at such a young age. Despite the division between relatively passive leaders like Red Cloud and war leaders like Crazy Horse, this battle represents an uplifting moment in the narrative where bands of Lakota come together to defeat a common enemy and threat to their collective way of life.

Black Elk explains how the sun dance works: a holy man finds the holy **tree** and calls others to dance and sing around it. After this, a celebrated warrior hits the tree and gives gifts to the less fortunate. Young maidens bearing axes sing around the tree before chopping it down and removing its branches. Chiefs carry the sacred tree back home, giving thanks along the way. Soldiers on horseback charge at place in the center of the village where the tree will stand, which is now a sacred place. After this, everyone feasts.

Thus far, the book has generally conveyed that ceremony is important to the Lakota—but this passage is the first opportunity for the reader gain insight into what kind of ritual objects and gestures are involved in a Lakota ceremony. Like Black Elk's vision, the sun dance is rife with symbolic imagery and elaborate ritual gestures. The sun dance parallels Black Elk's great vision: both feature unified communities gathered around a sacred tree. The sun dance is important to Black Elk as he tells his life story because it reminds him of a time when his people were unified and his cultural practices were untouched by outside influence.

The next day, holy men plant the tree at the center of the village. The following morning, mothers bring their babies to the tree, and soldiers pierce young children's ears around it. The day after, after purifying themselves in a sweat lodge, participants are painted by holy men. The men's backs or chests are cut, and they are tied to the tree by strips of rawhide. The men dance, pulling at the rawhide until the pain is too bad or their flesh tears.

Traditionally, individuals were required to have their ears pierced to be considered Lakota. The tree in the sun dance is similar to the red stick and blooming tree in Black Elk's initial vision; the presence of these objects in Black Elk's vision and in the sun dance reaffirms that they are sacred.

Black Elk resumes his narrative. After finishing the sun dance, scouts tell the village that there are soldiers camping up the river, preparing to attack. Black Elk's friend Iron Hawk, a Hunkpapa Indian who was 14 and with Crazy Horse during the battle, describes the scene: two parties set out to fight the Wasichus, who were joined by Crow and Shoshone Indians. A fierce battle ensued. Iron Hawk's pony was injured, so he retreated into the forest, where he found some Lakotas feasting on a bison they caught. He joined them until evening, when another Lakota scolded them and made them return to battle. Iron Hawk returned to the battle, and the scene was too chaotic for him to tell who was winning. The warriors left when it was dark to look after the women and children, and the *Wasichus* didn't follow.

The battle that Black Elk and Iron Hawk describe here is the Fight with Three Stars (General Crook) and his troops, which occurred on June 17, 1876. Joined by Crow and Shoshone warriors, Crook's forces attacked Lakota and Cheyenne Indians along the Rosebud River. Within the context of the book, the Fight with Three Stars is important because it gives the reader direct insight into Sioux people's relationship to war and violence: Iron Hawk readily and easily describes his involvement in the battle, which implies a comfort with or acceptance of war and violence. The battle also shows the lengths that the Sioux must go to protect their land from the U.S. troops, who are not above attacking Indian camps unprovoked in order to continue in their westward expansion.

Standing Bear offers his own perspective on the battle, though he didn't fight in it. He recalls that the morning after the warriors returned, he and some others investigated the sight of the battle and found a pile of dead soldiers wrapped in blankets. There was a ring with a white stone on the finger of one corpse. Standing Bear cut of the corpse's finger so that he could have the ring, and he kept it for a long time. Another man scalped a dead Wasichu and carried the scalp home on a stick. They stayed at camp for several days before breaking camp and moving to the Greasy Grass.

From a literary perspective, one might interpret Standing Bear stealing the white stone off the corpse's finger as a metaphorical reclaiming of what's been stolen from them. The Indians have suffered immensely as a result of the Wasichus' *greed, and now the tables have turned: the Indians not only the defeat the* Wasichus *in battle but also steal back an item that representatives their obsession with material wealth. The Greasy Grass refers to the area around the Little Bighorn River.*

CHAPTER 9: THE RUBBING OUT OF LONG HAIR

Black Elk describes his participation in the Battle of Little Big Horn. After fighting the Wasichus along the Rosebud, Black Elk's people camp along the south side of the Greasy Grass, where they are joined by many other tribes. The river waters are high from the snow melt on the Bighorn Mountains. The day before the battle, a medicine man named Hairy Chin dresses Black Elk and some other boys as bears for the curing ceremony of Rattling Hawk, a man wounded in the fight on the Rosebud. Being painted as a bear makes Black Elk thinks of his vision, and he suddenly feels that something horrible will happen. Rattling Hawk improves after this ceremony. The boys run to the river to wash off their paint, and then they return to the camp, where the Black Elk's people have "kill talks."

Rattling Hawk's curing ceremony is an example of the ability of ceremony or ritual gesture to elicit real change: in this case, the healing ceremony results in Rattling Hawk's recovery. The healing ceremony that Black Elk participates in is the Bear ceremony; according to Lakota, the Bear spirit gives men the power to heal wounds. Black Elk's participation in the healing ceremony is important to his character development as well as to the narrative arc that traces his journey toward being able to use the healing powers given to him in his initial great vision. "Kill talks" are when warriors boast of their victories and bravery in battle. Within the context of the narrative, kill talks reinforce the importance of warrior culture to the Sioux— and thus, the importance of defending their culture.

The next day, Black Elk feels ill. Just as Black Elk and some other boys are greasing themselves to go for a swim in the river, a crier from the Hunkpapa camp announces that the Wasichus are coming. Everyone gets their horses and prepares to fight. Black Elk's father tells Black Elk to bring a gun to his brother, who went off with some of the Hunkpapa to fight. Black Elk sees the soldiers appear on the big horses. The soldiers shoot at the Indians.

Black Elk's ill feeling seems to be evidence of his visionary powers warning him of the impending danger. The Soldiers shooting at the Indians that Black Elk references are Major Marcus A. Reno's detachment of Custer's forces. Reno's detachment attacked the south end of the Indians camped along the Little Bighorn River. Black Elk's eagerness to fight reflects the Sioux warrior culture in which he's been raised, his personal disdain for the Wasichu *forces that threaten his people and their culture, and his anxiety to fulfill the duty to his people dictated to him in his vision.*

Black Elk finds his brother, who tells him to go back. Black Elk follows his brother and the Hunkpapas into the timber while the women and children flee downstream. Soldiers shoot at Black Elk, his brother, and the Hunkpapas from above. Black Elk stays in the woods and thinks about his vision, which makes him strong: he imagines his people are **thunder** beings and that they will defeat the Wasichus.

Black Elk's vision and faith in the interdependence of humans and the natural world fuels his bravery in battle, as evidenced by his instinct to imagine his people as thunder beings.

Suddenly, somebody announces that Crazy Horse is coming, and the valley grows darker as the fierce battle continues. The soldiers run upstream, eventually riding into the river, where they continue to fight. A warrior orders Black Elk to scalp a Wasichu, so Black Elk shoots the *Wasichu* in the forehead and takes his scalp. He sees the Indian warriors fighting around the Santee camp in a cloud of dust. Black Elk returns to the Ogalala camp to show his mother his first scalp, and she "[gives] a big tremolo" in response.

Black Elk's mother's reaction to his first scalp—a "tremolo," or celebratory call made by emitting a wavering vocalization, suggests to the reader that the role of women within the Sioux warrior culture is to encourage and support the men.

Standing Bear recalls the battle from his perspective. He had been in the Minneconjou camp along the Little Big Horn River, eating in his tepee, the morning of the battle. Standing Bear's uncle calls him to help with the horses. They meet up with Standing Bear's brother and cross the Greasy Grass, where they see troops approaching the river to attack the Hunkpapa camp. Standing Bear's group moves out to meet the second band of soldiers—General Custer's. A crazy, chaotic battle ensues. Standing Bear's group mistakenly scalps a friend's corpse. The warriors fight until sundown, when the Wasichus retreat into the hills. The next day, the warriors head out to fight the remaining *Wasichu* soldiers.

The troops that Standing Bear references are Maj. Reno's detachment—the same troops that Black Elk described earlier. Standing Bear's group's mistake of scalping one of their own reflects the intensity of the battle—their mistake makes it seem as though they are literally blind with rage. This scene also gives the reader additional insight into Sioux-specific battle customs, such as scalping.

Iron Hawk, who was 14 during the battle, elaborates on Standing Bear's recollection, describing how a crier entered the Hunkpapa camp to announce that the soldiers were approaching. At this, Iron Hawk and the others dressed for battle and headed out to fight. He remembers seeing a Shyela who ran right into the middle of the shooting. The Shyela was so sacred that the soldiers' bullets couldn't hurt him.

Iron Hawk's and Standing Bear's input lends an element of authenticity and excitement to Black Elk's depiction of the Battle of Little Bighorn. One might also interpret their stories from the battle as a literary version of "kill talks." Neihardt includes these "kill talk" type stories to present the reader with a firsthand account of a ceremony, thereby emphasizing the importance of such practices in Lakota culture.

The battle grew bigger, and there was shooting everywhere. Iron Hawk shot a soldier with an arrow and was too mad thinking about the innocent women and children to care about killing. Toward the river, he saw a group of women and children crowding around dead soldiers, cheerfully stripping the soldiers' clothing. He saw two fat women approach a Wasichu soldier, who was wounded and playing dead. The women attempted to castrate the soldier, who immediately jumped up and tried to fight the women. One of the women stabbed and killed the soldier with her knife. Iron Hawk found the interaction very humorous.

Thinking of the innocent women and children they were defending allowed Indians to enter into battle expecting to die, and it fueled their motivations to fight. Iron Hawk's recollection of the women trying to castrate the wounded soldier gives this chapter a human element, and it provides some comic relief in an otherwise strategic, cold depiction of war.

Black Elk continues with his narrative: after showing his mother the Wasichu's scalp, Black Elk stays with the women. Although they can't see the battle, they know their people are killing many *Wasichus*. Eventually, Black Elk and some other young boys return to the battle on horseback. When they arrive, most of the *Wasichus* are dead. Black Elk takes a **watch** that is hanging from a dying soldier's belt and hangs it around his own neck.

Custer's troops were drastically underprepared to face the Indians, and the Battle of Little Bighorn was the U.S. Army's worst defeat since the Fetterman Fight. Black Elk's stealing of the golden watch is thematically similar to when Standing Bear steals the ring off the corpse's finger: both acts are a symbolic, ceremonial taking-back of the Wasichus' *greed.*

The women come over and everyone goes to the top of the hill, where they find dead horses, dead Wasichus, and dead warriors. Black Elk sees Chase-in-the-Morning holding up the body of Black Elk's cousin, Black Wasichu, who has been shot. Some people try to give the injured Black Wasichu medicine. Black Wasichu's father and Black Elk's father are so upset that they butcher a *Wasichu* soldier. The soldier is fat and his meat looks tasty, but they don't eat any. Warriors chase the soldiers back to their mules. Black Elk says he didn't feel bad about killing the soldiers because they tried to take his people's land and had attacked them first. The village breaks camp and flees the next night, making their way up the Greasy Grass. They make camp, dance, and feast.

Black Elk's father's and uncle's response to retaliate against the Wasichus *for Black Wasichu's death conveys a deep sense honor or respect for one's own. The dancing and feasting that follows the Battle of Little Big Horn establishes this kind of ceremony following some kind of test or trial (war or a hunt, for example) as a routine occurrence for Black Elk's people.*

CHAPTER 10: WALKING THE BLACK ROAD

Black Elk's people stay near the Bighorn Mountains for about a month. Black Elk's father tells him that their fighting was for nothing, because the Hang-Around-the-Fort people are still planning on selling the Black Hills to the Wasichus. More and more Indians leave to live on the agencies the *Wasichus* created for them. Black Elk's people move down the Rosebud, toward a sacred spot along a bluff where pictures that tell the future are known to appear. On this occasion, there is a picture of soldiers' heads hanging downward, which some say appeared before the Battle of Little Bighorn.

The agencies that existed during this time were Red Cloud (for the Ogalala), Standing Rock (for the Hunkpapas, Blackfeet, and Yanktonais), Cheyenne River (for the Minneconjous, Sans Arcs, and Two Kettles), Spotted Tail (for the Brules), and Lower Brule. The creation of separate agencies for separate tribes is an example of how colonization destroyed a once united, strong Lakota people.

By the Moon of Black Cherries (August), Black Elk's people hear that the soldiers are returning. They move camp, burning the grass behind them so that the soldiers' horses will starve. Sitting Bull, Gall, and others leave for Grandmother's Land, and many others flee elsewhere, but Crazy Horse refuses to surrender their land.

"Grandmother's Land," named after Queen Victoria of Britain, refers to Canada. Sitting Bull and Gall's move to Canada shows how Indians who chose not to cooperate with the Wasichus *contributed to the disunification of the Lakota people.*

In the Moon of the Black Calf (September), when Black Elk's people are camping near the head of the Grand River, a battle breaks out between Three Stars's soldiers and American Horse's people, resulting in American Horse's death. Crazy Horse assembles some warriors and chases the soldiers away. The soldiers continue to kill Black Elk's people, following them wherever they go. More and more Indians leave the war path and surrender to the Wasichus. There were once thousands of Indians fighting the *Wasichu*, but now there are only 2,000. The winter is rough; ponies starve and die, and Black Elk's people eat them.

Black Elk's reality now reflects his vision more than ever, with his people travelling down a path (black road) of increasingly treacherous tragedies and misfortunes. Interestingly, Black Elk gives no mention of Indians eating ponies in the transcript—this seems to be a detail that Neihardt included, which emphasizes the different perspectives of the Lakota and the Wasichu.


In the Moon of the Falling Leaves (November), Black Elk's people learn that the Black Hills and the land west of the Hills—where Black Elk's people currently reside—have been sold to the Wasichus. The *Wasichus* apparently got some chiefs drunk and tricked them into signing the 1876 Black Hills Agreement.

The 1876 Black Hills Agreement essentially reverses the conditions laid out in the Laramie Treaty less than a decade earlier: now, Wasichus *are free to follow their greed into the Hills and mine to their hearts' content.*


Near the end of the Moon of Falling Leaves (November), soldiers attack Dull Knife and his band of Shyelas at their camp on Willow Creek, attacking the camp as the people slept. Dull Knife and his surviving, starving people join Black Elk's camp, but Black Elk's people are starving and have no food to offer them. The Shyelas leave and go to the Soldiers' Town to surrender.

Circumstances beyond their control prevent Black Elk's people from helping the Shyelas in their time of need. This scene shows how Wasichus *indirectly forced American Indians into displacement by starving them off their native land so that they would have no choice but to live on agencies.*

Crazy Horse begins to act strangely after this, rarely staying in the camp, choosing to wander off alone. It is a bad, sad winter. In the Moon of the Frost in the Tepee (January), General Miles attacks Crazy Horse's village on the Tongue River. The Indians fight the Wasichus, but they have little ammunition and are forced to retreat to the Powder.

The Battle of Little Bighorn weakens Indian forces to the extent that they are now drastically ill-equipped to fight back, again demonstrating the brutality of Wasichus *against the Indian people.*

In either February or March, Spotted Tail, Crazy Horse's uncle, tries to convince Crazy Horse to surrender to the Wasichus. Spotted Tail was a good chief before he surrendered to the *Wasichus*, but Black Elk doesn't like Spotted Tail because he is fat with *Wasichu* food while the rest of them are thin and starving. In the Moon of the Grass Appearing (April), Black Elk's people make their way ahead of Crazy Horse and the others toward Red Cloud Agency, which is near the Soldiers' Town, and in the Moon When the Ponies Shed (May), Crazy Horse and the rest follow. Crazy Horse arrives and takes off his war bonnet and sits down. In the Soldiers' Town, there is enough to eat—but the soldiers watch them all the time, and Black Elk's mother and Black Elk's father wish they'd gone with Sitting Bull and Gall to Grandmother's Land.

To Black Elk, Spotted Tail's fatness is a visual reminder of Wasichu *greed and excess. The takeover of their land by* Wasichus *leaves Black Elk's people with a few equally unpleasant choices: stay in their land and starve, seek refuge in the Soldiers' Town and be monitored as if they are prisoners, or leave their rightful land and venture out into the unfamiliar in Grandmother's Land.*

CHAPTER 11: THE KILLING OF CRAZY HORSE

During the Moon When the Calf Grows Hair (September), Black Elk's people pack up their things at Red Cloud Agency and head to Spotted Tail's camp, but Red Cloud's people catch up to them and make them turn back. Black Elk learns later that Crazy Horse had made them turn around, as he feared there would be trouble at Spotted Tail's camp. The Wasichus had recently made Spotted Tail chief of all the Lakota because they knew he would do whatever the *Wasichus* asked. Apparently, *Wasichus* are spreading rumors that Crazy Horse wants to go to war again, though Black Elk doesn't believe this, as the *Wasichus* already confiscated their guns. Another supposed sign of Crazy Horse's dissidence is his refusal to go to see the "Great Father" in Washington that summer.

Shortly after signing the Black Hills Agreement of 1876, the U.S. government took control over Sioux Agencies, confiscated the Lakotas' guns and horses, and made them relocate to agencies where the government could monitor them. After taking their guns, General Crook (Three Stars) announced that Red Chief would be removed from power and Spotted Tail would be in charge of the Lakota at both his and Red Chief's agency. Crazy Horse, unlike Spotted Tail and Red Cloud, refused the U.S. government's offer to go to Washington and meet President Ulysses S. Grant. This scene gives further insight into the ways the U.S. government systematically weakened Native peoples by taking away their weapons and disrupting their power structures.

The next evening, Black Elk's people are at Red Cloud's agency when some soldiers take Crazy Horse to the Soldiers' Town nearby. Black Elk and Black Elk's father follow to see what's going on. When they arrive, Crazy Horse is surrounded by soldiers and Lakota police. Black Elk gets the feeling that something bad is about to happen. Suddenly, Crazy Horse shouts, and Black Elk hears that he has been hurt. Black Elk learns later that the Wasichus had told Crazy Horse that they would not harm him if he went willingly to the Soldiers' Town to talk to their leader, but they lied and took him to a jail cell instead. When Crazy Horse saw what was happening, he took a knife out of his robe and tried to defend himself. A soldier stabbed Crazy Horse with a bayonet, killing him.

Crazy Horse's death is another example of the Wasichus *saying one thing and doing another: just as they had originally promised the Lakota that the Black Hills would be theirs forever before going back on this promise and opening up the land for* Wasichu *mining, the U.S. soldiers give Crazy Horse the impression that they won't harm him before doing just the opposite. The Lakotas' conditions have gotten progressively worse as Black Elk's narrative unfolds, but Crazy Horse's death is a tragedy of unparalleled significance.*

Black Elk and Black Elk's father return to camp. Everyone mourns the loss of Crazy Horse, who was brave and good and only fought to save his people. He was just 30 years old. The next day, Crazy Horse's parents return his body to the camp. They place it in a box and go off alone with the body. Nobody knows where they brought the body; regardless, Black Elk knows that it doesn't matter where Crazy Horse's physical body lies, only that wherever "his spirit is, it will be good to be."

Crazy Horse's death marks the end of a major figure in the Lakota's fight against cultural assimilation. Interestingly, while the line about Crazy Horse's spirit is the most frequently cited of the book, it doesn't appear in the interview transcripts, which suggests that the expressed view is Neihardt's, not Black Elk's.

CHAPTER 12: GRANDMOTHER'S LAND

The Wasichus order Black Elk's people to move to a different agency. The band splits up, half going with Red Cloud, and the other half—including Black Elk—going with Spotted Tail. Black Elk and some others don't want to go to the new agency, and their old place on the Powder River isn't how it used to be. They decide to run away from the group and travel to Grandmother's Land where their relatives, Sitting Bull, and Gall are, and where they will be safe from the *Wasichus*. Black Elk is 15 years old. He wonders when he will be called on to realize his vision and save his people.

Black Elk and his family are essentially forced to flee to Grandmother's Land if they want to avoid living a surveilled life on an agency; at the same time, this choice complicates Black Elk's ability to realize his vision and save his people because it puts distance between himself and the problems (the Wasichus *and forced assimilation) that threaten his people and their culture.*

One day, Black Elk joins his uncle, Running Horse, to hunt bison. As they approach the Little River Creek, Black Elk starts to feel weird. He hears a voice sees two Lakota hunters chase a bison behind a bluff. Running Horse and Black Elk see a band of Crows emerge from behind the bluff. They later learn that the Crows killed the hunters, and Black Elk takes these events to be evidence of his growing visionary power.

Black Elk's frustration about not being able to save his people is compounded by the increasing presence of events like these, which prove to him that his powers can *enact real change on the world around him. However, he remains unable to harness these powers for the greater good of his people.*

In another instance, when Black Elk is out hunting with a man named Iron Tail in June, a voice tells him to return to camp quickly because something bad is going to happen. Black Elk and Iron Tail hurry back to camp and tell everyone to leave. On their way out, a big band of Crows charges and shoots at them. Black Elk's cousin, Hard-to-Hit, is killed in the attack.

Again, this event affirms Black Elk's faith that his visionary powers are real and can bring about tangible consequences for himself and his people. At the same time, however, he finds himself in an alien environment (in exile, away from most of his people) in which he is physically unable use those powers to perform his duty. In other words, outside circumstances—not personal shortcoming—prevent Black Elk from realizing his vision.

Black Elk's people stay on the Clay Creek in Grandmother's Land all that summer and winter. Black Elk is 16 years old. The winter is harsh; there are many blizzards, and game is hard to find. On a particularly difficult hunting trip with Black Elk's father, Black Elk hears a coyote speaking to him, telling him there are bison on a ridge to the west. Black Elk wakes his father and they head west, meeting some other Lakotas along the way. Sure enough, they find plenty of bison through the blinding snow flurries. It takes the men all day to butcher the bison. They make camp and use the raw bison robes for shelter. They have a joyous feast and keep the fire going through the night to fend off the cold.

Black Elk might be able to use his powers to avoid enemies, but in the grander scheme of things, he is unable to save his people from the larger, long-lasting problems they face, such as starvation and harsh winters. Moments like this successful bison hunt become rarer and rarer as Black Elk's narrative progresses.

Black Elk and Black Elk's father head home. Black Elk finds that five of their horses have frozen to death in the night. Everyone feels homesick for their own country and for the old days before the Wasichus invaded.

*Coming home from a successful hunt to find their horses dead confirms for Black Elk and his people that any victories they will have from now on will be temporary and few and far between: they are living in a post-*Wasichu *world, now, and this world is characterized almost exclusively by food scarcity, tragedy, and displacement.*

CHAPTER 13: THE COMPELLING FEAR

In the spring, two families from Black Elk's group set out for a place they used to camp. One morning, while Black Elk is taking the horses out to eat, he hears a voice warn him to look out. Suddenly, he sees two enemies (who he later learns are Blackfeet) crawling toward his camp to attack them. Black Elk prays to the spirits for help before telling his people that they must flee. They do so, not even pausing to take down their tepees. Black Elk hears a voice and sees a **thunder** cloud form, and he knows it is the spirits protecting them. As Black Elk and his people flee, they hear shooting coming from the direction of their deserted camp.

The Blackfeet that Black Elk refers to are the Blackfeet of Montana—not the Blackfeet Sioux, who are a Lakota band. Black Elk's powers continue to protect him and his people in these incidental, smaller ways. Here, Black Elk views the thunder cloud's formation as a comforting validation that it was spirits who helped him and his family escape.

They reach their country, crossing the Missouri river on a "fire-boat" and settle in a Soldiers' Town at the mouth of the Tongue River. The soldiers take Black Elk's people's guns and leave them with only two horses per tepee. In the Moon of Making Fat (June), they perform a sun dance. Black Elk feels guilty for not doing what the Grandfathers in his vision wanted him to do; he feels bad every time a **thunder** cloud approaches, and he hears the thunder calling on him to "make haste." The coyotes also call out to him. Black Elk is glad once the frosts begin and there are no more thunder storms to remind him of his unrealized vision.

When Black Elk returns to his homeland, the things that had once comforted him—a coyote's calling, thunder, and the voices—become sources of anxiety. Black Elk sees thunder (and the spiritual presence that it implies) as less of a reassurance and more of a weight on his chest that perpetually reminds him of his failures to save his people and their culture. The thunder, coyotes, and voices remind Black Elk that he possesses an unused visionary gift, and he feels alienated by the things that once brought him comfort.

Black Elk turns 17 that winter. When the spring comes around, Black Elk's parents ask a medicine man named Black Road to see what's wrong with Black Elk, as he continues to act strange. Black Elk is so anxious that he tells Black Road about his vision. Black Road tells him that to feel better, he must go through with the duty presented to him in his vision. He tells Black Elk that if he doesn't perform a horse dance, something bad will happen to him.

Black Road's advice marks a turning point for Black Elk: it offers him the opportunity to understand the ramifications of his vision and the powers it gives him. Black Road's gives Black Elk hope that he will finally be able to realize his vision and harness his powers for the greater good of his people.

CHAPTER 14: THE HORSE DANCE

Black Road asks a wise man named Bear Sings to help with the dance. The village sets up a sacred tepee that is painted with pictures from Black Elk's vision. Black Road and Bear Sings purify Black Elk in a sweat lodge and dry him with sage. Black Elk teaches them songs he heard in his vision. They procure four sets of four horses to represent the north, south, east, and west, as well as a bay horse for Black Elk to ride. Four beautiful maidens and six old men are selected to take part in the vision, as well. Next, they paint and dress the humans and horses for the dance while singing a sacred song. Everyone looks beautiful but fearful. The Grandfathers paint the black and red roads in the middle of the tepee, and place the sacred objects from Black Elk's dream around them.

The horse dance is important because it highlights the importance of ceremony in Lakota culture, as well as ceremony's ability to bring about real consequences. The horse dance allows Black Elk to perform his private vision so that he and his people can understand its meaning, and in so doing, accept Black Elk's status as a visionary. Sage is used in many Lakota rituals as a purifying agent.

Black Elk stands in the sacred tepee and holds a red stick. The dance begins with the Grandfathers singing and announcing the horse rider. As each band of horses is announced, they take their place behind the Grandfathers. Black Elk is struck by his vision and realizes that the dance is only a shadow of the spirit world his vision represents.

When Black Elk says that the horse dance is only a shadow of the spirit world that his vision represents, he means that there are essences of the spirit world that words cannot convey. Ceremony, therefore, is the next-best way for one to attempt to understand the mysteries of the spirit world.

Black Elk sees the Six Grandfathers before him in the cloud, as well as himself on the bay horse. A **thunder** cloud emerges and it begins to storm in the distance, but only a "little sprinkle" falls on the villagers. The virgins offer the holy relics to the sky. Sick people in the village approach the virgins, and afterward they feel cured and joyful.

Publicly performing his vision allows Black Elk to revisit the spiritual cloud world. Prior to this, Black Elk has only felt strange or uncanny feelings that remind him of his vision, briefly heard voices, or noticed thunder clouds that he associates with the vision. This direct engagement with the vision shows that the horse dance is working—that Black Elk is becoming better acquainted with what the vision means and what it asks of him.

The Grandfathers beat their drums. The four black horsemen lead a procession toward the western side of the village and all the riders join behind them. Each band of horses is given a chance to lead. The procession faces the west, east, south, and north, and at each direction, Black Elk prays to the spirits for wisdom and protection. When everyone is facing the sacred tepee, Black Elk cries out "hoka hey," and everyone charges toward it. The horses are rubbed down with sacred sage. The Grandfathers sprinkled fresh soil on the **nation's hoop** that was in the sacred tepee, and during the procession, the tiny pony hoofprints of the "spirit horses" from Black Elk's vision had apparently appeared on the hoop.

The Grandfathers that Black Elk refers to now are the horse dance performers playing the role of the Grandfathers—not the actual Grandfathers in his vision. The nation's hoop's presence is important here because it reaffirms Black Elk's most immediate task at hand: to restore his people, his culture, and the unification they had before Wasichu *colonization. The presence of the "spirit horse" hoofprints implies that the ceremony caused both the spirit world and the physical world to converge.*

Black Road takes the sacred pipe from a maiden and fills it with red willow bark, offering it to the Powers of the World. Then, the pipe is smoked and passed around to the whole village. Everyone is happy after the horse dance, and Black Elk no longer feels fear and anxiety. Before, the medicine men had refused to talk to him, but now they want to hear about his vision.

Smoking the pipe unifies Black Elk and his people. Symbolically, this implies Black Elk's shift from alienation and social isolation to acceptance: he is now unified with his people, and they now accept him as a medicine man, all as a result of the ceremonial performance of the horse dance.

CHAPTER 15: THE DOG VISION

Black Elk's people stay at the foot of the Tongue River through June, when a soldier says the land has been sold to the U.S. government. The soldiers take the Indians' horses and send them to Fort Yates, a new reservation for the Lakota people. Black Elk doesn't think they were ever repaid for their stolen horses. Gall and Sitting Bull remain in the Grandmother's Land. Black Elk decides that it's time to return to his people, the Ogalalas, and fulfill the destiny given to him in his vision. Black Elk and the Brules he is camping with set out.

Because he has performed his vision publicly through the horse dance, Black Elk is able to replace the fear and anxiety he previously attached to his vision with confidence and a renewed sense of purpose: he is ready to return to the Ogalalas and fulfill his destiny. The Fort Yates reservation is located in Standing Rock, North Dakota. In 1881, the U.S. government sent Lakota prisoners of war to this reservation; individuals who were part of other agencies (like Black Elk) were allowed to return to those agencies.

On their journey, Black Elk goes off alone and sings a song from his vision. He sees the two men in the cloud and knows that the men want him to help his people. Black Elk reaches the Pine Ridge Agency that the soldiers have built for the Ogalalas, and he stays there through the winter of 1881, when he turns 18 years old. The winter is hard for Black Elk because the **thunder** beings, who have become "like relatives to [him]," won't return until the spring. He feels alienated without them. Black Elk is grateful for his powers, though he sometimes wishes they'd been given to someone "more worthy."

The thunder beings are now "like relatives" to Black Elk because the horse dance has brought him closer to his vision. Whereas before the thunder frightened Black Elk, now it comforts him and keeps him focused on his purpose. Black Elk's wish that the spirits had selected someone "more worthy" to save his people reinforces his tendency to ascribe his people's decline to his own failure rather than to circumstances that are beyond his control, such as the relocation of American Indians to agencies.

When spring arrives, Black Elk goes lamenting with the help of a medicine man named Few Tails. Few Tails tells Black Elk to fast, smoke from the sacred pipe, and purify himself in a sweat lodge before the lamentation ceremony beings. The ceremony takes place on a hill outside the Agency, by Grass Creek. They make the ground sacred with sage and place sacred offerings to the spirits. Few Tails leaves Black Elk to lament. As Black Elk faces west, an eagle flies overheard and whistles; as he faces north, a chicken hawk flies; as he faces east, a swallow flies over him. As he faces south, he thinks of all his dead relatives, like Crazy Horse, and weeps. Suddenly, a cloud of butterflies appears in the sky.

The lamentation ceremony is another instance in which Black Elk engages in a ritual to better understand his vision and to perform his duty. The lamentation ceremony is a vision quest in which the lamenter "cries out" to the spirits for a vision. The birds that Black Elk sees during the lamentation ceremony connect with the Grandfathers' earlier message that Black Elk is to treat the birds as relatives. The appearance of bids implies that the vision quest is working, and that Black Elk is getting back in touch with his initial great vision.

The chicken hawk tells Black Elk that his Grandfathers will speak to him now. The dust rises around Black Elk, and he sees the two men from before, who are now riding sorrel horses and shooting arrows at dogs that have appeared from the dust while **thunder** beings cheer. Suddenly, the dogs' heads turn into Wasichu heads. The vision ends, and a storm grows closer to Black Elk, who continues to cry. He asks the Grandfathers for forgiveness and tells them that he now knows what it is they want him to do. The storm beats around Black Elk, but no hail can penetrate the sacred circle.

This vision contains many features of Black Elk's initial vision, namely the sorrel horses, the two messenger men, the birds, and the sacred circle, or hoop. The purpose of this vision quest is for Black Elk to gain a better understanding of his initial vision, and this purpose is fulfilled when Black Elk sees the pierced dog heads transform into Wasichu *heads, which imply that his purpose is to defeat the* Wasichus.

Black Elk falls asleep and dreams of his people sitting sadly around a sacred tepee. As he weeps for them, a colorful light appears and disappears; in its place rests a growing herb. Black Elk hears a voice telling him to help his people. He awakens and sees that the sky is just beginning to grow lighter. There are still bright stars all around him, and in between the stars he sees the faces of the unborn, men's and women's faces, and happy horses. Black Elk falls asleep again and is awakened by Few Tails. They head home, and Black Elk tells the village's old men about his vision. The old men say that he must perform the dog vision in 20 days. Further, because his people are so distraught, Black Elk must perform it with heyokas so that the people will laugh.

The herb is also a symbol from Black Elk's initial vision: it previously restored the black horse to health. The symbolic purpose of the herb's reappearance in this vision is to show Black Elk that he is to use the herb to heal his people. As was the case with the horse dance, Black Elk must now perform the dog vision he witnessed during the lamentation ritual to convey its wisdom to himself and to his people.

CHAPTER 16: HEYOKA CEREMONY

After waiting 20 days, it is time for Black Elk to perform the *heyoka* ceremony. Black Elk compares the *heyoka* ceremony's function to a **thunder** storm: Thunder storms are terrifying when they occur, but after they've passed, "the world is greener and happier." *Heyoka* ceremonies happen in an opposite way, instilling happiness within people first so that they are happy and clear-headed enough to receive harder truths. The *heyoka* ceremony balances out suffering and laughter.

In practice, the heyoka *ceremony differs from the horse dance because it goes about conveying wisdom or truth in an opposite way, priming the audience with laughter and foolish antics so that they possess an open-minded disposition and are more willing to hear the truths to ceremony conveys. In contrast, the horse dance was a more straightforward performance of Black Elk's vision.*

A man named Wachpanne supervises the ceremony. Wachpanne tells everyone to form a circle around the sacred tepee. In the center sits a pot of boiling water. Two *heyokas* sacrifice a dog, breaking its neck and cutting away everything except for the head, spine, and tail, which are offered to the Powers. Then, they boil the dog meat in a pot. Meanwhile, Black Elk and his friend One Side, both painted red and "streaked with black lightning," perform tricks alongside the other *heyokas* to make the people laugh.

Only people who have had visions of thunder beings can be heyokas. *Black Elk and One Side are painted red and "streaked with black lightning" because they represent the two messenger men in his vision, who are of the cloud world and associated with the thunder beings.*

Black Elk and One Side act out Black Elk's dog vision, charging toward the boiling pot. Mimicking the two men who kill the dogs in his vision, Black Elk pierces the dog's head with his arrow, and One Side pierces the dog's heart. After this, everyone charges to get a piece of the meat and flesh, which is now sacred with the power of the west. Everyone feels better after the ceremony.

The thunder beings are of the west, so the dog's meat is now sacred with their power. By extension, performing the heyoka *ceremony brings Black Elk closer to the thunder beings, whose power once intimidated him.*

CHAPTER 17: THE FIRST CURE

After the *heyoka* ceremony, Black Elk and some others move to the place between Wounded Knee Creek and Grass Creek, which is where Black Elk resides at the time he tells his story to Neihardt. They build log houses, even though Indians typically try to build round things. Indians place a sacred symbolic value on circles because circles, unlike squares, are unbroken and eternal. Circles are also found in nature, such as in birds' nests or the moon's rotation. But the Wasichus make them live in square boxes, so that is what they must do.

Neihardt conducted his interviews with Black Elk in Black Elk's home, in Manderson, South Dakota, on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Black Elk's digressive remarks on circles gives more insight into the importance of circles that have appeared in the story thus far, such as the sacred hoop. The Lakotas' sacred relationship to the circle also underscores their close connection to nature. Lastly, Black Elk's comments about circles creates a strict divide between Lakota culture, which is based in circles and nature, and Wasichu *culture, which is based in squares and which rejects nature.*

One day in June, Black Elk asks One Side with help finding the four-rayed herb he saw in his great vision. The *heyoka* ceremony has mad Black Elk confident that they are very close to finding the herb. He sings a sacred song and they find the herb, which has blue, white, red, and yellow flowers. Black Elk decides he must cure the weakest two-leggeds with the herb.

In addition to reassuring Black Elk's people, the heyoka *ceremony also restores Black Elk's faith in his powers, as evidenced by his newfound confidence that he will locate the four-rayed healing herb.*

Black Elk is eating supper when a man named Cuts-to-Pieces approaches him, asking for help with his son, who has been gravely ill for a long time. Black Elk agrees and goes to the boy. Black Elk uses the sacred objects from his dream—the wooden cup, the pipe, and the four-rayed herb—and cures the boy, who lives to be 30. At just 19 years old, Black Elk is now known as a healer among his people.

This moment marks another important milestone for Black Elk, in which he outwardly displays his healing abilities to his people. The implication is that moment exists as a direct result of the heyoka *ceremony, which helped Black Elk find the four-rayed herb and which now establishes him as a healer among his people, as his initial vision predicted.*

CHAPTER 18: THE POWERS OF THE BISON AND THE ELK

Black Elk explains to his audience that someone who has had a vision can't use it until he demonstrates his power publicly—he wasn't able to practice as a medicine man and cure people by using the Spirits' powers until after the *heyoka* ceremony. He also stresses that it's not his power, but the Spirits': had Black Elk operated under the believe that it was he who was curing the weak, the powers would cease to exist.

Black Elk reaffirms how crucial public ceremonies are to one's ability to access their private visions and powers. He displays his humility and reverence for Lakota culture when he maintains that his powers belong to the Spirits rather than to him personally.

Black Elk admits that until now, as he is telling his life story to Neihardt, he never told one person all of his vision—not even his friend, Standing Bear, or his son, Ben Black Elk. He wonders whether he will die, now that he has given his vision away by talking about it but decides it's important for him to record it.

That Black Elk hasn't been able to talk about his vision to anybody—even a close friend or a relative—shows how alienating his higher purpose has been, despite the moments of community with which the horse dance and the heyoka *ceremony have provided him. Black Elk's decision to tell his vision to Neihardt is motivated by the desire to save his culture: by recording his vision in writing through Neihardt, he can preserve the memory of his people and their culture that the* Wasichus *systematically tried to erase.*

Black Elk resumes his narrative to describe how he performed the bison part of his vision. To perform the bison ceremony, Black Elk gets a wise medicine man named Fox Belly to help him. With Fox Belly's and One Side's help, Black Elk performs the bison part of his vision in a space inside a sacred tepee meant to look like a bison wallow. The bison wallow has the **nation's hoop** in its center and a red road with bison tracks across both ends. Black Elk and One Side are painted red, like the man in his vision who was turned into a bison, and act like bison. After the bison ceremony, everyone drinks from the sacred cup, and Black Elk no longer doubts the meaning of his vision or his ability to heal others.

Each subsequent performance brings Black Elk closer to understanding his initial vision. The bison ceremony lets Black Elk access the part of his great vision in which the man painted red turns into a bison. It also represents Black Elk's ability to direct his people away from the black road of hardship on which they've been walking and refocus them toward the red road of prosperity. If the heyoka *ceremony affirmed Black Elk's power as a healer, this ceremony affirms his power as a guide.*

The next summer in 1883, when Black Elk is 21 years old, he performs the elk ceremony, which symbolizes growth. He enlists Running Elk, Standing Bear's uncle, to help. Six men are selected to be the elk, and four virgins to represent the four quarters of the earth. The elk men and virgins perform the elk ceremony, utilizing the sacred objects and colors featured in Black Elk's first vision.

In Lakota culture, elk symbolize growth and male generative power. Performing the elk ceremony brings Black Elk even closer to understanding another aspect of his vision, as the sacred objects he visualized are being used in a ceremony that connotes growth and progress.

CHAPTER 19: ACROSS THE BIG WATER

The fall after Black Elk performs the elk ceremony (1883), the Wasichus kill the last bison. Unlike the Lakotas, who hunted the bison for their meat, the *Wasichus* kill the bison for **yellow metal**, taking only the hides and sometimes only the tongues. Increasingly, Black Elk's people are moving into the "square gray houses," living within the boundaries allotted to them by the *Wasichus*. Black Elk is surrounded by sad, starving people and knows that the **nation's hoop** is broken. The Great Father in Washington was supposed to send them money, but Black Elk presumes that the *Wasichus* must have stolen it and lied.

Because the bison plays such a central role in Lakota culture, the Wasichus' *destruction of the bison population symbolizes the destruction of Lakota culture more generally. Along these lines, being forced to move into "square gray houses" is especially difficult to the Lakota because it means giving up the circular shape of their old homes (tepees), which, as Black Elk explained earlier, is sacred to their people.*

Black Elk continues to cure people for three years. In 1886, he hears that the Wasichus want a band of Ogalalas for a show that will be put on "across the big water." Black Elk decides to go, hoping that by learning more about the *Wasichu* way of life, he might be able to help his people. He wonders if it's possible that the *Wasichus'* way of life is better than his people's—although, in retrospect, he sees these thoughts as the product of despair. Still, his people's old ways are no longer working, and they are well on their way down the black road. Black Elk hopes he can bring the sacred hope back together and make the tree bloom again in its center. His relatives beg him to stay back, but Black Elk ignores them.

Black Elk joins Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, a traveling vaudeville performance featuring stereotyped depictions of American Indians, cowboys, and other elements associated with the American West. Black Elk realizes that while performing the horse, heyoka, *bison, and elk ceremonies has allowed him to harness healing and leadership powers, he remains unable to restore his people to the way they were prior to* Wasichu *colonization. Black Elk's decision to travel east may be interpreted as forced cultural assimilation: seeing how the old ways (ceremony, ritual) have failed to protect his people, he entertains the idea of assimilating to the new* Washichu *ways as a last ditch effort to save his people.*

Black Elk and about a hundred other men and women are sent on the "iron road" to increasingly larger towns across the country, putting on a show before traveling through the night to the next location. Black Elk is surprised by the big houses and the large amounts of people in the towns. He's also struck by the **bright lights** in the towns at night, which shine so brightly he cannot see the stars. Black Elk performs in many shows that winter. He likes performing, but he dislikes the Wasichus' involvement. He also has yet to find a way to help his people, observing that the *Wasichus* are greedy and don't care about one another the way the Indians used to.

The "iron road" refers to the railroad, but it may also be interpreted symbolically as the black road from Black Elk's vision, thereby suggesting that Black Elk can expect tragedy and hardship in his future. Black Elk positions the Wasichus' *bright lights (electric lights) as opposite of the stars—and, in so doing, he reinforces the* Wasichus' *and Lakotas' opposing relationships with nature. Black Elk's travels through* Wasichu *society confirm his initial belief that the* Wasichus *are fueled not by compassion, but by greed.*

In the spring, some of the performers go home. Black Elk and the remaining performers accompany the Wasichus on a big fire-boat. The journey is long and miserable. One night there is a great storm. The Indians are sick and scared, and the *Wasichus* laugh at them. Black Elk and some others believe they will die, and nobody sleeps that night. In the morning, the wind is strong and the waves look like mountains. Some of the animals on board died in the night. The *Wasichus* throw a bison overboard, which makes Black Elk cry; to him, this act symbolizes how the *Wasichus* have thrown away his people's power.

The "fire-boat" that Black Elk refer to is the State of Nebraska, *a steamship, which departed from New York on March 31, 1887. Black Elk is particularly affected by the* Wasichus *throwing the bison overboard because the bison is sacred to his people. In contrast, the* Wasichus*—motivated by greed—see the bison only in terms of its use value. Because the dead, unharvested bison can't financially benefit the* Wasichus, *they discard it.*

Eventually, they reach the shore, where Black Elk sees houses that are very close together. The Indians spend the night on the boat. The next day, the Wasichus unload them and take them to the place where they will perform their next show, in a town called London, for "Grandmother England," who owns Grandmother's Land. Grandmother England arrives at the show in a "big **shining** wagon." Black Elk's people dance and sing for Grandmother. They all like her because she is kind to them, professing that if the Indians "belonged" to her, she wouldn't parade them around in a show.

The closely-built houses are the opposite of the High Plains of Black Elk's home: they are the embodiment of wealth, greed, and Wasichu *society, and the rejection of Lakota culture and the natural world. Grandmother England refers to Queen Victoria of Britain.*


Grandmother England tells the Indian performers that they must come visit her, and they do so later that month. Black Elk's people are brought to her enormous house. Black Elk sees seats arranged in a circle full of people yelling, "Jubilee!" The Wasichus put the Indians in a place near the bottom of the seats and they watch as other **shining** wagons pulled by horses arrive, carrying Grandmother and her relatives. Grandmother England arrives in the final wagon, wearing a "shining" dress and hat. The Indians sing a song to Grandmother England, and Black Elk wonders whether things might have been different for his people "if she had been our Grandmother."

Black Elk and the other Wild West performers visit Grandmother England at Earl's Court, in London, on May 11, 1887. The people yell "Jubilee!" because the performance is a part of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, which celebrates the 50th anniversary of her ascension. Grandmother England's "shining" clothing is a visible display of her wealth. The reader might compare Grandmother England's "shining" appearance to the shining, "yellow metal" that has caused Black Elk and his people so much trouble. This passage therefore indicates that the Wasichus' *obsession with material wealth extends far outside Black Elk's homeland. But despite her obvious wealth, Grandmother England's kindness makes Black Elk wonder whether his people's situation wouldn't be so dire if Britain, and not the U.S., had assumed control of his land. Black Elk's comment betrays his cynical, defeated stance that it was inevitable that his people would be conquered by some outside force.*


CHAPTER 20: THE SPIRIT JOURNEY

Black Elk performs in shows for the next few months in Manchester, but he and some others get left behind. They find another Lakota who can speak the Wasichu language and who tells them that they can earn the money to go home by participating in a different show run by "Mexican Joe." It's a small show, but they travel throughout Europe. In Paris, Black Elk meets a girl who likes him and invites him to spend some time at her family's home. Black Elk continues to perform for Mexican Joe, but he grows increasingly homesick, to the point where he is too ill to perform. When Mexican Joe's show returns to Paris, Black Elk goes with the girl to her home.

Mexican Joe (Captain Mexican Joe Shelly) started a show to compete with Buffalo Bill's. Black Elk's homesickness marks the development of a new kind of alienation: whereas before Black Elk's vision alienated him from his people, now literal distance (an ocean's worth), as well as the culture shock of being surrounded by Wasichus, *contributes to Black Elk's sense of loneliness and social isolation.*

One morning, while Black Elk is sitting with the girl and her family, the roof appears to move. A cloud appears, sweeps Black Elk up into it, and carries him over the ocean, back to his homeland. He sees the Missouri River and the Black Hills, where he'd had his first vision so many years before. The cloud stops at Pine Ridge, where Black Elk sees all the different bands of his people gathered together in a big camp. He sees his parents; Black Elk's mother looks up, and Black Elk is sure that she saw him. The cloud takes Black Elk back over the big water and back to the big town. When Black Elk regains consciousness, the girl's family and their doctor tell him he's been lying near death for three days. He doesn't tell the family where he'd been, because he thinks they won't believe him.

Black Elk's sickness mirrors the physical illness he suffered as a child the first time he received a vision. This parallel implies that Black Elk has undergone a renewed call to action: being transported back to the physical and mental states that he experienced during his first vision restores his faith in his higher calling. So far, Black Elk's mother has been a relatively underdeveloped character, but her seeing him during this vision gives the reader the sense that she and Black Elk have a close, meaningful relationship.

A few days later, the family hears that Buffalo Bill is back in town, and they all go to his show. Buffalo Bill, or *Pahuska*, as Black Elk calls him, is glad to see Black Elk, but Black Elk decides it's time to go home. Buffalo Bill gives Black a ticket home and some money, and the next morning, Black Elk is on a boat on his way home. He has been away for three years. When Black Elk arrives at Pine Ridge, everything appears as it did in his vision. Black Elk's parents are excited to see him, and Black Elk's mother tells him that she dreamed that he visited them on a cloud but could not stay.

Black Elk calls both Buffalo Bill and General Custer Pahuska, *which means "Long Hair" in Lakota. Both men had noticeably long, lustrous locks of hair, and using the name Pahuska draws a line of separation between these men (and the* Wasichu *culture they represent) and the Lakota. Black Elk's decision to return home is fueled by the renewed sense of purpose he gained in his most recent vision. Black Elk's mother's comment affirms the closeness of their relationship, further emphasizing how important a sense of unity and familial intimacy is to the Lakota people.*

CHAPTER 21: THE MESSIAH

Black Elk sees that his people's situation has gotten much more dire during his time abroad. Now, nothing will grow, and the Wasichus have killed all the bison. The most recent treaty that Three Stars forced them to sign took away half of the remaining Lakota land. Because Black Elk's people are mostly confined to agencies, there is nothing they can do. Black Elk's power went away while he was overseas, but his power returns once he is back, and he is able to keep curing people. Still, many people are sick with measles and whooping cough, and many young children die.

The treaty that Black Elk references was arranged in a commission headed by Three Stars (General Crook) in 1889. The treaty drastically reduced Sioux food rations. Despite the return of Black Elk's powers, external circumstances like sickness and starvation are beyond his control, and his people continue to suffer despite his spiritual calling to save them.

The summer that Black Elk returns (1889), he hears talk of a Paiute man out west who has supposedly spoken to the Great Spirit in a vision and learned how to take back their country from the Wasichus. Black Elk's people send Good Thunder, Brave Bear, and Yellow Breast to see if the man is telling the truth. That fall, they return bearing good news: they saw the Paiute man, whom the *Wasichus* call Jack Wilson but whose real name is Wovoka. The Indians believe that Wovoka is a *Wanekia*, or messiah. Wovoka told the men that there would be a second world coming, "just like a cloud," that would crush everything in the dying world and restore things to how they had been in old times.

The imagery of Wovoka's vision parallels the imagery of Black Elk's great vision. Wovoka's emergence provides a glimmer of hope for the increasingly subjugated, suffering Lakota people. In particular, the second world coming in "just like a cloud" connotes the idea that the Lakota's spirituality (and particularly their reverence for the natural world) will somehow prevail over the Wasichus.

Wovoka gave Good Thunder sacred red paint and two eagle feathers. He told them that they must paint their faces and perform a Ghost Dance to get to the other world when the time came. Performing the Ghost Dance would also make the Wasichus disappear. Black Elk had initially been skeptical, but he begins to see the similarities between his vision and Wovoka's and wonders whether they could both come true and allow his people to get back on the red road.

The red paint and eagle feathers are additional examples of the sacred elements that Black Elk's and Wovoka's visions have in common. Wovoka's vision is particularly intriguing to Black Elk because it provides him with a more concrete outline of what he needs to do to save his people: before, while he knew what he had to do, he didn't know how *he could accomplish this major task. The Ghost Dance presents Black Elk with a concrete action he can perform to save his people.*

That winter is a harsh one. Many people die from "the bad sickness," including Black Elk's father. Black Elk's brother and sister died while he was overseas, and now it's only his Black Elk's mother and himself. He works at a Wasichu store so that they can afford to eat.

Again, Black Elk's visionary powers are useless in the face of physical problems like sickness. Black Elk works as a clerk in a store in Manderson, the town he lived in at the time in which his interviews with Neihardt took place.

That winter, more people journey out west to hear more about Wovoka. There is another meeting in 1890, and people insist that the sacred man is the son of the Great Spirit who was killed by the Wasichus long ago: in other words, he is a *Wanekia*, or messiah. They say that Wovoka's "cloud in a whirlwind" will come the following spring, in 1891. Black Elk later hears that Kicking Bear performed the first Ghost Dance at the head of the Cheyenne Creek, and that people who danced saw their dead relatives. Black Elk hears about dancing being held at Wounded Knee Creek.

The emergence of Wovoka as a Wanekia *gives the Lakota a renewed sense of hope that their suffering will end. Until now, their situation has worsened steadily, and has shown no sign of improving. Wovoka and his promise of an apocalyptic second coming gives the Lakota the strength to move forward, and the Ghost Dance provides them with a concrete way they can bring about change and restore their culture.*

Although Black Elk doesn't yet fully believe in Wovoka's vision, Black Elk's father's death inspires him to think about it more deeply. He rides to Wounded Knee to see what the Ghost Dance is all about. There, he sees how closely the dance resembles his vision: for example, the dancers dance in a circle around a red-painted tree. The vision and the dance also have sacred objects in common, like the pipe and the eagle feathers. Black Elk is overcome with happiness and decides that he will participate in the dance to finally put his power to use.

Seeing the Ghost Dance confirms for Black Elk his suspicion that there is a connection between his vision and Wovoka's prophecy. That it takes physically seeing the Ghost Dance for Black Elk to realize this connection reinforces the transformative power of ceremony.

CHAPTER 22: VISIONS OF THE OTHER WORLD

Black Elk dresses for the sacred dance. He thinks of his dead family, cries, and hopes that the Ghost Dance will bring them back to the red road. Black Elk shivers and knows that the power of the Great Spirit is within him. Good Thunder, Kicking Bear, and Black Elk link arms and begin to dance and sing a sacred song. Black Elk doesn't have a vision on the first day, but he feels more confident that his first vision was already coming true.

Just as the Ghost Dance will supposedly bring Black Elk's people back to the red road, Black Elk hopes that participating in the Ghost Dance will bring him back to a place where he can confidently enact his vision.

The next day, the people cry and laugh as they dance, holding hands in a circle. Black Elk dances with his eyes shut and begins to feel strange, as though he is no longer touching the ground. He collapses and sees an eagle in front of him. His physical body doesn't move, but he is able to float wherever he looks. He floats beyond a ridge and sees a beautiful land full of happy people who have plenty of food to eat. Then, he floats over the tepees and lands in the center of the **hoop**, in the middle of which stands a tree in full bloom.

The Ghost Dance causes Black Elk to have another vision, which supports the book's larger claim that ceremonies are transformative. Black Elk's vision reaffirms the importance of sacred objects present in his first dream, such as the sacred hoop and the blooming tree. In particular, the presence of hoop and tree—objects that represent unity and that the Grandfathers mention explicitly in their instructions to Black Elk—proves to Black Elk that dancing in the Ghost Dance is how he will perform his duty to his people.

Two men wearing holy shirts approach Black Elk and tell him that he has work to do before he can see Black Elk's father. Black Elk knows that the men must want him to return to his people bearing knowledge of the men's holy shirts. Black Elk returns to his body. He expects to see the tree blooming in the **hoop**, like in his vision, but it is dead.

That the tree is dead once Black Elk returns from his vision suggests that he is mistaken in his optimistic belief that the Ghost Dance will save his people. The dead tree also creates a barrier between the spiritual world of Black Elk's visions and the physical world he physically must live in. As spiritually wise as Black Elk might be, his visions are no match for the oppressive forces that threaten his people and their old way of life.

The next day, Black Elk makes the shirts like the ones he saw in his vision. Next, he makes a sacred stick, which he paints with the Wanekia's paint. Because of his vision the day before, Black Elk is asked to lead the day's dance. During the dance, Black Elk has another vision in which he flies through the air and revisits sees the ridge from the day before. He sees six villages beneath him and lands on the sixth.

Black Elk's latest vision resembles his initial vision in a number of ways, namely through the way he flies through the air (in the initial vision, he was transported into a cloud world, and he became an eagle flying over his people), as well in the appearance of the number six.

Black Elk touches the ground. Twelve men approach Black Elk and tell him it's time for him to see "the two-legged chief" before taking him to the village's center, where the blooming holy tree stands. A good-looking man who is neither Indian nor Wasichu stands against the tree. The man is painted red and wears an eagle feather in his long hair. The man tells Black Elk that all things belong to him, and then he disappears.

The number 12, the red man, the eagle feather, and the sacred stick are all elements of Black Elk's initial vision. These similarities between the vision that the Ghost Dance inspires and Black Elk's earlier visions again show how ceremony can have a spiritually transformative effect.

One of the 12 men who surround Black Elk gives him a white painted stick and a red painted stick, urging Black Elk to return to his people with the sticks. Black Elk then sees that the people around him are beautiful, and neither old nor young. The 12 men tell him that his nation's life will be this way. Twelve women tell Black Elk to return to Earth to tell his people about this beautiful way of life.

These people and their beautiful way of life represent Black Elk's people as they will live in the afterlife, where they will be reunited with their deceased relatives and where their culture will be allowed to flourish.

Black Elk is swept up into the air. He crosses over a river and sees people beneath it begging for his help to cross, but the wind sweeps him forward and he is unable to stop. Black Elk sees his "earthly people" dancing and returns to his body. Black Elk tells his people about his vision through songs, and they weep. Black Elk thinks about his vision and realizes that the six villages must represent the Six Grandfathers from his initial vision. He wonders if Wanekia might be the red man from this same vision.

Black Elk's inability to help the people cross the river beneath him seems to reflect the disconnect between his visions (the spiritual world) and reality (the physical world). As fiercely as he believes in his visions, Black Elk's power has yet to help his people in a lasting way—they are still starving, displaced, and persecuted. Black Elk's remark that the red man from his initial great vision might be the Wanekia draws a line between this initial vision and the present, which he takes as proof that he is on the correct path toward fulfill the higher purpose of saving his people.

CHAPTER 23: BAD TROUBLE COMING

The Wasichus take measures to prevent Indians from participating in Ghost Dances. When Good Thunder and Kicking Bear return from seeing the Wanekia, for example, the *Wasichus* at Pine Ridge imprison them. When people dance later that summer (1890) at No Water's Camp on Clay Creek, a *Wasichu* agent tells them to stop dancing. Black Elk sees this as evidence that the *Wasichus* are afraid of the Wanekia. Black Elk later learns that the Brules, Big Foot's people, and Sitting Bull's people are also dancing. People everywhere are in despair and starving, and the movement is gaining traction.

The Wanekia threatens the Wasichus *because his Ghost Dance restores the Lakotas' former unity and strength. Prior to the Wanekia's emergence, the Lakota had been weakened by displacement and starvation. Now, their hope and unity is restored through a shared faith in the Ghost Dance, and the promise of a better future the Ghost Dance offers.*

The Wasichus continue to lie to the Lakotas, giving them less than half of the food they promised them. While dancing with the Brules at Cut Meat Creek, Black Elk has a vision in which he sees the Flaming Rainbow and a tepee made of cloud. An eagle flies overhead and tells Black Elk, "remember this." In retrospect, Black Elk sees the eagle's words as a sign that he was making a mistake in following the lesser visions he had while dancing instead of following his initial, great vision.

As much as the Ghost Dance movement restores the Lakotas' hope, it fails to exercise much control over how the Wasichus *persecute them, as evidenced by how the* Wasichus *continue to decrease the Lakotas' rations. Black Elk's retrospective contemplation of the eagle's words reflects the general sense of remorse he attaches to his vision: he sees the eagle as warning him that he is straying from the path he must stick to if he wants to realize his great vision and save his people. Black Elk's contemplation suggests that if he hadn't gotten distracted by the Ghost Dance, he might have been able to fulfill the destiny given to him in his initial vision.*

Black Elk returns to the Ogalalas at Wounded Knee after dancing with the Brules. One day, they hear that soldiers from Pine Ridge are coming for them, so they move west, camping at Grass Creek and White Clay. Fire Thunder, Red Wound, and Young American Horse tell the Ogalalas that the Wasichu soldiers want to enforce regulations on the Ghost Dance, though they insist that they wouldn't take it away from the Lakota; Black Elk's people are skeptical. At Pine Ridge, *Wasichus* tell the Indians that they will only be allowed to dance three days a month.

The Pine Ridge soldiers to whom Black Elk refers are troops that were sent by President Harrison to occupy Pine Ridge in order to prevent Indian rebellion. On November 8, 1890, Daniel F. Royer, the government agent who presided over Pine Ridge, tried to make the Lakota give up the Ghost Dance. This scene underscores the growing tensions that the Ghost Dance created between the Wasichus *and the Lakota.*

The next day, a policeman stops by to inform Good Thunder and Black Elk that the Wasichus are going to arrest them. That night, they flee to the Brule camp. Black Elk tells the Brules about his visions and the Wanekia. He urges them fight for their way of life and be guided by their dead relatives' spirits. More Brules join them, and everyone moves down the Wounded Knee River to Smoky Earth River. There, a Catholic priest tries to tell them to go back.

Tensions continue to rise between Ghost Dancers and the U.S. government. The arrest that Black Elk references is an order issued by Agent Royer on November 25, 1890, for the arrest of Ghost Dance leaders. Black Elk's speech exemplifies his attempt to realize his vision by passing along its wisdom to the public.

Black Elk and Good Thunder's group continues on, moving toward the Badlands. There, they meet with two chiefs, American Horse and Fast Thunder, who force them to go back to Pine Ridge. Most of Brules refuse, but the Ogalalas obey the chiefs. On their way to Pine Ridge, they learn that Sitting Bull was murdered by policemen for resisting arrest. It's now the end of December in 1890. Black Elk is 27 years old. His people hear that Big Foot and 400 Minneconjou people are coming down from the Badlands, where they had been hiding since Sitting Bull's murder. Big Foot's people are starving, and Big Foot is terribly ill, so they head back south. On their way, they're intercepted by soldiers and taken to Wounded Knee.

Big Foot's people surrendered to a detachment of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry on December 28. Once the remainder of the Seventh Cavalry arrived, the Minneconjou were outnumbered by about 100 people. Wounded Knee is located roughly 18 miles east of Pine Ridge, the agency where Big Foot and his people were originally headed. Sitting Bull's death and the capture of Big Foot and his people presents an even more dire situation for the Lakota, suggesting that in the face of unremitting attacks from the Wasichus, *the Ghost Dance won't be powerful enough to save their people—a second coming is unlikely.*

CHAPTER 24: THE BUTCHERING AT WOUNDED KNEE

The morning of the incident, Black Elk hears shooting in the distance. He puts on his sacred shirt, grabs his bow, and he and some others head toward Wounded Knee. The party is intercepted by another man on horseback, who told them that "they have murdered him!" They reach the top of a ridge near the town that is now called Battle Creek and see a chaotic scene in the town beneath them. There is shooting and crying everywhere. Cavalrymen shoot at crowds of women and children trying to escape.

Tensions between the U.S. government and the Sioux— created by the Ghost Dance and exacerbated by Big Foot's presence at Wounded Knee—culminates in a gruesome massacre, known as the Battle of Wounded Knee, or the Wounded Knee Massacre. Members of the U.S Seventh Cavalry murdered over 100 Lakota, most of whom were women and children. Perhaps more than any other event in Black Elk's narrative, this incident exemplifies the brutality of the Wasichus and the violent force with which they decimated the Lakotas and their culture.

Black Elk and the others ride over the ridge and fight the cavalrymen. As they make their way along the dry gulch, they see a horrific scene of dead and wounded women, children, and babies who tried to escape. Seeing all this carnage, Black Elk wishes that he, too, were dead.

Black Elk is especially affected by the gruesome scene that lies before him because the visions he has received throughout his life convince him that it was his job to prevent this massacre from happening, and that he failed to do so. Black Elk's wish for death reflects his refusal to recognize that the massacre was beyond his ability to control.

After the soldiers leave, Black Elk's friend Dog Chief tells him how the trouble began: that morning, soldiers started to take Big Foot's people's guns away. People were stacking their guns and knives in a pile by the tepee where Big Foot laid ill. Soldiers surrounded the Big Foot people completely, and a soldier started to wrestle the gun away from Yellow Bird, which caused the gun to go off. The Wasichus insist that the gunshot was intentional, but Dog Chief, who was right there when it happened, vows that it was an accident. Immediately after the officer was killed, another officer shot and killed Big Foot, and the battle began. Yellow Bird died during the battle. After the fighting was over, a blizzard swept across the lands, burying the dead women, children, and babies in a snowy mass grave.

The Ghost Dance's transformative power proves to be ineffective in the face of the physical threats (the U.S. Army) directed at the Lakota. Ceremony might be spiritually transformative, but it's no match for the cavalrymen with their greater forces and deadly weapons, as evidenced by the Wounded Knee Massacre. Positioned at the top of a hill overlooking the Indian camp, the Seventh Cavalry attacked with four Hotchkiss guns, mounted, highly effective guns used by the U.S. Army in the late 19th century.

CHAPTER 25: THE END OF THE DREAM

Black Elk and Red Crow, a fellow warrior, retrieve babies they had hidden earlier from danger and they return to Pine Ridge. Everybody has fled, and the agency is empty. They eat some of the food the Indians left behind, and soldiers shoot at them, though they miss. Black Elk wishes he'd died. He finds the camp where his people fled and is reunited with his Black Elk's mother. Hardly anybody sleeps that night.

It seems as though the Great Spirit watches over Black Elk whether he likes it or not: in this instance, the soldiers' bullets defy all odds and don't hit him—which Black Elk seems to insinuate is evidence of spiritual intervention. Like his vision, spiritual power is both a blessing and a curse, giving him the power to live and be protected, but also presenting him with the guilt of feeling like he hasn't earned that protection. Now, Black Elk wants to die, having failed to protect his people, but spiritual protection prevents him from doing so.

Black Elk wants revenge, so he and some other Lakotas set out the next day to fight. They join Lakota warriors shooting at soldiers near the Mission. Black Elk remembers the geese in his initial vision and charges toward the soldiers, his arms outstretched like wings, making noises like a goose. He is eventually hit and wounded. He wants to continue fighting, but a man named Protector bandages Black Elk's wound and tells him he must not die, because his people need him. The Lakotas are almost victorious, but then a band of "black Wasichu soldiers" arrive, and they are forced to retreat.

Black Elk tries one last time to enact portions of his initial vision in an attempt to save his people. The "Mission" to which he refers is the Drexel Mission, a Catholic mission four miles north of Pine Ridge. This battle took place on December 30, 1890, the day after the Wounded Knee Massacre. The band of "black Wasichu soldiers" refers to the Ninth Cavalry, an African American cavalry commanded by Major Guy V. Henry. The way in which Black Elk refers to them suggests that Wasichu *is more of a mentality or set of ideals than it is a race—black people can also be considered* Wasichu *if they're fighting on behalf of the U.S,*

In the Moon of Frost in the Tepee (January), Black Elk learns that there will be another chance to fight, as there are some Wasichu soldiers stationed at Smoky Earth River. Black Elk and some others head out to Smoky Earth to fight the soldiers before retreating into the Badlands. Some warriors want to form a larger war-party, but people are quickly losing faith, and Red Cloud convinces them to surrender because it is winter and he doesn't think they will make it through another harsh time. They return to Pine Ridge. Black Elk laments the Battle of Wounded Knee, the loss of his culture, and his inability to act on the vision he was given as a young child. "The sacred **tree** is dead," he states frankly.

This fight refers to the fight with the Sixth Cavalry on January 1, 1891. Red Cloud's decision to surrender is a pragmatic response to his people's dire circumstances. Despite the hope for a second coming and a restored sense of unity that Wovoka and his Ghost Dance movement originally promised, the Wounded Knee Massacre makes it clear to Red Cloud that Lakota spirituality—the old way—is no match for the deadly and unremitting forces that the Lakota are up against. Black Elk finally acknowledges the hopelessness of his people's situation when he states that "the sacred tree is dead." Because the tree represents unity, Black Elk's statement implies that the Lakota's former unity and cultural richness cannot be resurrected.

CHAPTER 26: AUTHOR'S POSTSCRIPT

After Black Elk finishes his narrative, he points to Harney Peak and identifies it as the place where he had his initial vision. Black Elk wants to return there before he dies, so Black Elk and those who listened to his story arrange a trip to the peak. It's a sunny, clear day, and the country is in the midst of a drought. Black Elk tells his son Ben that if there is **thunder**, it will be proof that he still has some remaining power.

This chapter is written in the first person from Neihardt's point of view. This final episode is important because it gives Black Elk's story a life beyond the pages of the book, offering the hope that Black Elk and his culture will live on, despite the violence done to them over the period of time that the story covers.

When the group reaches the peak, Black Elk, dressed as he was in his initial vision and holding the sacred pipe, faces to the west and addresses the Spirit. He acknowledges the Great Spirit's power and thanks him for sharing it with him and allowing him to help his people. Despite this, Black Elk tells the Spirit, he has been unable to save his people: the **tree** has never bloomed. Black Elk asks the Great Spirit for a final opportunity to help his people. Suddenly, clouds form in the sky and it begins to **thunder** and rain. Black Elk cries silently, and the sky clears.

Neihardt leaves it to his reader to determine whether this scene on the peak is spiritual or merely coincidental, which is indicative of the reverence with which he treats his subject. Black Elk's final cries are ambiguous: he could be crying happy tears because the Great Spirit has returned his prayers and brought him a storm. They could also be sad tears, as the thunderstorm's arrival reaffirms that Black Elk has powers but failed to use them to save his people.

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