PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 7: Black Elk (1863-1950); also known as Hehaka Sapa and Nicholas Black Elk

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Source: Black Elk: Earth Prayer & the Sunset

Primary Work

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| Top | Black Elk (1863-1950): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Diana Heichel

For the first thirty years of his life, Black Elk was an Oglala, Lakota medicine man. In his second life, he was a practicing and proselytizing Catholic. At the age of 67, he narrated Black Elk Speaks, a collaborative biography that captures the essence of what it was to be prereservation Lakota and the Native American spirituality that was the underlying foundation of Lakota life. Which of these two men was the real Black Elk? This spiritual paradox in Black Elk's life makes a fascinating subject for study and speculation.

To understand Black Elk, one must have some historical background of his people. The Oglala are one of seven branches or sub-tribes of the Teton Lakota, who are believed to have migrated westward to the Black Hills (the Paha Sapa) and beyond into Wyoming and Montana around 1775 to escape the encroaching whites and the enemy Chippewa. In 1825 the U.S. government drew the frontier line along the western borders of Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa and Minnesota, designating everything west of the line as Permanent Indian Country, "as long as the grass shall grow and the rivers run" (Lazarus 13-16).

Essentially, the U.S. government broke every treaty they ever made with the Lakota. Each new treaty signed to replace the previous broken one usually reduced the size of Indian lands. In the decade of the 1840's, wagon trains of miners and settlers on their way to California, Oregon and Utah, cut a destructive path through the prairie sod and drove the buffalo away from the traditional hunting areas. The Lakota fought back and the army sent troops into the Permanent Indian Country to protect the wagon trains.

The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 reduced the huge Permanent Indian Country to an area encompassing the western half of South Dakota and parts of Nebraska, North Dakota, Montana and Wyoming. However, in 1861 the Bozeman trail which cut through the Sioux treaty land, to accommodate traffic into the gold fields of Montana. Ogalala Chief Red Cloud declared war and effectively halted traffic on the trail and forced abandonment of Fort Kearney.

Black Elk, was born on the Little Powder River, probably in what is now Wyoming, in July, 1863, into a world that had been invaded by the white man and was on the verge of destruction. His father and his father's father were medicine men with healing powers, freatly respected in their tribe. In 1866, Black Elk's father was crippled in the Fetterman Massacre and Black Elk became the hunter for the family.

In the treaty of 1868, which ended Red Cloud's war, the army agreed to abandon the Bozeman trail and established the Great Sioux Reservation that included the Black Hills. In 1874 Custer found gold on an exploratory trip through the Black Hills. In December, 1875 the Commissioner of Indian Affairs issued an ultimatum that all Lakota who were not on the reservation must come in by January 31 or be considered hostile. In February, the U.S. declared war on the hold-outs, who were being led by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, who was a second cousin to Black Elk. Crazy Horse amassed a large following of Sioux, including Black Elk's band, and other tribes on the Greasy Grass in June of 1876.

Black Elk was not old enough to participate in the Indian Wars in the 1860's and early 70's. However, when he was nine years old, he had an experience that was to haunt him the rest of his life. He contracted an unidentified illness and was semi-comatose for 12 days, during which time, he had an extremely intricate and powerful vision full of symbols of Lakota spiritual beliefs. In his vision, two men came and took him up into the heavens, where saw many beautiful different colored horses with manes of lightening and thunder in their nostrils. He met the six Grandfathers who were the powers of the East, West, North, South, Sky and Earth and he saw himself as the Sixth Grandfather or the spirit of mankind. He saw himself being given great power to heal and to destroy and to lead his people. He foresaw that he would live to see four generations and the demise of the buffalo and he saw himself standing at the center of the universe. He did not tell anyone about his vision for many years, because it frightened him and confused him, and because he was so young, he did not think anyone would believe him or take it seriously.

Black Elk was about 13 years old in June of 1876 at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. He had a premonition the day before that something terrible was going to happen. He participated on the outskirts of the battle with other boys his age and relates in *Black Elk Speaks* how he killed or helped to kill several soldiers who were already wounded and scalped two of them. He was not sorry. They had come to kill his people and he felt the soldiers were very foolish and got what they deserved (Black Elk 127).

After Custer's defeat at the Little Big Horn, the U. S. government retaliated by reducing the reservation lands once again, and Red Cloud (whose people were living on the reservation) was forced to sell the Black Hills when the government threatened to cut off supplies if his people did not sign the treaty (Lazarus, 91-92). Crazy Horse was killed during an arrest attempt at Fort Robinson in May, 1877. Sitting Bull and his followers, including Black Elk's band fled to Canada, where Black Elk stayed for about three years. The summer that Black Elk was sixteen, he became so disturbed by his vision that he finally related it to his band's leader,

Black Road, who was a wise old medicine man. Black Elk's people were very impressed with the power of his vision.

| Top | Black Elk began his calling as a medicine man in the spring of 1881 by performing a horse dance ceremony at Fort Keogh, Montana, where his family was camped with other refugees from Canada. The next year, 1882, his family settled at the Pine Ridge Reservation. Black Elk had become an important and respected medicine man at the age of nineteen. However, reservation life was a difficult adaptation. The buffalo were gone with the Lakota way of life. Warriors and hunters tried to become ranchers and farmers and lived on government rations. Black Elk was concerned and confused about the future of his people. Like many others, he didn't know whether it would be best to try to return to the old ways or to try to adapt to the white man's ways and try to live like the white man (DeMallie 7). In 1886, Black Elk joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in order to travel and learn more about the white men who had taken over his people's world.

Black Elk played first at Madison Square Garden in New York. The following year, in England, Black Elk became separated from the show when it closed, and was stranded in England with two other Lakotas. They were able to join another Wild West show and traveled through German, France, and Italy. In May, 1889, Black Elk reunited with Buffalo Bill in England and was a given a ticket home. He returned to the Pine Ridge Reservation in the autumn of 1889

Black Elk learned about the white men during his travels. He learned to speak a little English and apparently was well-treated in Europe. He was baptized in order to join the show and his letters, written in Lakota, talk about his belief in God and curiosity about the white man's religion. His travels gave him a realistic perception of the white man's world that many Native Americans of the time did not have. He understood the numbers and scope of the white civilization. He felt he had lost his Lakota power while in Europe, but it returned upon his return. He took a job as a store clerk at Pine Ridge and became interested in the Ghost Dance. He saw similarities between the ghost dance and his vision and took the movement as a message that he should help his people return to traditional ways.

In 1890, the Ghost Dance spread like wildfire across the western part of the U.S. as Native American tribes grasped at a last hope of a better world. What started as a pacifist Christian movement by Wovoka turned more militant among the Lakota, who were suffering from drought, disease and starvation due to inadequate food allotments Steltenkamp 72). They wore ghost dance shirts that they believed would protect them from bullets and they danced for the defeat of the white man and the return of the buffalo. The whites in the area of the Pine Ridge reservation grew nervous and the Indian agent called in the U.S. Calvary. The Army used the agitation as an excuse to arrest Sitting Bull, who was living on the Standing Rock Reservation. Sitting Bull was shot by a tribal policeman during the arrest.

The dancers, led by Big Foot, fled to Wounded Knee where approximately 500 cavalry caught up with them. While the Lakota were being disarmed, surrounded by gattling guns, a Lakota warrior accidentally shot a soldier. The result was the massacre of approximately 300 men, women and children at Wounded Knee on December 28, 1890. Black Elk and approximately twenty other men from the reservation heard the shooting and rode over to see what was happing. He had no gun, but was wearing a sacred shirt and carrying a sacred bow that he believed would protect him. He and his companions arrived after the wholesale slaughter, but were able to rescue several of their people.

After Wounded Knee, the Ghost Dance movement died along with the hope and spirit of the disillusioned Lakota people, who saw it as the symbol of treachery of the whites. Many viewed it as proof that Native Americans and the whites could never live together in any kind of mutual relationship. Black Elk turned his back on white man's ways for a time. Many years later, after spending decades as a practicing Catholic, Black Elk said, "I did not know then how much was ended. …A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream…the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead" (Brown 446).

In 1892, Black married for the first time to Katie War Bonnet. They had three boys. Only Ben lived to adulthood and was the translator between his father and John Neihardt during their work on Black Elk Speaks. Katie died about 1903. In 1906, Black Elk later married Anna Brings White, who gave him two sons and a daughter. One of the boys died in infancy, the other lived to adulthood but was killed in an accidental fire in 1959. Black Elk's daughter, Lucy, is the source of much of the material in Michael Steltenkamp's biography of Black Elk (Steltenkamp 18).

Black Elk tried to help his people by practicing as a medicine man and healer. In 1904, an incident happened that, according to Lucy, was the catalyst for Black Elk's conversion. Black Elk was called to perform a healing ceremony for a sick child. During the ceremony, Father Lindebner, from the Holy Rosary Mission at Pine Ridge, arrived to give the boy last rites. He was angry to find Black Elk practicing shamanism and threw Black Elk and his magic props out of the tent. According to Lucy, Black Elk was not angry, but accepted the idea that the white God was more powerful (Steltenkamp 36). That same year, Black Elk he was baptized, received the Christian name Nicholas and was thereafter often called Nick Black Elk by both Indians and whites.

| Top | The conversion of the Native American to Christianity was of primary importance to the whites. Various Christian sects actively lobbied for rights to a particular reservation and the Roman Catholic church won Pine Ridge. (Note: 1870-1881 Under the Peace Policy of President President Grant, the government banned Catholic missionaries from the Pine Ridge Agency. See HOLY ROSARY MISSION/RED CLOUD INDIAN SCHOOL) According to Vine DeLoria, there

were practical reasons for the Indian conversion or pretense at conversion. Indian religion was banned on many reservations, and conversion made the whites happy and made life easier. The Indians looked at their situation and then looked at the white man's numbers and wealth. The white God seemed more powerful and better able to take care of his people (DeLoria 106-109).

Black Elk became a catechist, performing many duties such as church services, baptisms, last rites, and instruction in Catholic doctrine in the absence of a priest. According to Lucy, he traveled tirelessly and converted many Lakotas and other Indians to Catholicism. When asked by Neihardt why he converted, he said, "So my children could live in this world." This sounds like Black Elk converted for the sake of expediency. Also, he was paid for his services, and this job seems to have been how he supported his family aside from some small farming and the government dole. However, Lucy, whose opinion may be influenced by the fact that she is a life-long Catholic herself, felt that he was entirely sincere in his efforts. She remembers him not as a dispirited warrior, but as a happy, kind and gentle man.

In teaching Catholicism, Black Elk used a pictorial device that was common at the time called a picture catechism. This was a strip of paper about a foot and wide and several feet long illustrating the Creation at the bottom and Heaven at the top. This pictorial was commonly called the Two Roads Map and contained many colorful and pictures of humans and fanciful creatures that might be encountered on the gold road to Heaven or the black road to Hell. There were striking physical similarities between some of the images on this map and the images that Black Elk described in his vision. Black Elk interpreted his vision as a call to heal and to lead his people to a good and spiritual life. However, there was also a part of his vision that indicated that he had the power for great destruction and that he was to lead his people in war against the whites. Intelligent and practical he could probably see the futility in this and was able to reconcile his vision with the idea of leading his people into Christianity. Black Elk's vision gave him power in the eyes of his people, but was also a terrible obligation to live up to. He spent his entire life agonizing over whether he was living up to the dictates of vision. Converting may have let him off the hook in regard to some of obligations of his vision. Lucy felt that her father saw parallels and connections between old Lakota religion and Christianity (Steltenkamp 102).

Black Elk suffered from tuberculosis for many years, which may have contributed to his reluctance to take on the role of war chief. White man's diseases such as tuberculosis, smallpox and cholera were rampant on the reservations and these diseases accounted for more Native American deaths than war with the whites. He also had a partial loss of eyesight as a result of a gunpowder accident when he was a medicine man, but was an avid reader of the bible in the Lakota language. He helped organized and preached at the annual summer Catholic Sioux Congress (Steltenkamp 46). Around 1912 or 1913, Black Elk went east on a Catholic lecture tour visiting major cities such as New York and Washington, D.C. preaching to Native American Catholics and lecturing to whites in an attempt to raise funding for Indian churches (Steltenkampe 67).

In August, 1930, at the age of 67, Black Elk was approached by poet John Neihardt, who was researching the Ghost Dance. Black Elk seemed to know Neihardt was coming though they had never met and during prolonged meetings in the summer of 1931 told the poet details of his life and his vision that his own friends and family had not heard. While Black Elk spoke, read and wrote Lakota, he did not read or write English and spoke very little of the white man's language. The narration process, with Black Elk's son, Ben, interpreting and Neidart's daughters taking notes was long and arduous. It is a matter of speculation among scholars of the work as to whether it is Black Elk's in its entirety, or what has been added, changed or embellished by Neihardt to fit his romantic ideas about a Lakota warrior and to increase commercialism. Changes and misunderstandings may have also occurred simply because of the translation process.

What were Black Elk's motivations for telling his story? Neihardt said that he believed Black Elk's purpose was to preserve his great vision and Lakota history for his people after he was gone. To the Native American people, ritual and ceremony are extremely important. The very telling of the stories was a kind of ritual that could restore and transmit the power of the vision and transfer some of the burden of his vision onto Neihardt (Wiget 211). Wiget goes so far as to speculate whether Black Elk used Neihardt to send his message to his people before he died (Wiget 214), and that he purposely tried to draw parallels between Lakota spirituality and Christianity to elicit sympathy and help for his people from the whites (Wiget 83).

The book did not sell well in 1932 when it was published, however a reprinting in 1961 was well-received and was translated into at least six languages. In recent years Black Elk Speaks has enjoyed a revival to almost a cult status. Native Americans turning away from Christianity and searching for their roots and others searching for spiritual enlightenment have, according to Vine Deloria, embraced it as a kind of Native American bible symbolizing the journey of life of Native American people. Some of the priests on the reservation were disturbed at the idea that Black Elk, their prize convert, might still be thinking about or practicing the old religion. In 1934, Black Elk wrote a declaration affirming his conversion to and true belief in Christianity and concern that he not be thought a pagan because of Neihardt's book.

In February, 1941 Black Elks' second wife died. After his retirement from church work, Black Elk spent his summers entertaining tourists in the Black Hills. He performed in Sioux pageants enacting traditional life, playing the part of a

medicine man. Demallie speculates that he did it to teach the white audiences about the old Lakota religion, but Lucy felt that he did it purely for money and enjoyment (Steltenkamp 112).

In 1947, Black Elk invited another writer, Joseph Epes Brown to visit him at his home in Manderson, South Dakota. Black narrated to Brown details about Lakota ceremonies, including the Sun Dance, that he had not told to Neihardt. The result was The Sacred Pipe, published in 1953. These ceremonies were no longer being performed and it seems evident that Black Elk wanted them recorded before he died.

In 1948 Black Elk broke his hip and his tuberculosis flared up. He had a slight stroke while in the hospital and when he was released, he was confined to a wheelchair, slightly paralyzed and with his sight failing for the rest of his life. He took turns living with his children, Ben and Lucy. Black Elk died on August 17, 1950. He had predicted that when he died there would be a "great display of some sort in the sky" (Steltenkamp 134). Several witnesses in Steltenkamps autobiography have testified that at his wake there was an unusually display of the northern lights and falling stars (130-133).

DeMallie points out that Black Elk was one of the most successful Native Americans of his generation in adapting to the white world, (57). However, DeMallie also feels that Black Elk lived with a sense of despair and failure (55) and regrets that perhaps the old religion would have been better for his people (72). (Lucy does not agree.) There is no doubt that he felt a great sense of obligation to determine what the vision meant and to live his life accordingly. However, in light of the new world he found himself and his people in, he may not have known what to do with the vision. Perhaps he adapted as best he could, reconciled his vision with Christianity and tried to make his life have meaning in conjunction with his vision, but as he grew older turned back full circle to his Lakota roots. During the same period that he was avowing his Christianity to anyone who would listen, he was standing on top of Harney Peak, the center of the universe, praying to the Six Grandfathers for his people. Whether saint, sell-out or trickster, Black Elk left a unique legacy of Native American history, spirituality and ritual and a work of literature that would have been lost to the world if Black Elk had chosen to speak.

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Study Questions

1. Why does Black Elk seem to think it important that his story be told? Why does John Neihardt think it is important? Do they both have the same reasons? Analyze "Heyoka Ceremony" as Black Elk's attempt at making a connection with an audience, and comment on how the chapter offers a working definition of the very process of "raising consciousness."

2. Arnold Krupat (in "The Indian Autobiography: Origins, Type, and Function," American Literature, 1981) has written that "to see the Indian autobiography as a ground on which two cultures meet is to see it as the textual equivalent of the 'frontier.'" Write an essay in which you comment on this statement and its significance for understanding Black Elk Speaks.

3. In the second (1961) edition of Black Elk Speaks, John Neihardt changed the title page of the text from "as told to John Neihardt" to "as told through John Neihardt." Explain the significance of this change, and interpret the relationship it suggests between Neihardt and Black Elk, and between Neihardt and Black Elk Speaks.

4. Compare and contrast Black Elk Speaks with two other American texts, Benjamin Franklin's The Autobiography, and

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (both in NAAL, Volume 1). Focus on the relationship between central narrator and autobiographical text. How does each text reflect different choices by the speaker in terms of self-presentation, connection to history, choice of significant events, and literary form?

5. Compare and contrast Gertrude Simmons Bonnin's autobiographical writing (Impressions of an Indian Childhood, The School Days of an Indian Girl, An Indian Teacher among Indians) and narrative voice with that of Black Elk in the excerpts from Black Elk Speaks. Both writers were Sioux; evaluate their respective roles as "holy man" and "teacher," comment on their different experiences with biculturalism, and compare the points at which they break off their autobiographical accounts.

7. Read Mary Austin's "Shoshone Land" and "The Basket Maker" from The Land of Little Rain (available in Mary Austin, Stories from the Country of Lost Borders, edited by Marjorie Pryse, 1987) and evaluate Austin's biculturalism in light of Neihardt's description of collaborating with Black Elk.

MLA Style Citation of this Web Page

Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 7: Black Elk." *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature- A Research and Reference Guide*. URL:http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap7/blackelk.html (provide page date or date of your login).

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