

# Is it a Curse or a Blessing? Black Elk's Attitude towards his Vision in Neihardt *Black Elk Speaks*

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## Abstract

This paper is a detailed analysis of Black Elk's great vision in *Black Elk Speaks* written and documented by John G. Neihardt. It detects Black Elk's possible intentions behind disclosing his full vision to Neihardt for the first time. This paper tracks the sequence of events and developments changing accordingly with the vision's progression. It discerns Black Elk's altering perspective on the vision from resisting it to utilizing it to enlighten people. In addition, this paper lists the burdens that come with the vision and shows how they effected Black Elk mentally and physically. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the vision reflects many of the Native American cultural aspects such as associating each one of the four main directions with a specific colour. It also detects the vision's elements similarity to ones from other foreign cultures which resulted in questioning the vision's authenticity such as the Mandala and wheeled carts. Finally, the paper examines doubting critiques and interpretations made by critics and thinkers on the truth behind the vision.

**Keywords** Vision, Ritual, Grandfathers, Main four directions, Documentation, Native American, Newcomers, Disclosing, Spiritual World, Burden

*Black Elk Speaks* is known as John G. Neihardt, an American writer and poet, master piece, and it has been translated into nine languages. The book is considered as one of the most significant literary works on the Native American culture. It seems to work more as a

documentation of Black Elk's great vision, who is a dignified man in the Sioux tribe known for his holiness and healing powers, than any other kind of literary work. The vision works as the core of the book where all the events and actions revolve around; how did it start, the natives' reactions to it, its aims and goals, and the value of such visions in Native American communities.

*Black Elk Speaks* is about a man whom his vision is supposed to help him in performing some spiritual rituals to make his tribe overcome the struggles and difficulties they are heading to. The story can be considered as the result of the historical encounter between Neihardt and Black Elk. Neihardt's first intention was to learn about the Native American culture more specifically the tradition of The Ghost Dance for his epic poem. But when he and Black Elk started talking about the vision, he became more interested in the vision than anything else. The concept of the vision is not something queer or new for Neihardt because he himself has experienced previous similar encounters with dreams and visions. Both Black Elk and Neihardt were anxious to officially record the vision for the coming generations so that it will not be lost or corrupted. "One can only imagine the surprise on Neihardt's face when Black Elk invited him to come back and record his vision. This was beneficial to Black Elk because he found a way to reserve his vision for future generations" (Sanchez). There are several explanations and reasons given by critics on why Black Elk decided to tell the full version of the vision to Neihardt for the first time. Some argue that Black Elk aims to transfer this vision from one culture to another and from this preceding generation to the next one. But others think that Black Elk intended to pass his powers to others in order to partly relieve himself from the heavy burdens he carried by himself for years. Ben, Black Elk's eldest son, and Neihardt are some of the nominated candidates to possess Black Elk's powers as Clyde Holler once stated, after Neihardt and his daughters were adopted by the tribe, he was given the name Flaming Rainbow after the rainbow door to

the Grandfathers in Elk's vision. So, Black Elk hopes that this would symbolize Neihardt's role as a doorway to his great vision and to the wisdom of the Grandfathers (25-26).

One of the most impressive characteristics of the vision is the technique used to convey the message, which is the gradual development of events. It started with only voices when Black Elk was four years old "I first heard the voices, but I think it was, because I know it was before I played with bows and arrows or rode a horse, and I was out playing alone when I heard them. It was like somebody calling me, and I thought it was my mother, but there was nobody there. This happened more than once, and always made me afraid" (11). Then at the age of five it developed into dialogues and images. The descriptions of the first encounter with the spiritual world and the first abnormal events begin at the second chapter. It took place when Black Elk and his grandfather were hunting in the woods. To be more specific, Black Elk spoke to a bird for the first time and the bird told him to listen to the voices: "Listen! A voice is calling you" (11). And when he looked to the clouds, he saw the heads of two men coming towards him like arrows, and as they came, they were singing a sacred song: "Behold, a sacred voice is calling you; All over the sky a sacred voice is calling" (12). Black Elk admits to his fear of disclosing such incidents in the beginning, and kept them to himself: "I did not tell this vision to anyone. I liked to think about it, but I was afraid to tell it" (12).

The third chapter "The Great Vision" is the most significant one because it depicts how the vision was fully given to Black Elk at the age of nine years old and this time the vision was clearer than ever. Here we can witness the idea of the gradual development again, where the Great Vision did not appear suddenly or out of the blue. In other words, the vision developed with a clever technique, it started with only voices at the age of four; to make him notice it and be familiar with it, then minor abnormal activities started to occur when he was five years old. And when Black Elk reached the age of nine, which is the age where a kid

starts to develop a sense of responsibility and independence, the vision became more defined and stronger than before. The fact that Black Elk's vision started at a very young age indicates that Black Elk was chosen for this holy position by a greater force, unlike other holy men in their tribe who had to perform certain rituals to receive such visions.

The Great Vision started with the voices calling him again and again "It is time; now they are calling you." (13). And when Black Elk was very sick, he heard the same voices he once heard before as a child. Those voices are in fact the voices of the six Grand fathers from another existence who want him to protect the people and stop the approaching destruction of their village. This time Black Elk was transformed from the real physical world to another spiritual one. However, in this spiritual journey each one of the Grandfathers gave him an object symbolizing or representing a certain power that he will need to save his people. Furthermore, the Grandfathers warned him that his mission is not an easy one and that he must prevent the great danger from destroying not only the natives' communities or tribes but also the entire world.

In the vision, one may notice various aspects that reflect the natives' culture and give a better understanding of their traditions. For example, the circle shape mentioned repeatedly in the vision:

At you have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to the round. In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as who was unbroken, the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the (122).

This shape is regarded one of the most sacred things in their culture, they believe that almost everything goes in a circle; moreover, their sacred hoop is also shaped as a circle.

Similarly, numbers are as important as shapes. In the vision, three numbers are presented, and they are significant not only to the vision but also the traditions of the natives. The numbers mentioned in the vision are six, four, and twelve. Number twelve is used to indicate the number of virgins, horses, and Bisons mentioned in the vision. Six refers to the six Grandfathers and the six powers or objects they gave to Black Elk (a wooden cup of water that contains the sky- a bow- a herb- a peace pipe with a spotted eagle on it- a red stick- the name Eagle Wing). Lastly, number four which works in a beautiful harmony with the circle shape. For instance, the image of the four horses in four different directions inside a circular design, moreover, the four ages in the human life (infancy-childhood-adolescence-adulthood), the four seasons of the year (spring-winter-autumn-summer), and the four main directions(east-west-north-south) all run in circles:

Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. This sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The Moon does the same, and both are round. Even the season's form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, (122).

In the vision, each one of the four main directions is associated with certain colors, objects, and creatures. For example, the north is associated with white, winter, white horses, white giant's wing, herbs, and death. While the east is associated with red, spring, sorrel horses, day break star, pipe, and youth. A different side that the vision reveal is how the Native American culture is influenced by other foreign cultures and traditions. To be more specific, the image of the horses in four different directions in a circular design is to some

extent similar to the Mandala, a spiritual and ritual symbol presenting the universe. The Mandala is used to practice spiritual traditions in Hinduism and Buddhism. Moreover, the Pony drag that Black Elk once mentioned, which is used to move people and equipment, is similar to the wheeled carts of the newcomers or whites' technology (Prenatt-26-30).

In the vision, Black Elk was given several great powers to save mankind: "My boy, have courage, for my power shall be yours, and you shall meet it, for your nation on earth will have great troubles" (19). But the dreams and the powers he got from it seem to frighten and confuse Black Elk. He lived in constant fear because he could not figure out how to use powers such as the power to heal and: "the power to make over" (25). Because of Black Elk's young age at the time and the greatness of the vision, he was afraid of what could happen if he discloses the story. He explains to Neihardt how difficult and challenging it was to adjust to the new changes, and how many obstacles he had to overcome to fulfill the Grandfathers' hopes. Black Elk even admits to his attempts to ignore the voices from the spiritual world whenever they called. But the voice of the spirits seems to work as a haunter following him everywhere and reminding him of his great mission: "It is time! It is time!" (99). As time passes, his condition seems to get worse as he narrates: "I could understand the birds when they sang, and they are always saying: "This time! It is time!" the Crows in the day in the coyotes at night all cold and called to me; "It is time! His time! This time!" Time to do what? I did not know" (99). The vision may have damaged Black Elk psychologically for he lived in constant fear for years: "I was so afraid of being afraid of everything" (100). Moreover, he was under a tremendous pressure carrying such burden and responsibility all by himself.

Black Elk's mission includes helping people regain their health, return the nation to its blossomed and flourished days, and to make them follow the sacred manners and rituals of their culture as passionately as they used to: "Give them now the flowering state that they may flourish, and the sacred high that they may know the power that is peace, and the wing of the

white giant that they may have endurance and face all wins with courage” (21). Therefore, he had the sense of being queer and different from others as a kid and as a teenager: “I could not get along with people now” (99). The psychological damage is not the only thing he suffered from; the physical damage was also apparent on him. When he was only nine years old, he got sick for twelve days during the vision “they told me I had been sick twelve day, lying like dead all the while” (30).

The fourteenth chapter "The Horse Dance," marks Black Elk's first obvious attempt to realize his vision and fulfill his duties by performing the horse dance. With the help of Whirlwind Chaser, who is a local medicine man, Chaser helps Black Elk understand his new position as a holy man and explains to him how to use his gifts and powers. The Sioux tribe's reactions to the vision were more than positive, and they showed interest and enthusiasm to participate in the rituals. The participants were extremely careful and detailed in performing the rituals, they were extremely interested in learning the songs and copying the exact same image from the vision in their coordination. This level of attention and care given by the members of the tribe to fulfill the vision indicates the importance and significance of such visions in Native American communities. Furthermore, the fact that their acceptance, appreciation, and respect for the vision come from its direct connection to religious values indicates how the religious side still plays a major role in their community “As one reads Black Elk Speaks, one realizes the importance of Black Elk's dreams and vision as well as the richness in religion” (Sanchez). It is interesting to see such interest and believe in the human spirituality in a time known for the materialistic and capitalist approaches brought by the newcomers. This idea of spiritual appreciation can be detected in the natives' reactions to Black Elk's vision. Jan Kubinek once stated that in the natives' communities there is no such thing as a boundary between the spiritual world and the realistic world and both worlds realize the importance to live in harmony with one another (9).

Looking back into Native American history, one will find that visions are not limited to Black Elk only. Many visions were received before, and most of those visions' warnings occurred. For example, before the invasion of the whites there was a man called Drinks Water, Water saw the arrival of the new race and stated that the natives are going to be living in isolation and starvation: "When this happens, you shall live in square gray house is, in a barren land, and decide those square gray houses you shall starve" (6). Water isolated himself in the woods and died of sorrow.

After the success of the Horse Dance, Black Elk was thrilled by the results he got and the natives' joy: "I could see that my people were all happier. Many crowded around me and said that they or their relatives who had been feeling safe were well again, and these gave me many gifts. Even the horses seem to be healthier and happier after the dance" (109). Because of this overwhelming response, Black Elk's attitude towards the vision seems to completely change to a positive one: The fear that was on me so long was gone, and when thunder clouds appear if I was always glad to see them, where they came as relatives now to visit me. Everything seemed good and beautiful now, and kind. Before this, the medicine man would not talk to me, but now they would come to me and talk about my vision. (110)

Black Elk seems to be more comfortable with the vision now and happily enjoying his new position as the holy medicine man. It is ironical how the vision could cause him two extremely different and opposite effects. The first one is fear and isolation while the second is joy and admiration from the natives, "Black Elk has dreams and vision that disturb and excite him" (Johnston, 109).

The Great Vision is not the only vision that Black Elk came across. As the story progresses, he encounters several visions. For instance, the Dog Vision in the fifteenth



chapter is one of the most significant visions he had, therefore, he decides to perform it. The vision came after the newcomers stole the lands and horses of the natives. In other words, the whites now are the main enemy and the natives need to prevent them from destroying their possessions and lands. The Dog ritual is their way to defend and protect themselves. One can clearly notice Black Elk's new attitude towards fulfilling the visions from being anxious and afraid during the first ceremony to being confident and enthusiastic during the second one. All his fears before the Horse Dance completely vanished in the Heyoka ceremony as he becomes more and more accepting of his role as a healer.

At the final chapter, Black Elk admits to his failure to fulfill the vision and protect the natives from the danger that is waiting to happen: "Men and women and children I cured of sickness for the power the vision gave me; but my nation I could not help" (112). He saw a lot of the things he was once warned about by the Grandfathers happen. Many criticized him for given up his vision by becoming a catholic instead of protecting their religious values and sacred manners as the Grandfathers ordered him. The reason behind this shocking change could be Black Elk's desire to spread peace among the two different communities instead of constant fights and destructions. His last attempt to save the vision was to inform mankind of its existence: "I know I have given away my power when I have given away my vision, and maybe I cannot live very long now. But I think I have done right to save the vision in this way" (129). Some critics argue that the visions and dreams Black Elk experienced are results of the deep connection between his spirit and mind. Therefore, those visions and dreams are only reflections of an unconscious desire. One of those critics is James Thomas; he thinks that the language of our souls and the part that is on a spiritual and psychological journey is not considered as a part of the material world. Therefore, those desires often come to us as visions, reflections, dreams, and even daydreams (9).

Overall, it can be said that *Black Elk Speaks* is not a regular literary work, it is one of the most detailed explorations of the natives' spirituality and a historical documentation discussing the events that led to one of the world's most horrendous massacres. Black Elk's vision is a fairly lengthy oracle full of new experiences such as speaking to spiritual beings as the Grandfathers and gaining new powers such as understanding birds. His relation to the vision is best described as a roller-coaster of emotions where he experienced many ups and downs that affected him mentally and physically. Although the vision gradually revealed itself to Black Elk, carrying such responsibility at a young age caused him constant fear with doubts of whether he will be entrusted by his people or dismissed. In other words, he did not want to be a holy man or a healer, he preferred to be an ordinary child like other children. His hesitation ended after the success of, the Horse Dance, and his perspective on the vision changed. With a new positive view of his role as a healer, Black Elk thought that he will be able to succeed in restoring the natives' faith and fulfilling the vision. However, his enthusiasm was shattered with admitting his failure at the end. His decision to disclose the full vision might be his last attempt to inform the masses on it. This is an effective method to preserve the vision from any possible manipulation especially with many attempts to distorted the natives' heritage and destroy their identity by presenting them as primitive savages. For instance, some of the natives' rituals, as the Ghost Dance, were deliberately misrepresented as acts of violence. Furthermore, sharing the vision in a written form may make many readers grasp a sense of what it means to lose everything and aim for protection and peace instead of selfishness and destruction.

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### Conflict of Interest

Author declares that they have no conflicts of interest related to this research.