

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The Cat Who Went to Heaven

by

### Elizabeth Coatsworth

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### Book Information

Elizabeth Coatsworth, The Cat Who Went to Heaven

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64 Pages

Book Level: 5.9

Interest Level: MG

A magical cat inspires a Japanese artist to paint the greatest picture of his life.

**Award:** Newbery Medal

**Topics:** Arts, Painting; Countries/Regions, Japan;  
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Lists, Just Connect: Relationships

### Main Characters

Prince Siddhartha the young Indian prince who became Buddha

the artist a poor artist commissioned to make a painting of the dying Buddha

the cat (Good Fortune) the one animal not to be admitted into heaven; she watches as the artist creates his painting

the housekeeper the poor artist's housekeeper; she brings the cat home

the priest the head priest from the temple, who commissions the artist to make a painting of the dying Buddha

### Vocabulary

**contemplation** meditation

**homage** respect and admiration

**hydrangeas** shrubs with clusters of dainty flowers

**obstinate** stubborn

**renunciation** rejection

**sagacity** wisdom

### Synopsis

A poor young artist lives with his old housekeeper in Japan. The artist cannot sell any of his paintings, so they have only a few pennies to buy the most humble food. One day the housekeeper returns from

the market with a cat rather than food. At first the artist is angry, but he relents because he likes the small cat. The housekeeper names the cat Good Fortune.

The cat lives up to her name. Shortly after the cat comes to live with them, the priest from the temple visits the artist and informs him that fate has chosen him to paint a picture of the dying Buddha for the temple. The painting will be displayed and his fortune will be made.

Before he begins painting, the artist spends three days meditating upon the life and teaching of Prince Siddhartha, a strong, mighty warrior-prince who had vanquished all his competitors to win the hand of the beautiful princess Yosadhara. Prince Siddhartha had recognized suffering in the world around him and had given up his life of privilege to spend years as a wandering beggar seeking wisdom. Finally, after years of suffering, he had become Buddha, the Enlightened One. After imagining the life of the Buddha during the three days, the artist is ready to draw the dying Buddha.

The artist paints Buddha, the various gods of the earth and sky, and the disciples who came to say farewell. He then recalls a story about each animal that came to bid Buddha farewell. This gives him the inspiration to paint each one so well that it seems to come alive on the silk scroll.

After each animal is painted, Good Fortune praises each figure. But she becomes impatient and sad because there is no cat in the picture. The artist explains to the cat that of all the animals, only the cat had rejected the teachings of Buddha and was not to be admitted into heaven. The cat is devastated. The artist sees the sorrow the cat feels from being excluded and risks the disapproval of the priest by putting a cat in the picture. When Good Fortune sees the cat in the painting, she dies overwhelmed with joy.

The priest from the temple comes to view the finished painting. He says the cat on the painting makes it inaccurate, so the painting must be burned

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the next day. The artist and his housekeeper are very sad at losing his painting and his hopes for fortune. The next day, however, the artist is brought to the temple in a great flurry of excitement and sees that the painting has been mystically altered. The place where the cat was painted is pure white silk; the cat's image has been moved under the hand of Buddha, receiving his blessing.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Initial Understanding

The priest asks the artist to make a painting of the death of Buddha for the temple. Why does the artist include animals in the painting? Why does he decide to include a picture of a cat?

*The purpose of including the animals in the painting is to illustrate the great compassion of Buddha. The artist recalls a specific example of how each animal either received kindness from Buddha or was used as an instrument of kindness. Through his experience of recalling the stories and painting the animals, the artist becomes more like Buddha and becomes willing to sacrifice his fortune for the sake of the cat's happiness.*

#### Literary Analysis

Other than Prince Siddhartha (Buddha), the only character in the story to have a name is the cat, Good Fortune. Explain why the author does not give a name to the artist. Why does the cat have a name?

*The name of the artist is not important to the story. In painting the picture, the artist is trying to show the great benevolence of the Buddha. The cat, however, is the central character of the story. It is the cat that has to show her unselfishness in order to earn her way into heaven. The name, Good Fortune, foreshadows what happens to her and the artist.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

The priests commission the artist to paint the picture of Buddha because the paper with his name written on it is the only one not blown away. Why don't the priests just randomly choose a paper?

*If the priests choose the name of the artist, then the selection of the artists will not be the work of Buddha. Knowing "Buddha's will in the matter" is very important to them. They use this method purposely to allow Buddha to be able to reveal his will.*

#### Constructing Meaning

At the end of each chapter, the author inserts a Song of the Housekeeper. Why are these songs significant to the story?

*The songs serve two main purposes. First, in maintaining her subservience, the housekeeper does not reveal her thoughts and feelings to the artist, so the songs provide a way for her to disclose her perspective to the reader as events unfold. The second purpose of the songs is to give the reader insight into the meaning of some of the events in the chapter.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** The story centers on the painting of a dying Buddha. Buddhism is one of the major religions of Japan. Have the students research the history and elements of Buddhism and write a report of their findings. The report should include reference to Prince Siddhartha and his influence on Buddhism.

**Responding to Literature** The housekeeper sings her songs to provide deeper meaning to the story. Have each student compose a poem describing a current or historical event with which they are familiar. The poem should rhyme and be metered and should portray a progressive unfolding of events or feelings. Student volunteers can read their poems to the class with discussion to follow focusing on how poetry reveals things that ordinary prose may not

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expose.

**Understanding Sequence** As the artist experiences the spirit of Buddha and the stories of the animals, his painting evolves into the final product. Have the students prepare a poster or mural depicting the events of the story in their proper sequence. For example, they could show a cat first, followed by a priest, followed by the artist painting, etc. They can use hand drawings, computer graphics, or magazine pictures. The posters can then be displayed in the classroom.

**Understanding the Main Idea** The story consists of eight untitled chapters. Divide the class into eight groups and assign one chapter to each group. Have each group think of a title for the chapter. The titles should express the main idea of each chapter. After the titles are complete, have a member of each group read the title to the class in the order of the chapters of the book. Discussion afterward should focus on the main idea of each chapter and the main idea of the whole book.