

The Cat Who Went to Heaven Short Guide

The Cat Who Went to Heaven by Elizabeth Coatsworth

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Contents

The Cat Who Went to Heaven Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14



Overview

Although at first this slim volume has the appearance of a children's "animal story," with lovely woodcuts by the celebrated illustrator Lynn Ward, it soon becomes evident that the author's goal is to convey in lyrical and poetic language the point of view of Far Eastern philosophy in general and Buddhist thinking in particular. *The Cat Who Went to Heaven* attempts to describe the interrelationship of human ideals and the qualities of the animal world.

Using the device of a simple folk tale, with added legends, Coatsworth portrays Buddhist principles of living:

devotion, compassion, and respect for life. She fashions an instructive parable, interwoven with poems and fables and the inspiring story of the Buddha himself. This unusual blend of literary forms is a fine example of how allegory and style can merge to evoke the spirit of another culture, in particular its peaceful outlook on life and the natural world.

Although the author produced an enormous body of work, this book remains her most popular and is still much in demand among book collectors and devotees of young adult literature.

Aside from its unusual structure and content, *The Cat Who Went to Heaven* has much to offer the reader since it demonstrates that a book written for young people can be part of a literary tradition that includes art, religion, and an unfamiliar realm of legend and myth.

About the Author

Born May 31, 1893, in Buffalo, New York, Elizabeth Coatsworth attended Buffalo Seminary and went on to receive her bachelor's degree from Vassar College in 1915 and her master's degree from Columbia University in 1916. She married Henry Beston, also a writer, in 1929 and spent most of her life in rural Maine.

Originally a poet and the author of twenty books of verse, Coatsworth began writing children's books in the 1930s and authored over one hundred titles as well as many adult novels. The subjects and settings of her works are varied; many are set in New England, while others reflect her extensive travel throughout Europe and the Far East. It was the latter that inspired *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*, a book that won the Newbery Medal in 1931. Coatsworth received the Children's Spring Book Festival Honor Award for *Under the Green Willow* in 1971. She died on August 31, 1986, in Nobleboro, Maine.

Setting

Coatsworth's tale is set in a village in Japan at an unspecified time. This locale, however, is not as important to the story as the different settings specific to the Buddhist legends that the artist recalls. The inspired painting that the artist is able to create after taking in the cat acts as a backdrop for the narrative, for it is the central theme in the book.

By juxtaposing a realistic setting with an imaginary one, Coatsworth shows that the fables the artist relates have applications to everyday life.

Japan, for the most part, is a foreign culture for young readers. Coatsworth effectively reproduces Japanese traditions, art, and religion in a simple and direct manner. Therefore, the novel acts both as a fable and as an introduction to Asian legends and manners.



Social Sensitivity

Coatsworth admirably recreates Buddhist legend and tradition in a nonjudgmental fashion. She neither preaches nor condemns; instead, she leaves it to the reader to formulate his or her own ideas about the religion. The novel explains the spiritual aspects of Buddhism in a fashion which young adult readers can clearly understand, yet with a certain subtlety and charm.

As a Western author, Coatsworth avoids cultural stereotypes; instead, she realistically creates a fantasy while at the same time being informative.

Literary Qualities

Coatsworth's book has the effect of an Oriental drawing, one of the delicately drawn prints now popular in the West.

Certainly her skill as a "nature poet" contributes to the gentle, finely detailed mood of the book. She draws upon her knowledge of Japanese legend so that the fables become a vital tapestry against which she sets the Buddhist point of view. The fables attribute human characteristics to the animals (anthropomorphism) and transform the book into an allegory.

An unusual part of the structure— which, like many Eastern art forms, is tightly organized and disciplined—is the regular appearance of haiku-like poems written by the housekeeper. They are simple in form and offer an objective perspective of the artist and the cat.

These verses create a dramatic atmosphere, not unlike that which the chorus provides in Greek tragedy.



Themes and Characters

To call *The Cat Who Went to Heaven* an "animal story" is to mislead the reader, for its poetic character, serene mood, and lyrical approach to the basic belief of Eastern thought take the book far beyond the realm of storybook.

The plot is deceptively simple. A Japanese artist, in the midst of severe hardship, and his devoted housekeeper, take in a stray cat whom they name "Good Fortune." Despite the artist's feeling that cats are unlucky (it was the only animal to refuse to honor Buddha and is denied an afterlife), his kind nature wins out, and, to his surprise, his luck changes. He is commissioned by the local priests to create for the temple a painting depicting the death of Buddha.

Delighted by this sudden turn in his luck, the artist meditates for three days, envisioning himself as the young Prince Siddhartha (the name of Buddha when he was a prince). His deep meditation gives him the understanding and peace of mind necessary to produce such a work. In conceiving and planning his painting, the artist begins to recall the examples that the Buddha provides: love of humanity, respect for all living things, and the most important element—humility.

The artist's path to enlightenment is through the animal world. As he chooses his "cast of characters" for the painting, the artist notes the special qualities of each beast, such as fidelity, dignity, kindness, courage, beauty, grace, generosity, and self-respect. For each animal, he tells a legendary tale to illustrate the quality the animal expresses.

As the artist progresses, the cat begins to express her desire to be included in the painting; the artist explains that this is not possible because of the cat's refusal to honor Buddha. As Good Fortune feels more and more excluded and dejected, the artist's principles grow stronger and he decides to include the image of Good Fortune whom he has come to love and respect for her support.

He adds her to the painting and she dies from joy upon seeing her portrait.

The priests, however, are angry when they view this bold addition, and they decide to burn the painting. But the next day, the artist goes to the temple and finds not only his painting on display, but unblemished silk where the cat's likeness had been. Instead, the artist sees that, "the Buddha whom he had painted reclining with hands folded upon his breast, had stretched out an arm in blessing, and under the holy hand knelt the figure of a tiny cat, with pretty white head bowed in happy adoration."

While Coatsworth does not attempt a full-fledged portrait of Buddhism, she presents the essence of its tradition in the folktale. The artist intuitively understands the teachings of Prince Siddhartha in that he maintains his dedication to art during adverse times, works out of love for his subjects, and accepts self-sacrifice as a step toward enlightenment.



By extension, of course, Coatsworth extols the central Buddhist tenet that the goal of humanity should be to understand and develop these qualities in itself. More particularly, the lesson that emerges from the fables is that just as the humble animals have much to contribute to the world, so too does the most humble person deserve respect and honor. The housekeeper figures into the teachings of Buddha since her dedication to her master and her compassion for the cat echo the compassion of Buddha in the miraculous conclusion to the story.

Finally Coatsworth subtly shows us that life lies beyond the realm of "luck."

Good fortune is the result of adherence to the principles of goodness. The cat Good Fortune earns heaven not through her charm but through devotion to those who sacrifice for her.



Topics for Discussion

1. Compare the Japanese and Western superstitions about cats.
2. In what ways is the artist well suited to paint the important work he is commissioned to do?
3. What characteristics does the housekeeper share with Good Fortune?
4. The housekeeper's poems express great pride in her master. Of what is she proud?
5. What Buddhist qualities does Good Fortune reveal in her actions? In what ways does she exhibit human attributes?
6. What important step does the artist take in order to choose the best idea for the painting?
7. What motivates the artist to defy the priests and include the cat in his painting? How does this relate to the process he uses in the creation of the painting itself?
8. Why is the conclusion called "miraculous" by the priest?
9. Why does the artist chose the snail as the first animal to bid farewell to Buddha?
10. Which episodes convince the artist that Good Fortune is not just an ordinary cat?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read several of Coatsworth's other books. Report on the philosophy of nature that emerges in them.
2. Read several of Coatsworth's poems, such as "Swift Things Are Beautiful" (1934). Write an essay in which you examine her philosophy of nature and her style.
3. A number of Coatsworth's other books are set in rural Maine. Are the characters, values, and themes similar to the books that are set in Asia?
4. Research Buddhism and its beliefs.

In what ways does *The Cat Who Went to Heaven* reflect these ideas? Keep in mind that there are several schools of Buddhism practiced in different cultures.

5. In a museum or library, investigate Asian art. Do you see any common themes in the paintings? Are there any similarities between these paintings and the artist's in *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*? Explore the philosophy behind Eastern painting and explain how it relates to Buddhism.

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Related Titles

Most of Coatsworth's novels are concerned with American subjects. However, in addition to *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*, Coatsworth has written two other novels based on Oriental themes: *Cricket and The Emperor's Son* (1932) and *Knock at the Door* (1931). *Cricket and the Emperor's Son* is a series of tales about a little boy, Cricket, who finds a magic paper which produces story after story for him to read to the sick child of the emperor.



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