Elephants Have Wings – Teaching Notes – page notes

The page notes below accompany the reading of ‘Elephants Have Wings’.

‘Elephants Have Wings’ revisions the parable of the blind men and the elephant.

It is at its core an ethics and philosophy book for young people as they grapple with the key question - what is truth?


Each illustration is placed within the page like an art piece to invite reflection and search for the mysteries, symbols, philosophies and themes.

Elephant’s eyes

The elephant’s eyes communicate. On the front cover, the elephant is looking out at readers, inviting them to come inside the story.

On pages 22-23, the elephant’s eyes look to the next page – where the extraordinary painting of the elephant within the physical world opens up answers and more questions.

On pages 16-17, the elephant closes his eyes with reflection and pleasure at being complete.

At other times, the elephant looks back to protect the children, looks ahead as guide to the world, cries when the world is torn with conflict, stares towards home.

End Papers

Colours

The opening end paper – red

The closing end paper - 7 colours from the base of the spine to the top of the head are:-

red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet.

The colours represent the 7 chakras in Hindu, Buddhist, Yogic, Eastern traditions and the New Age spirituality in Western nations on the pathway to enlightenment and wisdom.
Red
Red is a spiritual and cultural colour in Hinduism, Buddhism and throughout India and Asia.

Folk Design

The design in the end papers is universal referencing Indian, Asian and European folk traditions.

The Tree of Life

The tree of life is part of most cultures, beliefs and faiths including Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, the Baha’i faith, Islam and folklore.

It is a symbol of immortality and eternal life.
The tree of life changes within the story. In the end papers it is in the beautiful designs. However throughout the story, it changes. At times it sheds leaves, flourishes with harmony, becomes blackened with conflict, re-grows.

The texture of the blue page is identical to the end papers. The blue represents sky and flying. In Hinduism Airavata is a flying elephant that is the king of all elephants. In Hindu mythology, the flying white elephants bring the monsoon rains to refresh the earth.

Pages 4-5

Circle of Life

The design of ‘Elephants Have Wings’ has the artwork placed within the framework of a white background to create a circle impression to symbolise the circle of life, the continuation of the life cycle with is core to many faiths and philosophies.
Stories through Generations

Stories are passed from generation to generation – from grandfather to father to children.

Newspaper Collage

The father tells an ancient story which has modern meaning. Newspaper collage connects the past and the present.

Tree of life

The tree of life is represented throughout the book.

It is viewed through the window.

Elephants

Elephants are considered sacred and are never below the feet. The elephants in the room are on the shelf and painting is on the wall, in the hangings.

Hands and symbols

Discover the hands (Jainism) and the Hindu symbol on the flags below the shelf.

The Hindu symbol: -

Hands symbolise connecting all humanity with faiths and/or humanitarianism and love.

Clothes

The clothes are a mixture of Indian and Western clothing. Notice the father’s jacket and the motif of the flower on the girl’s dress, which will reappear in the later pages.
The father is not wearing a turban and maintaining that tradition which is controversial within some faiths and opens the discussion of tradition, change and adaption of the past and the present.

Red flower

The red flower represents life, growth on the wall the bedroom. It will be repeated throughout the book.

Pages 6-7

Motifs

Elephant; clothes; colour red; passing on story; red flowers.

Pages 8-9

Motifs

Tree of Life; newspaper collage; circle of life; clothes.
The Secret
This begins the children’s search for the secret of life. ‘Elephants Have Wings’ uses the Socratic method of questions. The grandfather, father send the children on their own search to find their answers.

Birds
Birds are throughout the book, representing journey – at times soaring, flying in the wrong direction, detouring, investigating, crossing the world and universe, going home.

The Universe
Symbols of the universe – moon, stars, celestial lights are throughout.

The story of the family and the two children is personal, but also universal.

Diversity
The children represent all ethnicities and colours.

Pages 10-11

Motifs
Tree of Life; clothes; circle of life; universe, diversity

Symbols of the Elephant
The rope, tree branch, marble, scarf, sandy wall

Pages 12-13
Motifs

Tree of Life; the Universe; bird; clothes; circle of life; clothes.

Anger and conflict

The children argue as they believe they are right. The children’s body language reflects their conflict. The monkeys in the circle of life with its peacefulness contrasts to the conflict of the children.

Monkeys

The monkeys are presented through collage in the circle of life. They are real monkeys ranging from the old world monkey with its blue face and to modern monkeys. There is the circle of life connection to continuity.

Mandala

The circle of life connects to the spiritual mandala (Sanskrit: Maṇḍala, 'circle') which is a spiritual and ritual symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism, representing the Universe. Illustrating personal mandalas invites meditation, reflection and inner peace.

Pages 14-15
Motifs

Tree of life, symbols of the elephant, circle of life, universe.

Clothes

The grandfather wears traditional clothes and the turban which is worn by men. Turbans are worn by Sikhs, Muslims, often by nobility regardless of religious background, and historically in Judaism and some Christian sects. The questions about passing on this tradition relates to the circle of life – is the turban important? Or faith and family? What is the heart of life?

Pages 16-17

Motifs

Symbolism of the elephant; universe; diversity; circle of life; tree of life; elephant’s eyes.

The Parts of the Elephant
The parable of the blind men and the elephant. What does it mean? What happens if a part of the elephant is torn away?

Pages 18-190

Motifs
Circle of life; colour red; clothes; red flowers; intergenerational family.

The search for the secret begins.

Pages 20-21

Motifs
Circle of life, elephant, colour red, elephant’s eyes.

Landscape of the earth
Without any figurative and realistic representation, the illustrations reveal the essence of the beauty of the natural world with jungles, wilderness, deserts landscapes.

**Collage**

The silver wings of the elephant are a collage – protecting and embracing the children.

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**Pages 22-23**

**Motifs**

Tree of life, birds, colour red, elephant, collage, newspaper collage, hands, universe, circle of life, elephant’s eyes.

The white elephant with wings takes the children into the soul of the beauty of the world and universe. Its eyes close like a meditation for peace and harmony.

Search for the elephants that are integral to the tree of life and nature. Discover the two birds; the hands; trees, flowers and relationship with the elephants.

**Pages 24-25**
Motifs

Birds, newspaper collage, universe, world, elephant’s eyes,

As the elephant flies across the world into the universe to show the children amazing creation, it protects the children, looking back at them with his brown eye.

Pages 26-27

Motifs

Universe, newspaper collage, collage, circle of life, elephant’s eyes.

There is elation as the white winged elephant takes the children across the universe, his eyes look ahead.

Pages 28-29
Motifs

Tree of life, newspaper collage, collage, parts of the elephant, elephant’s eyes, world.

The elephant turns, plunging through skies and a world cracked by conflict and war. The symbols of war – tank, soldier, displaced houses.

The elephant is torn apart – with his parts the rope, tree branch, marble, scarf, sandy wall – thrown across the pages.

The tree of life is black and burnt.

The children are afraid and hold each other and the elephant is crying.

But there is hope – there are brown leaves from the tree of life and the elephant is still flying.

Pages 30-31

Motifs

Collage, world, elephant’s eyes, tree of life, universe, bird, circle of life.
The elephant rises from the conflict with his eyes looking forward, crossing the earth and taking the children to home.

Water colour blues, greens, yellows, whites create a sense of rivers, jungles, mountains, valleys, forests, the natural world. Crossing cities and towns, the elephant is racing.

The tree of life is budding in front of the children’s home. The elephant and protector, closes its eyes knowing the children are safe.

Page 32

'I know Grandfather’s secret now,' I whisper.
My brother waits.

Motifs

Colour red, flower, hands, symbols, elephant’s eyes, circle of life.

The secret is revealed – ‘Everyone is different but we’re the same, too. The elephant is in all of us.’

While this is an answer, it is also a question. How is humanity the same? How is humanity different?
What is the elephant in all of us?

What is truth?

The elephant remains on the page as protector, a wisdom keeper, a way towards truth.

The children are in the circle of life and a mandala, representing the search for enlightenment. In the background of the circle with its red colour of spirit and flowers are symbols of Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Island and the hands connecting all people.