

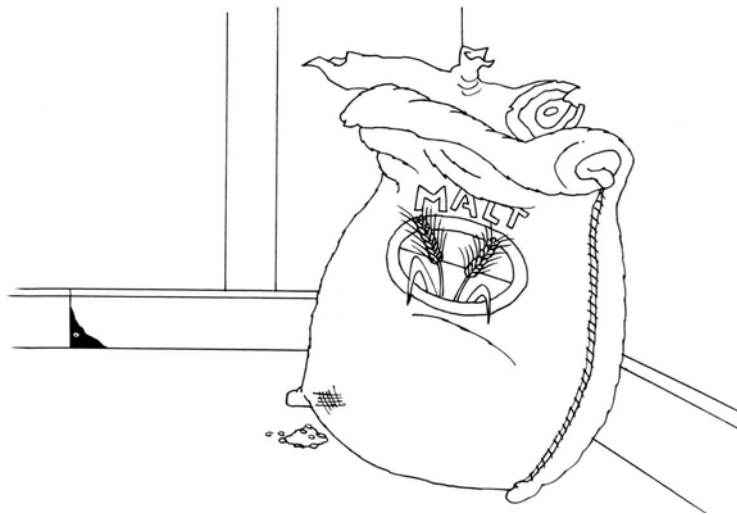
ZIPTALES™

Reading the Poem

The House That Jack Built

The Poet

This nursery rhyme is of unknown origin, and dates back to at least the 1600s. Alone among our 'Rhyme Time' selection, its authorship is lost in history.



The Poem

Some nursery rhymes started out as secret messages, or metaphoric references to celebrated people or events. So for example 'Ring a ring of roses' is said to be a reference to the Black Death (in which one of the symptoms was respiratory failure – 'a tishoo, a tishoo, we all fall down'). 'Three Blind Mice' may refer to three Protestant noblemen executed by Queen Mary in Tudor times. 'Mary Mary quite contrary' is also believed to refer to this famous brutal queen.

However, 'The house that Jack built' is not thought to have any secret meaning, though it may refer obliquely to the poor building standards sometimes seen in the houses of the poor – the ancient equivalent of what we would now call a 'jerry built' house.



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The poem is one of a small group of 'cumulative' songs or verses. Other famous examples are '**There was an old lady who swallowed a fly**' and '**The Twelve Days of Christmas**'. The concept is simple. The first verse sets up a situation. The next verse adds something (the malt, the rat, the cat, the dog, the cow, the maiden, etc), before repeating the first verse. The song or poem grows and grows, but the repetition always brings it back to where it began. This gives it a very satisfying feel, like a round ('**Row, row, row your boat**' or '**Frère Jacques**').

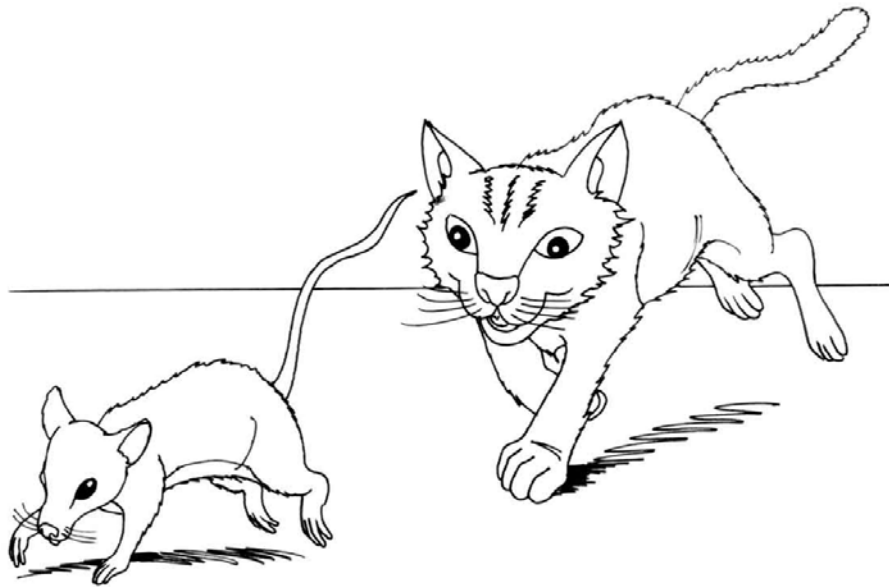
The people or creatures who appear in the poem are basically commonplace parts of the landscape of several centuries ago. There is no moral.

The poem has no regular rhyme scheme. Instead it sets up a series of five short lines with no rhyme, but all roughly the same length, followed by a series of six longer ones (most with nine syllables), each with the same rhyme ('horn'). The regular 'beat' of the rhyming lines gives a great rhythm to the piece.

Why is this poem popular? Because it is a classic of childhood. It appears in practically every collection of nursery rhymes, and is enduringly popular.

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Reading the Poem The House That Jack Built Glossary of Words



cock	rooster or cockerel
corn	grain (probably wheat)
malt	a fermented grain (usually barley) used in brewing
maiden	young unmarried woman