

Notes

Practice with Hints

Use the Notes column to take notes and use SALSA™ strategies. There are a few hints to get you started.

John Henry

Author Unknown

Set in the 1870s, "John Henry" tells the story of a strong African-American man who pounded a steel drill with a hammer to build railroads. Legend has it that John Henry tried to save the jobs of his crew by challenging the steam drill invented to replace them.

Skim

This introduction gives important information about the background of the poem.

John Henry was just a little boy,
You could put him in the palm of your hand
And his Papa cried out with a lonesome farewell,
"Son's gonna be a steel-driving man, O Lord,
Son's gonna be a steel-driving man."

John Henry was a very small boy,
Sitting on his mammy's knee;
He picked up a hammer and a little piece of steel,
Saying, "A hammer'll be the death of me, O Lord,
A hammer'll be the death of me."

Ask

What does this prediction suggest about what will happen later?

John Henry went up on the mountain
And he came down on the side.
The mountain was so tall and John Henry was so small
That he laid down his hammer and he cried, "O Lord,"
He laid down his hammer and he cried.

John Henry was a man just six feet in height,
Nearly two feet and a half across the breast.
He'd take a nine-pound hammer and hammer all day long
And never get tired and want to rest, O Lord,
And never get tired and want to rest.

John Henry was a steel-driving man, O Lord,
He drove all over the world.
He came to Big Bend Tunnel on the C. & O. Road ¹
Where he beat the steam drill down, O Lord,
Where he beat the steam drill down.

Skim

Footnotes define words and expressions readers might not know.

¹ Big Bend Tunnel was located in West Virginia, on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad.

Notes

Look Look closely at repeated lines like this one. They can be key to understanding the poem.

John Henry said to the captain,
 “Captain, you go to town,
 Bring me back a twelve-pound hammer
 And I’ll beat that steam drill down, O Lord,
 And I’ll beat that steam drill down.”

They placed John Henry on the right-hand side,
 The steam drill on the left;
 He said, “Before I let that steam drill beat me down
 I’ll die with my hammer in my hand, O Lord,
 And send my soul to rest.”

The white folks all got scared,
 Thought Big Bend was a-fallin’ in;
 John Henry hollered out with a very loud shout,
 “It’s my hammer a-fallin’ in the wind, O Lord,
 It’s my hammer a-fallin’ in the wind.”

John Henry said to his shaker, ²
 “Shaker, you better pray,
 For if I miss that little piece of steel
 Tomorrow’ll be your buryin’ day, O Lord,
 Tomorrow’ll be your buryin’ day.”

The man that invented that steam drill
 He thought he was mighty fine.
 John Henry sunk the steel fourteen feet
 While the steam drill only made nine, O Lord,
 While the steam drill only made nine.

John Henry said to his loving little wife,
 “I’m sick and want to go to bed.
 Fix me a place to lay down, Child;
 There’s a roarin’ in my head, O Lord,
 There’s a roarin’ in my head.”

They took John Henry to the graveyard,
 And buried him in the sand,
 And every time that train comes roaring by,
 It says, “There lies a steel-driving man, O Lord,”
 There lies a steel-driving man.”

² The “shaker” was the worker who held the drill bit and shook off debris.



Assemble Is this a fitting way to remember John Henry?