

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

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

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.

Ask What does this prediction suggest about what will happen later?

- 1 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.”
- 2 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.”
- 3 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.
- 4 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.
- 5 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

- 6 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.”
- 7 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.”
- 8 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.”
- 9 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.”
- 10 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.
- 11 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.”
- 12 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.

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



Assemble Is this a fitting way to remember John Henry?

1 Which sentence best describes the character of John Henry?

- (A) He was a powerful man who had faith in people's strength.
- (B) He was a superstitious man who believed in luck.
- (C) He was a suspicious man who did not trust machines.
- (D) He was a dangerous man who threatened his co-workers.



Hint—Look for the choice that sums up all the details about John Henry you find in the poem.

2 Which of the following foreshadows what will happen later in the poem?

- (A) "And never get tired and want to rest"
- (B) "Saying, 'A hammer'll be the death of me'"
- (C) "It's my hammer a-fallin' in the wind."
- (D) "There's a roarin' in my head."



Hint—Which choice talks about something that *will* happen, not what is happening?

3 What is the most important setting for the poem's action?

- (A) on the side of a tall mountain
- (B) in the house where John Henry grew up
- (C) in the cemetery where John Henry is buried
- (D) at the construction site of a railroad tunnel



Hint—This poem mentions several settings. Where does the most action happen?

4 Which detail helps create a mood of excitement, danger, and suspense?

- (A) "He'd take a nine-pound hammer and hammer all day long."
- (B) "John Henry said to the captain, 'Captain, you go to town'"
- (C) "For if I miss that little piece of steel Tomorrow'll be your buryin' day"
- (D) "[He] said to his loving little wife, 'I'm sick and want to go to bed.'"



Hint—How does each choice make you feel? Which is most exciting?

- 5** The conflict in this poem is resolved when John Henry
- (A) laid down his hammer on the mountainside and cried.
 - (B) announces he will beat down the steam drill.
 - (C) drives his drill farther than the steam drill can.
 - (D) is buried in the sand of the graveyard.



Hint—The resolution is the point when the main problem is solved—not necessarily the very end of the story.

- 6** Which of the following choices best describes the main theme of “John Henry”?
- (A) No person can escape his fate.
 - (B) Machines strip us of our humanity.
 - (C) Even a poor person can be a great hero.
 - (D) A person can be more powerful than any machine.



Hint—A literary work can have more than one theme. Which theme is closest to the main idea of the poem?

- 7** Describe the effect created by language in “John Henry.” Support your answer with examples from the poem.



Hint—Look at things like word choice, exaggeration, and repetition. What impact do these things have on readers?