

John Henry was an African American who built railroad tracks. Legend has it that a white man challenged him to try to lay track faster than a steam-powered machine. Read the selection below. Then read each question and choose the best answer. Use the provided answer sheet at the end of the workbook to record your answers.

John Henry

by Anonymous

John Henry was about three days old,
Sittin' on his papa's knee.
He picked up a hammer and a little piece of steel
Said: "Hammer's gonna be the death of me, Lord, Lord!
Hammer's gonna be the death of me."

The cap'n says to John Henry,
"Gonna bring me a steam drill 'round,
Gonna bring that steam drill out on the job,
Gonna whop that steel on down, Lord, Lord!
Whop that steel on down."

3 John Henry told his captain,
"A man ain't nothin' but a man
But before I let your steam drill beat me down
I'd die with a hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord!
I'd die with a hammer in my hand."

4 John Henry said to his shaker¹,
"Shaker, why don't you sing?
I'm throwing thirty pounds from my hips on down
Just listen to that cold steel ring, Lord, Lord!
Listen to that cold steel ring."

5 John Henry said to his shaker,
"Shaker, you'd better pray,
'Cause if I miss that little piece of steel,
Tomorrow be your buryin' day, Lord, Lord!
Tomorrow be your buryin' day."

The shaker said to John Henry,
"I think this mountain's cavin' in!"
John Henry said to his shaker, "Man,
That ain't nothin' but my hammer suckin' wind,
Lord, Lord!
Nothin' but my hammer suckin' wind."

1. shaker: the worker who holds the drill bit

The man that invented the steam drill,
Thought he was mighty fine.
But John Henry drove his fifteen feet,
And the steam drill only made nine, Lord, Lord!
The steam drill only made nine.

John Henry hammered in the mountain,
His hammer was striking fire,
But he worked so hard, he broke his poor heart,
He laid down his hammer and he died, Lord, Lord!
He laid down his hammer and he died.

They took John Henry to the graveyard,
And they buried him in the sand,
And every locomotive comes a-roaring by,
Says, "There lies a steel-driving man, Lord, Lord!
There lies a steel-driving man."

Well, every Monday morning
When the bluebirds begin to sing
You can hear John Henry a mile or more
You can hear John Henry's hammer ring, Lord, Lord!
You can hear John Henry's hammer ring.

John Henry

- How does the location of the contest in the mountains help set the mood for this selection?
 - It creates a calm, natural feeling.
 - It creates a rapid, nervous feeling.
 - It creates a raw, earthy feeling.
 - It creates a refined, cultured feeling.
- What is the effect of the repetition in the last two lines of each stanza?
 - It creates a regular rhyme.
 - It makes John Henry seem like a real person.
 - It echoes the sound of Henry's hammer.
 - It lets the speaker express Henry's true feelings.
- What is the meaning of the word *whop* in stanza 2?
 - bang or hit with force
 - make a loud noise
 - a dance
 - melt
- Which pair of words *best* describes John Henry's attitude in stanza 3?
 - proud and confident
 - lost and confused
 - sad and depressed
 - angry and bitter
- John Henry drives his steel further than the steam drill. How much further was this?
 - 6 feet
 - 9 feet
 - 15 feet
 - 24 feet
- Which of these lines use repetition?
 - lines 1 and 2
 - lines 6 and 7
 - lines 14 and 15
 - lines 16 and 17

John Henry

7. Based on the context of stanza 8, what does the word *fire* mean?
- A dynamite (explosive)
 - B flame
 - C red rocks
 - D sparks
8. What effect does the contest with the steam drill have on John Henry?
- A It forced him to admit he was wrong.
 - B It caused him to lose friends.
 - C It made him work harder than normal.
 - D It killed him.
9. Who or what keeps John Henry's name alive for all time?
- A the locomotives
 - B the mountain
 - C his relatives
 - D his shaker
10. People who built the railroads in the 1800s were **most likely** to have which of the following characteristics?
- A great physical strength
 - B an ability to inspire others
 - C the desire to work harder than machines
 - D intelligence and good looks