

Read the poem and story. Then answer the questions that follow.

The legend of John Henry originated in the late 1800s during the construction of a system of railroads in the United States. Scholars disagree about the actual origin of the legend, but most agree that, although the details have been exaggerated, the legend may contain some seeds of truth.

The Ballad of John Henry

*an American folk song
from The Century, November 1896–April 1897*

When John Henry was a little tiny baby
Sitting on his mama's knee,
He picked up a hammer and a little piece of steel
Saying, "Hammer's going to be the death of me, Lord, Lord,
5 Hammer's going to be the death of me."

John Henry was a man just six feet high,
Nearly two feet and a half across his breast.
He'd hammer with a nine-pound hammer all day
And never get tired and want to rest, Lord, Lord,
10 And never get tired and want to rest.

John Henry went up on the mountain
And he looked one eye straight up its side.
The mountain was so tall and John Henry was so small,
He laid down his hammer and he cried, "Lord, Lord,"
15 He laid down his hammer and he cried.

John Henry said to his captain,
"Captain, you go to town,
Bring me back a twelve-pound hammer, please,
And I'll beat that steam drill down, Lord, Lord,
20 I'll beat that steam drill down."

The captain said to John Henry,
"I believe this mountain's sinking in."
But John Henry said, "Captain, just you stand aside—
It's nothing but my hammer catching wind, Lord, Lord,
25 It's nothing but my hammer catching wind."

John Henry said to his shaker,
“Shaker, boy, you better start to pray,
'Cause if my twelve-pound hammer miss that little piece of steel,
Tomorrow'll be your burying day, Lord, Lord,
30 Tomorrow'll be your burying day.”

John Henry said to his captain,
“A man is nothing but a man,
But before I let your steam drill beat me down,
I'd die with a hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord,
35 I'd die with a hammer in my hand.”

The man that invented the steam drill,
He figured he was mighty high and fine,
But John Henry sunk the steel down fourteen feet
While the steam drill only made nine, Lord, Lord,
40 The steam drill only made nine.

John Henry hammered on the right-hand side.
Steam drill kept driving on the left.
John Henry beat that steam drill down.
But he hammered his poor heart to death, Lord, Lord,
45 He hammered his poor heart to death.

Well, they carried John Henry down the tunnel
And they laid his body in the sand.
Now every woman riding on a C and O train Says,
“There lies my steel-driving man, Lord, Lord,
50 There lies my steel-driving man.”

John Henry: Man vs. Machine

by Robert San Souci, Faces

1 Folks say lightning flashed and the whole state of Virginia shook the night John Henry was born to Preacher Henry and his wife. The same folks say he weighed 44 pounds at birth.

2 Even as a baby, John loved hammering things. By age 10, he could hammer down fence posts like a grown man. At 18, he was more than six feet tall, weighed about 200 pounds, and was strong as a locomotive. When working on the family's small farm, he would hear a distant train whistle and say, "Someday, I'm gonna be a steel driver for the railroad."

3 So he went to West Virginia and signed on with the Chesapeake & Ohio—called the C&O—railroad crew, working on the Big Bend Tunnel. One and a quarter miles long, it would cut through a mountain and become the longest railroad tunnel in America.

4 John Henry was hired as a "driver," who hammered a steel drill into the rock to make an opening for blasting powder. His every blow drove the drill an inch deeper into solid rock. The work was hard and the days were hot, but John loved the idea that his hammering was helping make a tunnel through which trains would soon roar. His boss boasted, "He's my finest driver. I'd match him against any man."

5 Though tough, John had a tender heart and fell in love with Lucy, who worked as a maid. She was short to his tall, coffee and cream to his ebony—but while she seemed soft, she was a steel-driving woman from a family of railroad workers. She could lay down rails second only to John Henry, if she had a mind to. They were soon married, and lived in one of the little wooden shanties that housed the railroad workers. The whole crew turned out for the wedding. They bought John a new 20-pound hammer and gave Lucy a flapjack turner big enough to flip hotcakes the size of wagon wheels.

The Iron Monster

6 Word reached the tunneling crew that the owners of the C&O railroad were thinking of buying a newly invented steam drill to replace many workers.

7 John Henry and the other men laughed and called it "the iron monster."

8 But the drill's inventor insisted, "My machine will drill a hole faster than any 10 men!" Then John began to worry that he might lose his job and his and Lucy's dream of buying a farm. And it bothered him to think that folks would say the tunnel was dug by a machine, not a good, honest man's work.

9 So John went to his boss and said, "You tell everyone, I've got a man who can swing two 20-pound hammers. He'll beat that steam drill down and prove that a man is better than any iron monster.' But you gotta promise, if I win, you'll keep all the men working until the Big Bend Tunnel is finished."

10 The boss agreed to a 30-minute contest. If the machine outdrilled John Henry, the C&O would buy it and fire the workers. But if John Henry won, they would pay him \$100, and he and the other men could keep their jobs.

11 Lucy was worried, and tried to get him to give up his plan. But John kissed her and said, "The men are countin' on me. And with that money, we can buy our farm. Besides, a man ain't nothin' but a man. I gotta prove that no machine can drill better than a sledgehammer and steel in an honest man's hand."

The Contest

12 The next day, the man-giant and the steam drill lined up side by side, near the end of the tunnel, while a big crowd gathered inside.

13 The boss dropped his flag and the contest began.

14 At first the steam-powered drill pulled ahead.

15 But this only made John Henry slam his hammer down faster. By the time the contest was halfway over, John Henry's spikes were biting just as deep as the machine's, while the men cheered.

16 Soon John's 20-pounders rose and fell so fast they were almost invisible. The sweat poured down his face, and he grunted as he strained to lift his hammers. Still John slammed away. And he smiled when he saw the steam drill begin to overheat and shake.

17 John pulled farther ahead. His muscles were aching and the rock seemed to grow harder, but this only made him pound more forcefully. Just before the boss yelled, "Time!," the mechanical spike driver shook and wheezed and ground to a halt.

18 But John Henry could not slow down at first. He drove his spike several inches deeper, then suddenly fell to the ground. The men carried him out of the tunnel and laid him with his head in Lucy's lap.

19 "Lucy," he gasped. "Did I beat that steam drill?"

20 "You did," she said, her tears falling like cool rain on his burning face.

21 "Oh, Lucy, I hear a roarin' in my head, like a locomotive rushin' down the tracks," John said. Then his soul boarded the train that only he could see.

22 While John Henry died that hot July day, his story became a part of railroad legend. Wherever a train speeds over the tracks, some part of John Henry rides the rails with it.

Closely reread lines 32–35 from the poem “The Ballad of John Henry”:

A man is nothing 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.

How do these lines reflect John Henry’s relationship with the new technology? Use **two** details from the passage to support your answer.

Write your answer in complete sentences.

65

Closely reread the sentence from paragraph 11 of "John Henry: Man vs. Machine."

Lucy was worried, and tried to get him to give up his plan.

What effect does Lucy's worry have as the story develops? Use **two** details from the passage to support your answer.

Write your answer in complete sentences.

66

In the classic myth of "Beowulf," a great hero decides to save the lives of others by fighting a dragon alone, dying in the process. "Beowulf" was written over a thousand years ago. How do the events of "John Henry: Man vs. Machine" seem similar to the myth of "Beowulf"? Use **two** details from the passage to support your answer.

Write your answer in complete sentences.

Go On

Planning Page

You may **PLAN** your writing for question 67 here if you wish, but do **NOT** write your final answer on this page. Write your final answer on pages 45 and 46.



