Unit 7

Title: John Henry[[1]](#footnote-1)

Suggested Time: 5 days (45 minutes per day)

Common Core ELA Standards: RL.6.1, RL.6.2, RL.6.3, RL.6.4, W.6.1, W.6.4, W6.9; L.6.1, L.6.2, L.6.4, L.6.5

Teacher Instructions

**Preparing for Teaching**

1. Read the Big Ideas and Key Understandings and the Synopsis. Please do **not** read this to the students. This is a description for teachers about the big ideas and key understanding that students should take away **after** completing this task.

Big Ideas and Key Understandings

A person’s dignity lies in his or her determination to succeed regardless of the cost.

Synopsis

John Henry competes against a steam drill in driving steel. He proudly claims that he would sooner die than let a steam drill beat him. Henry beats the steam drill and ultimately dies. However, before he dies, he tells his baby that he, too, must grow up to be “a steel driving man”. Henry’s wife goes to the place where her husband died and never returns.

1. Read the entire selection, keeping in mind the Big Ideas and Key Understandings.
2. Re-read the text while noting the stopping points for the Text Dependent Questions and teaching Tier II/academic vocabulary.

**During Teaching**

1. Teacher reads the text aloud while students follow along.
2. Students and teacher re-read the text while stopping to respond to and discuss the questions, continually returning to the text. A variety of methods can be used to structure the reading and discussion (i.e., whole class discussion, think-pair-share, independent written response, group work, etc.)

Text Dependent Questions

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| --- | --- |
| **Text-dependent Questions** | **Evidence-based Answers** |
| What is a ballad? | A ballad is a poem that tells a story and is meant to be sung or recited. |
| What do you learn about John Henry from the introduction? | John Henry is an African American believed to have been a real man. He is a part of American folklore and worked on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in West Virginia; his job was to dig railroad tunnels. He was physically strong. |
| What is a steel driving man? | A steel driving man is a person who used a ten-pound hammer to drive a steel drill into rock in order to make holes for explosives. |
| What part of John Henry’s life does the repetition in lines 4 and 5 emphasize? | It emphasizes the tradition of John Henry’s family passing on the job as a steel driving man. |
| Why does the father insist that John Henry have the same job as him? | It was an expectation of John Henry’s father that his son would have the same occupation. This demonstrates the pride John Henry’s father had in his job and the importance in continuing this line of work through future generations in his family. |
| What makes the hammer squeal? | The hammer lets out a squeal or sharp sound by the strong force John Henry places on the hammer when he hits the steel drills. |
| What is the last thing John Henry says to his wife? What does this foreshadow? | The last thing John Henry said to his wife was “Be true to me when I’m dead, Oh, be true to me when I’m dead.” This statement foreshadows his impending death. |
| What is a steam drill? | A steam drill is a large steam powered drill used to dig holes. |
| Why is there a competition between the steam drill and John Henry and why does John Henry view the steam drill as an opponent? Who won the competition? Provide textual evidence. | The competition between the steam drill and John Henry is symbolic of the man vs. machine conflict. John Henry views the steam drill as an opponent because machines can do the job of a man. If the machine does the job better and faster, then many men will be out of jobs. John Henry won the competition.  "John Henry struck bottom at half past eight,  And the steam drill didn't bottom till nine,  And the steam drill didn't bottom till nine." |
| What do you think John Henry’s victory over the steam drill represents and what does it tell us about John Henry’s character? | John Henry’s victory represents the heart and determination of man to succeed regardless of the cost. A machine does not possess these strengths and if it breaks, it takes a man’s intelligence to repair it. From the competition we learn that John Henry is determined, hard working, and takes pride in his job. When he states, “Before I’d let that steam drill beat me down, I’d hammer my fool self to death”. Another example occurs when he continues to keep working despite that the competition is already over. |
| How would you describe John Henry’s attitude toward his work? | John Henry would rather die than have the steam drill beat him. He had great pride in his work as a steel driving man. It was something his father had done before him. The steam drill threatens his ability to provide for his family. If the machine beats John Henry many other steel driving men and shakers may lose their jobs as well. If the larger than life John Henry can't beat the machine, then the men will lose hope. |
| What is a shaker? | A shaker is a person who holds the steel drill for the steel driving man and shakes the drill to remove it from the rock. |
| Why does he ask the shaker to “sing just a few more rounds”? | The shaker has been singing a work song to make the workday pass more pleasantly and perhaps to mark the rhythm of John Henry’s hammering. Henry is saying that he wants to continue working. The rhythm of the singing also helps him keep pace and provides encouragement. |
| What does John Henry mean when he says “You’re gonna hear this hammer of mine sound”? | When John Henry says "You're gonna hear this hammer of mine sound" he means that he is going to continue digging determinedly, until he beats the machine. |
| John Henry says that working on the big Bend Tunnel will be the death of him. What other lines refer to John Henry’s death? | Even though the contest is over, John Henry is going to continue working. Literally, the hammering will be loud. And on a deeper level, word will get out that he, a man, beat the new machine.  The last thing before he died,  He said, “Be true to me when I’m dead,  Oh, be true to me when I’m dead.”  “I’d hammer my fool self to death,  Oh, I’d hammer my fool self to death.”  He said, “This big Bend Tunnel on the C. & O. road  Is going to be the death of me,  Lord! is going to be the death of me.”  The last words before he died,  “Son, you must be a steel driving man.”  Said she was going where John Henry fell dead,  Said she was going where John Henry fell dead. |
| Why is the reference to his death repeated so frequently? | John Henry gave the ultimate sacrifice, his life, to beat the steam drill and prove his worth as a man. Students may infer that the work of a steel driver was very hard, as was the work of railroad building in general. John Henry could be symbolizing all workers. This also provides evidence for the theme that a person’s dignity or pride drives them to succeed regardless of the cost. |
| Why does John Henry want his son to be a steel driving man? | John Henry’s father was a steel driving man. He is a steel driving man. He wants to continue the family tradition. He is proud of his hard work and his help in expanding America through the railroad. He is especially proud, as a former slave, to be able to earn a living. |
| What does “hammered my insides in two” mean? | While hammering on the mountain, John Henry worked to total exhaustion leading to his death. The media has often reported this in sports, such as in endurance racing, football, etc. Possible medical theories are that he suffered dehydration, a heart attack, or a stroke. |
| What caused John Henry’s death? Find textual evidence to support your answer. | John Henry has literally worked himself to death. As he starts work, John Henry says, “Before I’d let that steam drill beat me down,/ Id’ hammer my fool self to death”. After he beats the steam drill, he says, “Before I’d let that steam drill beat me down, /I’d die with hammer in my hand”. At half past three he says, “This big Bend Tunnel on the C. O. & road /Is going to be the death of me”. This is also evidenced when John Henry says “Captain, I’ve hammered my insides in two, Lord I’ve hammered my insides in two. John worked to total exhaustion. |
| Why is John Henry considered victorious when he dies competing against the machine? | John Henry demonstrates the dignity of man versus machine in his determination to succeed regardless of the cost. |

Tier II/Academic Vocabulary

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|  | **These words require less time to learn**  (They are concrete or describe an object/event/  process/characteristic that is familiar to students) | **These words require more time to learn**  (They are abstract, have multiple meanings, are a part  of a word family, or are likely to appear again in future texts) |
| **Meaning can be learned from context** |  | squeal  be true  mine  hammer  struck bottom  beat  sound |
| **Meaning needs to be provided** | Introduction – ballad  steel driving man  drive  steel  half-past six  steam drill  shaker |  |

Culminating Writing Task

* Prompt

*“John Henry” is a ballad based on a man believed to be a real African American slave who gained his freedom during the Civil War. His story has become timeless, traveling from coast to coast and from generation to generation. What evidence demonstrates John Henry’s pride in his job and his determination to succeed regardless of the cost? Write a one-page essay using specific evidence from the text, including direct quotes and line numbers.*

* Teacher Instructions

1. Students identify their writing task from the prompt provided.
2. Students complete an evidence chart as a pre-writing activity. Teachers should guide students in gathering and using any relevant notes they compiled while reading and answering the text-dependent questions earlier. Some students will need a good deal of help gathering this evidence, especially when this process is new and/or the text is challenging!

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| ***Evidence***  ***Quote or paraphrase*** | ***Elaboration / explanation of how this evidence supports ideas or argument*** |
| “Before I’d let that steam drill beat me down, I’d hammer my fool self to death” | This demonstrates John Henry’s determination to conquer the technology. Aside from his determination to beat the machine because of his pride in his work, there is also the factor that if the technology beats him, it is symbolic of machine over man, which will also lead to the demise of the importance of man’s work. There is symbolism in the need to beat this machine. Getting beat means being replaced. His power over machines also gives himself power, something important for a former slave, and gives him some power over those who depend on his strength, white men. All of this he is willing to die for; it is for more than himself. He is willing to sacrifice his life. |
| “Before I’d let that steam drill beat me down, I’d die with the hammer in my hand” | See answer above |
| The steam drill started at half-past six,  John Henry started at the same time.  John Henry struck bottom at half-past eight,  And the steam drill didn’t bottom till nine,  And the steam drill didn’t bottom till nine. | John Henry finished a half-hour before the steam drill finished. Man clearly beat machine. |
| John Henry said to his shaker,  “Shaker, why don’t you sing just a few more rounds?” | Even though “the competition” has ended, John Henry continues the work. This clearly demonstrates his pride in his job. |
| The last words before he died,  “Son, you must be a steel driving man” | John Henry has such pride in his job that he wants his son to continue the work. |

1. Once students have completed the evidence chart, they should look back at the writing prompt in order to remind themselves what kind of response they are writing (i.e. expository, analytical, argumentative) and think about the evidence they found. (Depending on the grade level, teachers may want to review students’ evidence charts in some way to ensure accuracy.) From here, students should develop a specific thesis statement. This could be done independently, with a partner, small group, or the entire class. Consider directing students to the following sites to learn more about thesis statements: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/01/ OR http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/ thesis\_statement.shtml.
2. Students compose a rough draft. With regard to grade level and student ability, teachers should decide how much scaffolding they will provide during this process (i.e. modeling, showing example pieces, sharing work as students go).
3. Students complete final draft.

* Sample Answer

In the ballad of “John Henry”, the protagonist John Henry shows a tremendous amount of pride in his job and a determination to succeed. Technology, in the form of a steam drill, has threatened to replace the job that the men in John Henry's family have had for generations. It is a job that was passed down from his father, and it is a job that John Henry wants for his son. It is this pride in his job that fuels his determination to beat the steam drill, no matter the cost.

In several places in the ballad John Henry says, "Before I'd let that steam drill beat me down, / I'd hammer my fool self to death". John Henry also states, " Before I'd let that steam drill beat me down, / I'd die with a hammer in my hand." Both of these statements clearly show John Henry's determination to win. He is willing to lay down his life in this competition in order to beat the steam drill.

The ballad it says, " The steam drill started at half past six, / John Henry started at the same time, / John Henry struck bottom at half past eight, /And the steam drill didn't bottom till nine," John Henry finished a half-hour before the steam drill finished. His pride and determination to succeed gave him the motivation needed to beat the steam drill. Man beat the machine.

Even after the competition ends and John Henry has won, he still wants to continue working. It states that "John Henry says to his shaker, / "Shaker, why don't you sing just a few more rounds?" This clearly demonstrates the pride John Henry has in his job. He also shows pride in his job by wanting his son to continue his work. "The last words before he died, / "Son, you must be a steel driving man." The pride he has in his job and the determination he has to succeed may have cost him his life in the competition, but it is a job so loved by him that he wants it for the next generation of his family. It was that same pride and determination that motivated John Henry to beat the steam drill, no matter the cost.

Additional Tasks

* *Additional Task #1 - Read the nonfiction biographical article about John Henry, “John Henry, the Steel Driving Man – Facts, Fiction and Themes”. Number the paragraphs. (There are seventeen.) While reading, underline the facts about John Henry, the C&O Railroad, Big Bend Mountain, and the Civil War/Reconstruction. After reading, transfer this information to a graphic organizer.*

*(Teacher Note: You may create the fishbone graphic organizer using the following website:* [*http://www.worksheetworks.com/miscellanea/graphic-organizers/fishbone.html*](http://www.worksheetworks.com/miscellanea/graphic-organizers/fishbone.html))

*Label the center line “The Man: Facts, Fiction, and Themes”. Label the bones “Facts About John Henry”, “More Facts About John Henry”, “C & O Railroad”, “Big Bend Mountain”, “Civil War/Reconstruction”, and “What John Henry Represents”. On each line of the fishbone chart, include the paragraph # from which the information is found. On the back of the fishbone chart, use what you have learned from the ballad and the biography to explain why you think John Henry and his legend have become timeless, traveling from coast to coast and from generation to generation.*

The Man - Facts, Fiction and Themes

By Carlene Hempel

There are two John Henrys, the actual man and the legend surrounding him. Defining the first is a matter of assembling facts. He was born a slave, worked as a laborer for the railroads after the Civil War, and died in his 30s, leaving behind a young pretty wife and a baby.

Pinning down the second, the legend, is not so easy. It's as varied as the thousands of people - menial workers, scholars, professional musicians - who have studied, sung and recorded it over the years.

The story of John Henry, told mostly through ballads and work songs, traveled from coast to coast as the railroads drove west during the 19th Century. And in time, it has become timeless, spanning a century of generations with versions ranging from prisoners recorded at Mississippi's Parchman Farm in the late 1940s to present-day folk heroes.

From what we know, John Henry was born a slave in the 1840s or 1850s in North Carolina or Virginia. He grew to stand 6 feet tall, 200 pounds - a giant in that day. He had an immense appetite, and an even greater capacity for work. He carried a beautiful baritone voice, and was a favorite banjo player to all who knew him.

One among a legion of blacks just freed from the war, John Henry went to work rebuilding the Southern states whose territory had been ravaged by the Civil War. The period became known as the Reconstruction, a reunion of the nation under one government after the Confederacy lost the war. The war conferred equal civil and political rights on blacks, sending thousands upon thousands of men into the workforce, mostly in deplorable conditions and for poor wages.

As far as anyone can determine, John Henry was hired as a steel-driver for the C&O Railroad, a wealthy company that was extending its line from the Chesapeake Bay to the Ohio Valley. Steel drivers, also known as a hammer man, would spend their workdays driving holes into rock by hitting thick steel drills or spikes. The hammer man always had a partner, known as a shaker or turner, who would crouch close to the hole and rotate the drill after each blow.

The C&O's new line was moving along quickly, until Big Bend Mountain emerged to block its path. The mile-and-a-quarter-thick mountain was too vast to build around. So the men were told they had drive their drills through it, through its belly.

It took 1,000 men three years to finish. The work was treacherous. Visibility was negligible and the air inside the developing tunnel was thick with noxious black smoke and dust. Hundreds of men would lose their lives to Big Bend before it was over, their bodies piled into makeshift, sandy graves just steps outside the mountain. John Henry was one of them. As the story goes, John Henry was the strongest, fastest, most powerful man working on the rails. He used a 14-pound hammer to drill, some historians believe, 10 to 20 feet in a 12-hour day - the best of any man on the rails.

One day, a salesman came to camp, boasting that his steam-powered machine could outdrill any man. A race was set: man against machine. John Henry won, the legend says, driving 14 feet to the drill's nine. He died shortly after, some say from exhaustion, some say from a stroke.

So why would one man - one among a hundred years of other men and other stories - emerge as such a central figure in folklore and song? For this, we can only speculate.

Like Paul Bunyan, John Henry's life was about power - the individual, raw strength that no system could take from a man - and about weakness - the societal position in which he was thrust. To the thousands of railroad hands, he was an inspiration and an example, a man just like they who worked in a deplorable, unforgiving atmosphere but managed to make his mark.

But the song also reflects many faces, many lives. Some consider it a protest anthem, an attempt by the laborers to denounce - without facing punishment or dismissal by their superiors - the wretched conditions under which John Henry worked.

*This old hammer killed John Henry*

*But it won’t kill me, it won’t kill me.*

Another refrain perhaps allowed the men to imagine they could walk away from the tunnel. And of course they could have. The whites driving them were not their owners. But still, for many blacks, the railroad was an extension of the plantation. Whites were barking the orders; an army of blacks was doing the work. And, for the most part, they had no other option.

*Take this hammer, and carry it to the captain,*

*Tell him I'm gone, tell him I'm gone.*

Whatever John Henry meant or has come to mean, his legend has persevered. Perhaps that's because it reminds us of a time in history - the war and Reconstruction - that we know we ought not to forget. Or, perhaps it's that John Henry represents to us a man who stayed true, despite living in a time and place where, just like in Big Bend, the roads were blocked and the choices, limited.

In other words, like all good heroes, his story still applies.

<http://www.ibiblio.org/john_henry/analysis.html> (Last updated: Dec. 1998)

Answer: Answers will include many, but not all of the following:

Facts About John Henry: born a slave, laborer for the railroads after the Civil War, died in his 30’s, left behind a young pretty wife and a baby, born in 1840’s or 1850’s in North Carolina or Virginia, 6 feet tall, 200 lbs, immense appetite, baritone voice, banjo player, steel-driver for C&O railroad, used a 14-pound hammer to drill 10 - 20 feet in a 12-hour day

Facts About C&O Railroad: wealthy company, extending its line from the Chesapeake Bay to the Ohio Valley, hired John Henry

Facts About Big Bend Mountain: blocked the path of the new C&O rail line, mile-and-a-quarter thick, men were told to drive their drills though the belly of the mountain, it took 1000 men 3 years to finish, hundreds of men lost their lives tunneling though the mountain

Facts About Civil War/Reconstruction: the war ravaged the Southern states, the period after the war become know as the Reconstruction, a reunion of the nation, gave equal civil and political rights to blacks, 1000’s and 1000’s of men were sent into the workforce, mostly in bad conditions for little money.

What John Henry represents: power-the individual, raw strength that no system could take from a man, an inspiration and example-a man who worked in deplorable conditions but still made his mark, protest anthem-laborers denouncing poor working conditions, possible freedom-although the railroad was somewhat an extension of the plantation, the men could now walk away, a man who stayed true

Question on back: Answers will vary

John Henry and his legend have become timeless because he represents values and characteristics we all admire, values we’d like to grow in ourselves. He has a strong mind and body, never giving up. When life presents to him the difficulties of slavery, poverty, poor working conditions, and the threat of technology replacing his job, he faces it all with courage, continuing to work hard. The challenges of poverty, poor working conditions, pride in a job, and the treat of technology are timeless and universal. People continue to find inspiration in the way that John Henry meets his many challenges.

*Additional Task #2 – Art Appreciation: The following paintings were part of the John Henry series painted by Palmer C. Hayden (1890-1973) between 1944 and 1954. In many of his works, Hayden emphasized the important role of African-American workers in the industrial expansion of the United States.*

*Hayden’s paintings can be found on the following links.*

*His Hammer in His Hand*

*http://www.encore-editions.com/ethnic-african-american-art-painting-reproduction-print-palmer-hayden-hammer-in-his-hand-1944-27x33-inches-original-image-size*

*John Henry and Steam Drill*

*http://www.encore-editions.com/ethnic-african-american-art-painting-reproduction-print-palmer-hayden-john-henry-and-steamdrill-1944-30x40-inches-original-image-size*

*John Henry Died with a Hammer in His Hand*

*http://awalkthroughharlem.weebly.com/art.html*

*In Hayden’s work, John Henry is a heroic figure, notable for his impressive physique, his confidence and optimism, and his ease with a hammer. Have students discuss the following questions for each painting.*

*His Hammer in His Hand*

1. *Why do you think the artist chose to portray John Henry as smiling?*
2. *How would the effect of the painting be different if he were frowning or glaring?*

*John Henry and Steam Drill*

1. *What is the mood portrayed in the painting? Support your answer.*
2. *Contrast the steam drill team and the hammer team.*

*John Henry Died with a Hammer in His Hand*

1. *What is the crowd’s attitude towards John Henry? Choose three separate members to help support your answer.*
2. *What does John Henry’s death position and the fact that he is holding his hammer reflect about him?*

*7. From these three paintings, what did you learn about John Henry’s character?*

Answer:

His Hammer in His Hand

1. John Henry’s smile shows his confidence in his task. He is pleased with his work. He is proud to be a free man earning a living as opposed to being a slave.
2. He would not be a man able to beat a steam drill. It would show a lack of satisfaction for his job as well as his defeat – if not physically, then emotionally – by the machine taking over his job, hence his pride and dignity to do his job.

John Henry and Steam Drill

1. The mood is active and competitive. The center of the painting is John Henry and his shaker; they appear confident.
2. The steam drill team appears tense, focused, and worried about the outcome. The man in the suit looking on could be a financial backer maybe; he is looking on intently, dressed in his suit, at what the drillers are doing. There are a great deal of other people looking on also, watching John Henry and his shaker, everyone very interested in this display of human strength against machine. Both of the members of the drill team are Caucasian. The hammer team appears jovial and confident. This is especially evident through the shaker’s smile.

John Henry Died with a Hammer in His Hand

1. Answers will vary. 1) The donkey appears respectful with his head bowed and eyes closed. 2) The kneeling man at John Henry’s feet wearing the top hat appears solemn and respectful, particularly because of his stance. 3) The man wearing the red plaid shirt appears shocked with his mouth and eyes wide open.
2. Despite the fact that he is dead, John Henry appears strong. He is facing up, just as he faced his opposition. Several times in the ballad, he stated “I’d die with the hammer in my hand” (line 34). He remained true to his word. John Henry’s body is in a crucified position. Like Christ, John Henry sacrificed his life for the common man. As a representative of the common man, he proved that a man could not be replaced by a machine.
3. All three paintings reflect his strength and confidence. In all three paintings he is the central focal point; viewers of the painting, like viewers of his life, are drawn to him as is evidenced by the huge crowd in two of the paintings watching him work.

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**“John Henry”**

1. What is a ballad?
2. What do you learn about John Henry from the introduction?
3. What is a steel driving man?
4. What part of John Henry’s life does the repetition in lines 4 and 5 emphasize?
5. Why does the father insist that John Henry have the same job as him?
6. What makes the hammer squeal?
7. What is the last thing John Henry says to his wife? What does this foreshadow?
8. What is a steam drill?
9. Why is there a competition between the steam drill and John Henry and why does John Henry view the steam drill as an opponent? Who won the competition? Provide textual evidence.
10. What do you think John Henry’s victory over the steam drill represents and what does it tell us about John Henry’s character?
11. How would you describe John Henry’s attitude toward his work?
12. What is a shaker?
13. Why does he ask the shaker to “sing just a few more rounds”?
14. What does John Henry mean when he says “You’re gonna hear this hammer of mine sound”?
15. John Henry says that working on the big Bend Tunnel will be the death of him. What other lines refer to John Henry’s death?
16. Why is the reference to his death repeated so frequently?
17. What does “hammered my insides in two” mean?
18. What caused John Henry’s death? Find textual evidence to support your answer.
19. Why is John Henry considered victorious when he dies competing against the machine?

1. *This story is a “duplicate.” (It is found in other anthologies, as well.) This particular revision was completed by a teacher who uses a different anthology than you, so the page numbers have been removed. This may require you to make some adjustments/add page numbers to some of the questions.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)