

Read the poem. 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. John Henry used a hammer and a steel spike to make tunnels for the railroad. This ballad is about a contest between John Henry and a new invention, the steam-powered drill. 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."

Go On

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."

17 This question has two parts. First, answer part A. Then, answer part B.

Part A

What is an important theme of the poem?

- A** People should not try to do work that can be done by machines.
- B** Inner strength is more important than outer strength.
- C** The human spirit is stronger than any machine.
- D** Remarkable people are unaware of the qualities that make them great.

Part B

Which line from the poem **best** supports the answer to part A?

- A** "The mountain was so tall and John Henry was so small,"
- B** "And I'll beat that steam drill down, Lord, Lord,"
- C** "John Henry hammered on the right-hand side."
- D** "He hammered his poor heart to death."

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Read these lines from the poem.

But John Henry said, "Captain, just you stand aside—
It's nothing but my hammer catching wind, Lord, Lord,
It's nothing but my hammer catching wind."

Why does the author use the metaphor of John Henry's hammer "catching wind"?

- A** to suggest the pace of John Henry's hammering
- B** to call to mind a cooling breeze
- C** to give the reader a mental image of the hammer
- D** to help the reader imagine the coolness of the metal hammer

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In the poem, John Henry twice mentions a connection between his hammer and his death before he battles the steam drill. What effect does this have on the reader?

- A** It confuses the reader because the reader does not know whether his word is trustworthy or not.
- B** It lessens the suspense for the reader by revealing exactly what will happen to John Henry.
- C** It annoys the reader because the reader thinks John Henry should have been able to avoid his death.
- D** It gives the reader an anxious feeling by making John Henry's downfall seem fated from the beginning.

Go On

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Which of the following descriptions of heroes in some classic stories is **most** like the character of John Henry?

- A** He takes on a seemingly impossible task, completes it using every bit of his strength, and dies at the end.
- B** He travels far away from home to take on a seemingly unbeatable foe, saving his people from harm.
- C** He grows up being trained to confront an enemy and, though hesitant as an adult, knows there is no one who can take his place.
- D** He comes from humble beginnings, but through a twist of fate, his life changes and he finds his true calling.
- E** He sets off on a journey with a difficult goal in mind and must overcome a series of obstacles before finally meeting his goal.

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Read the sentence below. It is an analysis drawn from details in the poem.

Beating the steam drill is John Henry's destiny.

Find one stanza from the story that is evidence for this analysis. Write it below.
