Title of Unit: John Henry

Period of History: 1870 – 1873: Construction of the Big Bend Tunnel on the Chesapeake and the Ohio Railroad

ELA Close Reading Planning Tool

Grade Level: 3

Time of Year: Mid-Year

Subject Area: Elementary Language Arts – Reading & Writing

Theme of Lessons: Careful examination of an African American tall tale/heroic myth based on the popular black folk ballad, John Henry.

Goal: The students will gain an understanding of specific and figurative language an author uses to develop characters, particularly in the genre of African American tall tales.

Next Generation Sunshine State Standards:

Reading Standard(s):

RL.3.1 Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as a basis for the answers.

RL.3.2 Recount stories, including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in text.

RL.3.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, distinguishing literal from non-literal language.

RL.3.10 By the end of the year read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas and poetry, at the high end of the grades 2-3 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

Listening and Speaking Standard(s):

SL.3.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 3 topics and texts, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.

SL.3.3 Ask and answer questions about information from a speaker, offering appropriate elaboration and detail.

Writing Standard(s):

W.3.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.
Language Standard(s):
L.3.5 Demonstrate understanding of word relationships and nuances in word meanings.
First Reading: Students read and mark entire text independently.

Social Studies Standard(s):
SS.3.G.4.4 Identify contributions from various ethnic groups to the United States.
SS.3.C.2.1 Identify actions of citizens that demonstrate civility, cooperation, volunteerism, and other civic virtues.

Text Under Investigation: John Henry by Julius Lester (this book was provided to all third grade teachers who attended Language Arts Florida Standards training in 2012 - 2014)
Paired Text: None

Synopsis/Big Idea of text: John Henry is a folktale about a man who is bigger and stronger than life. He outperforms teams of men and even a steam drill with just his hammers in the expansion of the railway system.

Performance Task Description: Explain how the author uses figurative language to portray the magnitude of John Henry’s strength? Justify your answer with evidence from the text.

Prerequisite Skills (what skills/strategies need to be taught prior to this close reading lesson): Figurative Language: hyperbole, personification, simile, metaphor, onomatopoeia, using key details to describe a character, writing in the information mode about a narrative text.
Academic Vocabulary:

- Sledgehammers – a large heavy hammer swung with both hands
- Commotion – noisy confusion, uproar
- Pulverized – to crush or grind something into small bits
- Holler - to call out or shout something, yell

Learning Objectives:

- Students will identify the characteristics specific to tall tales
- Students will identify and incorporate the author’s use of figurative language in their written responses.
- Students will understand how tall tales and heroic myths were developed and passed on.
- Students will understand the connection between African American and significant historical events.

Cultural Concept/Information:

On August 28, 1830, the driver of a horse-drawn carriage challenged the Tom Thumb, the first American-built steam locomotive, to a race on the newly formed Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The locomotive was winning the race until a mechanical malfunction caused it to slow, allowing the horse-drawn car to pull ahead. Despite this initial setback, steam locomotives quickly became popular with railroad companies, and for the next 40 years, thousands of miles of railroad track would be laid across the country. Like the carriage driver who challenged the Tom Thumb, the folk hero John Henry, an ex-slave African American steel driver, was said to have challenged a mechanical, steam-powered drill to a steel-driving race in order to protect his job. John Henry won the competition, only to die in victory.

The song celebrates a man who matched his prowess against that of a machine. Do we admire him for doing so? The song begins with John Henry’s premonition, while still a baby, that “Hammer’s gonna be the death of me.” Yet as a grown man he clings to that hammer and squarely faces the death that doing so brings him.

Julius Lester’s version of John Henry describes a man who was a friend to wild animals, was stronger than any many alive, and who demonstrated an unstoppable courage that inspires readers. Set during the time of railroad building, the ballad represents an example of African American music and the story is told with rhythm, wit, and humor as well as a heavy dose of exaggeration.
Technological & Research Resources:

- Black history website with archives on multiple topics: John Henry, Black History Now!, June 9, 2011
  http://blackhistorynow.com/john-henry/

- Website that includes history and lyrics and for 22 ballads: Classic African-American Folk Ballads, Smithsonian Folkways,

- History of Rail and Railroad Workers: History of Railroads and Rail Workers in the U.S.in the 1800s, https://sites.google.com/site/historyofrrunions/home/early-history-1800-1899

- Includes photographs and historical information for railroad construction: John Henry and the Coming of the Railroad, National Park Service

- Includes photographs and historical information for Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad Company: Chesapeake and Ohio Historical Society, http://www.cohs.org/

- Articles and essays and collection items including photographs of sheet music: Library of congress Celebrates the Songs of American

First Read
Students read the text:

Read entire text (10 – 15 minutes)   Reading Focus for lesson: Text code “E” next to words or phrases that show exaggeration and “O” next to words that show onomatopoeia. Have students turn and talk to share findings.

Responding to the text: Turn and talk, discussing and comparing coded text.

Second Read

Reading Focus for lesson: Listen to the rhythm of the text and the author’s use of figurative language.

Third Read

Close Reading

   Reading Focus for lesson: Text Coding “P” next to words or phrases that show personification.

Responding to the text: Select an example of personification from the text and explain how it supports the idea of John Henry being stronger/larger than life.

Fourth Read

Responding to the text: Underline evidence in response to Text Dependent Questions (TDQ),

Class discussion

Text Dependent Questions (page number)   Expected conversation

Paragraph 10: How does the author help us to understand what the word commotion means? “made so much racket” “kicked up so much dirt and dust…” moon and sun got confused

Paragraph 3: What can you infer from the description of the boulder in paragraph 3? Extraordinary, extremely large and in the way

Paragraph 15: What does the author mean by “that boulder shivered like you do on a cold winter morning when it looks like the school bus is never going to come.”? How are the illustrations connected to the ideas the author has shared on these pages? (Turn and Talk) It shook hard like you do when you’re very cold. It was also shaking with fear of John Henry’s hammer, just like you shake when you are nervous about missing the bus.
Describe how John Henry’s attempt to move the boulder was different from the work crew’s attempt? Work crew- many strong men, used dynamite, confident that their way was the best, unsuccessful

John Henry- one strong man, used 2 hammers, confident that his way was best, outperformed the crew & their dynamite

Who or what has John Henry proven to be stronger than? A crew of men, dynamite, a gigantic boulder

Fifth Read

Close Reading: Following the reading of the text, students will need to respond to the reading focus question. Reading Focus for lesson:

How does the author use figurative language to portray the magnitude of John Henry’s strength? Justify your answer with evidence from the text.

Performance Task Notes: Students having their notes and text coding available to them will be very helpful in completing the performance task. Explain the rubric with the students prior to beginning the performance task so they are aware of what is expected to be considered proficient.
Bibliography:

• A Worker on the Transcontinental Railroad, James Barter, Working Life Library Binding, December 17, 2002

• The Boy in the Picture: The Craigellachie Kid and the Driving of the Last Spike, Ray Argyle, July 26, 2010


• American Ballads and Folk Songs, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, Dover Books on Music, Oct 21, 1994


