Is it ever right to GIVE UP?

Think of a time when you kept trying something without success. Did you get discouraged, or did the experience make you try harder? When some of us might give up, other people find the strength to persevere. In the poems you are about to read, you will meet two characters who refuse to take no for an answer.

QUICKWRITE Think of a situation in which you gave up doing something—perhaps playing an instrument or being on a team. Write a brief paragraph explaining the positive and negative consequences of your decision.
**LITERARY ANALYSIS: CHARACTERIZATION IN POETRY**

The two works you are about to read are *narrative poems*, which means they tell a story. Like short stories, narrative poems always feature characters. Poets can bring their characters to life, or *characterize* them, in just a few words. A telling image, a carefully chosen scrap of dialogue, or a striking detail can suggest a great deal about a character's traits, behavior, and values.

As you read “Barbara Frietchie” and “John Henry,” pay attention to what the poets’ language suggests about the characters. Then note information about each main character in the appropriate part of a graphic like the one shown.

**READING SKILL: RECOGNIZE SOUND DEVICES**

One way that narrative poems differ from short stories is the extent to which they use *sound devices* to add meaning and interest. The three Rs of sound devices are

- **Rhyme**: the repetition of sounds at the ends of words
  
  *Over the mountains winding down,*
  *Horse and foot, into Frederick town.*

- **Rhythm**: the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in the lines of a poem
  
  *She leaned far out on the window-sill*

- **Repetition**: repeated sounds, words, or phrases that are used for emphasis
  
  *You must be a steel driving man like me,*
  *You must be a steel driving man like me.*

Reading a poem aloud can help you appreciate the sound devices. As you read “Barbara Frietchie” and “John Henry,” notice the effect the devices have on the sound and sense of the poem.

Complete the activities in your *Reader/Writer Notebook*.  

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**Meet the Author**

**John Greenleaf Whittier**

1807–1892

**Fiery Abolitionist**

Although John Greenleaf Whittier had little formal schooling, he was naturally drawn to poetry. His career began in 1826 when a newspaper published one of his poems, which his sister had submitted without his knowledge. William Lloyd Garrison, a noted abolitionist, was the newspaper’s editor, and his passion for ending slavery affected Whittier. Whittier’s poems about the evils of slavery were published in 1846 under the title *Voices of Freedom*.

**BACKGROUND TO THE POEMS**

“Barbara Frietchie” and the Civil War

As an abolitionist, John Greenleaf Whittier strongly supported the Union side in the Civil War. He wrote “Barbara Frietchie” to honor a legendary act of courage. Barbara Frietchie was a citizen of Frederick, Maryland, who was fiercely loyal to the Union. According to legend, as Confederate soldiers marched through the town, she defiantly waved a Union flag.

**John Henry**

It is not known if John Henry actually existed, but the character may have been based on a real steel driver in the early 1870s. Steel drivers used hammers and steel drills to pound holes into mountains. Then explosives blasted deeper into the mountains to create tunnels for railroads. The speed and efficiency of machines like steam drills eventually threatened the livelihood of steel drivers. John Henry’s story is often sung as a ballad.

Go to thinkcentral.com.  
Keyword: HML8-291
Up from the meadows rich with corn,
Clear in the cool September morn,
The clustered spires of Frederick stand
Green-walled by the hills of Maryland.

5 Round about them orchards sweep,
Apple and peach tree fruited deep,
Fair as the garden of the Lord
To the eyes of the famished rebel horde,¹

On that pleasant morn of the early fall
When Lee² marched over the mountain wall;

Over the mountains winding down,
Horse and foot, into Frederick town.  

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¹. *horde*: a large group or crowd.
². *Lee*: a general for the Confederate army during the Civil War.
Forty flags with their silver stars,
Forty flags with their crimson bars,

15 Flapped in the morning wind: the sun
Of noon looked down, and saw not one.

Up rose old Barbara Frietchie then,
Bowed with her fourscore years and ten;³

Bravest of all in Frederick town,
She took up the flag the men hauled down.

In her attic window the staff she set,
To show that one heart was loyal yet. b

Up the street came the rebel tread,
Stonewall Jackson⁴ riding ahead.

25 Under his slouched hat left and right
He glanced; the old flag met his sight.

"Halt!"—the dust-brown ranks stood fast.
"Fire!"—out blazed the rifle-blast.

It shivered the window, pane and sash;
30 It rent⁵ the banner with seam and gash.

Quick, as it fell, from the broken staff
Dame Barbara snatched the silken scarf. c

She leaned far out on the window-sill,
And shook it forth with a royal will.

35 “Shoot, if you must, this old gray head,
But spare your country’s flag,” she said.

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3. forth score years and ten: ninety years.
4. Stonewall Jackson: a general for the Confederate army during the Civil War.
5. rent: tore apart.
A shade of sadness, a blush of shame,
Over the face of the leader came;

The nobler nature within him stirred
To life at that woman’s deed and word;

“Who touches a hair of yon gray head
Dies like a dog! March on!” he said.

All day long through Frederick street
Sounded the tread of marching feet:

All day long that free flag tost
Over the heads of the rebel host.

Ever its torn folds rose and fell
On the loyal winds that loved it well;

And through the hill-gaps sunset light
Shone over it with a warm good-night.

Barbara Frietchie’s work is o’er,
And the Rebel rides on his raids no more.

Honor to her! and let a tear
Fall, for her sake, on Stonewall’s bier.

Over Barbara Frietchie’s grave,
Flag of Freedom and Union, wave!

Peace and order and beauty draw
Round thy symbol of light and law;

And ever the stars above look down
On thy stars below in Frederick town!

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6. **bier** (bîr): a stand on which a coffin is placed before a burial.
When John Henry was a little boy,
Sitting upon his father’s knee,
His father said, “Look here, my boy,
You must be a steel driving man like me,
You must be a steel driving man like me.”

John Henry went up on the mountain,
Just to drive himself some steel.
The rocks was so tall and John Henry so small,
He said lay down hammer and squeal,
He said lay down hammer and squeal.

John Henry had a little wife,
And the dress she wore was red;
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.”

John Henry’s wife ask him for fifteen cents,
And he said he didn’t have but a dime,
Said, “If you wait till the rising sun goes down,
I’ll borrow it from the man in the mine,
I’ll borrow it from the man in the mine.”

John Henry started on the right-hand side,
And the steam drill started on the left.
He said, “Before I’d let that steam drill beat me down,
I’d hammer my fool self to death,
Oh, I’d hammer my fool self to death.”
The steam drill started at half-past six,
John Henry started 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 said to his captain,
“A man, he ain’t nothing but a man,
Before I’d let that steam drill beat me down,
I’d die with the hammer in my hand,
Oh, I’d die with the hammer in my hand.”

John Henry said to his shaker, 1
“Shaker, why don’t you sing just a few more rounds?
And before the setting sun goes down,
You’re gonna hear this hammer of mine sound,
You’re gonna hear this hammer of mine sound.”

John Henry hammered on the mountain,
He hammered till half-past three,
He said, “This big Bend Tunnel on the C. & O. road 2
Is going to be the death of me,
Lord! is going to be the death of me.”

John Henry had a little baby boy,
You could hold him in the palm of your hand.
The last words before he died,
“Son, you must be a steel driving man,
Son, you must be a steel driving man.”

John Henry had a little woman,
And the dress she wore was red,
She went down the railroad track and never come back,
Said she was going where John Henry fell dead,
Said she was going where John Henry fell dead.

John Henry hammering on the mountain,
As the whistle blew for half-past two,
The last word I heard him say,
“Captain, I’ve hammered my insides in two,
Lord, I’ve hammered my insides in two.”

1. **shaker:** the person who holds the steel drill for the steel driving man and shakes the drill to remove it from the rock.

2. **big Bend . . . road:** Construction work on the Big Bend Tunnel on the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad in West Virginia took place from 1870 to 1873.
John Henry was a childhood hero of mine, and he was probably one of the biggest influences on who I am and how I live my life. To me, the legend and the man are the same; I still see him as a regular guy who was confident in himself and who never, ever gave up. When he needed a job, he went and got one, convincing the boss that he was the right man for it. And when that job of Steel Driving Man was threatened by automation, he challenged that Steam Drill to a contest and won. Sure, he died in the process, but that just adds to his legend. The point is, he said he would win and did, against all odds. What a role model for young and old alike!
Comprehension

1. **Recall** What causes Barbara Frietchie to hold a flag out her window?
2. **Clarify** Why does John Henry have a contest with the steam drill?

Literary Analysis

3. **Make Inferences** Reread lines 23–42 of “Barbara Frietchie.” Why do you think Stonewall Jackson decides to protect the woman who defied him?
4. **Interpret Symbol** What do you think John Henry’s victory over the steam drill symbolizes, or stands for beyond its usual meaning?
5. **Analyze Couplets** “Barbara Frietchie” is written in couplets, rhymed pairs of lines that usually have the same or a similar number of syllables. Think about the characteristics of these couplets and the effect they help create. Then tell what purpose couplets serve in the poem.
6. **Analyze Ballad** “John Henry” is a ballad, a poem that tells a story and was originally meant to be sung. What elements of the poem make it songlike?
7. **Compare and Contrast** Using a Venn diagram like the one shown, compare and contrast the characters of Barbara Frietchie and John Henry. Are they more similar or different?
8. **Analyze Characterization** Review the character maps you created as you read. Based on the information you collected, describe each character in detail. What are they like? What do they believe in?
9. **Evaluate Sound Devices** Read several stanzas of each poem aloud. For each poem, tell whether you think the rhythm, rhyme, or repetition affects the meaning most. Explain your answer.
10. **Compare Texts** In the “Cartoon Tribute to John Henry,” how does Bobby’s encounter with Dr. Dampflok parallel John Henry’s experience in the poem?

Extension and Challenge

11. **Readers’ Circle** Why do you think Barbara Frietchie and John Henry captured the American imagination? Think about why Americans value the traits these characters display in the poems.

Is it ever right to GIVE UP?

Considering the outcome, do you think John Henry was right to persevere at his work on the railroad? Explain.