

Fourteen Myths, One Legend:

A New Historicist Reading of The Myth of John Henry in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*

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ABSTRACT

Myths and folklore are living records of tradition, culture, and beliefs transmitted from one generation to the next. The prologue of Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* (2001) presents fourteen variations of the myth of John Henry. Whitehead, in his novel demonstrates how oral tradition transforms historical fragments into culturally meaningful legend. Rather than presenting John Henry as a fixed heroic figure, Whitehead foregrounds the multiplicity of voices, regional claims, racial dynamics, and industrial myth-making that contribute to shape the narrative. These varied myths destabilise the idea of a single, recoverable historical truth. This paper tends to approach the varied myths of John Henry using the theoretical lens of Stephen Geenbalt's New Historicism. The varied narrative construction of the myth

exposes the contested and constructed discourse of history. The prologue in *John Henry Days* functions as a metafictional archive of cultural memory. It reveals how power, memory, and culture contribute in the production of historical meaning. By exhibiting fourteen varied competing histories, Whitehead interrogates the politics of representation. He questions the authority of singular narratives, suggesting that myth operates not just as a preserved fact but as an evolving site of ideological negotiation.

Keywords: Myths and folklore, Tradition, Regional claims, Constructed discourse, Cultural memory, Ideological negotiation.
