Who Gets the Thread?

A Manchester mill worker and the value of her labor

TOT.C.1.3.A "Analyze the proposition that industrialization and free trade had alienated workers from the fruits of their labors."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline details about who makes, owns, and sells the thread. Circle ways trade could help or hurt workers, then number two details that support the claim of alienation and one that limits it.

A Spinner's Share

1. Imagine a cotton spinner in a Manchester mill in the 1850s. Each morning, she tends machines that twist cotton into thread. She is paid a wage for her hours, but the mill owner owns the machines, buys the cotton, and sells the finished thread. Before large factories, some textile workers made cloth at home and sold what they produced, though merchants often supplied materials and controlled prices. Factory work did not simply replace freedom with control. Still, the spinner's paycheck is different from owning the thread she makes or deciding how its sale will benefit her.

2. The mill can produce far more thread than a home worker could, and its owner can earn profits when sales rise. The spinner may never see the buyer or learn the final price. If the owner cuts her hours when orders fall, she shares the risk without controlling the business. These facts support a claim that industrialization can alienate workers from the fruits of their labor: the product and much of its value belong to someone else. Yet wages can buy food and housing, and some factory workers earned more than they could in other available jobs.

3. Free trade adds another layer. In 1846, Britain repealed laws that had restricted grain imports, opening the way for cheaper imported food. Lower food prices could help wage earners. At the same time, British manufacturers sought overseas buyers for their textiles. If sellers faced strong competition, owners might try to keep prices low by holding down wages, although trade alone did not determine pay. The spinner could help make goods sold far away while receiving only her wage, not a share of each sale. To judge alienation, compare who makes the goods, who owns them, and who gains or loses when trade expands.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does ownership of the thread support the claim that factory work alienated the spinner from the fruits of her labor?

2. When orders fall, how do the spinner's risks and the owner's control differ? Why does that difference matter to the claim?

3. How could expanding trade both strengthen and weaken the claim that workers were alienated?

4. Does the passage show that factory workers were always worse off than workers who made cloth at home? Use one detail to explain your judgment.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine a bakery worker who earns wages while the owner owns the ovens and sells the bread abroad. Imported flour lowers the bakery's costs. In 70 to 100 words, argue whether the worker is alienated from the fruits of their labor, using one ownership detail, one trade detail, and one reason your conclusion is not certain.

ANSWER KEY

Who Gets the Thread?

HIGH SCHOOL · TOT.C.1.3.A

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline details about who makes, owns, and sells the thread. Circle ways trade could help or hurt workers, then number two details that support the claim of alienation and one that limits it. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does ownership of the thread support the claim that factory work alienated the spinner from the fruits of her labor?	**The spinner makes the thread, but the owner owns and sells it. She receives wages rather than control over the product or its sale.**
2	When orders fall, how do the spinner's risks and the owner's control differ? Why does that difference matter to the claim?	**The owner can cut the spinner's hours, so she loses pay even though she cannot control the business. She bears a risk tied to sales without deciding how the business responds.**
3	How could expanding trade both strengthen and weaken the claim that workers were alienated?	**Overseas sales might benefit owners without giving workers a share of each sale, and competition might hold down wages. Cheaper imported food could also help workers afford necessities.**
4	Does the passage show that factory workers were always worse off than workers who made cloth at home? Use one detail to explain your judgment.	**No. Merchants sometimes controlled home workers' materials and prices, and some factory workers earned more than they could in other available jobs.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The bakery worker may be alienated from the fruits of their labor because the owner, not the worker, owns the ovens and the bread sold abroad. The worker receives wages rather than the full revenue from each sale. Cheaper imported flour might increase the owner's profit without raising those wages. However, lower costs could also help the bakery stay open or raise pay, and wages still compensate the worker. Without knowing the pay and how the savings are shared, I cannot conclude that trade necessarily makes the worker worse off.

Accept arguments for or against alienation if they explain ownership, a possible effect of trade, and a limit on what the scenario proves. Do not require students to assume that lower flour costs change wages.