Who Owns the Mill?

Trace a critique of private ownership through one workplace.

TOT.C.1.3.B "Describe the idea that private property is exploitative, based on selfishness, and results in inequality."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline a detail showing why critics call the mill exploitative, circle an owner's choice they might call selfish, and number two steps that could widen inequality.

Work, Wages, and Ownership

1. In a nineteenth-century textile mill, workers operate machines that turn cotton into cloth. The mill owner owns the building, machines, and finished cloth. Workers own neither the machines nor the cloth they make; they receive wages for their time. Critics such as Karl Marx called the owner's control of production a form of private property. They distinguished it from owning a coat or a toothbrush for personal use. Their concern was not that anyone kept a coat. It was that one person could own the tools many people needed to work and could decide who used them and on what terms.

2. Suppose the cloth sells for enough to cover cotton, repairs, wages, and other costs, with money left over for the owner. Marx argued that workers' labor creates value beyond what they receive in wages. From this viewpoint, the owner takes the extra value as profit because the owner controls the mill, not because the owner did all the work. Critics call this exploitation: workers produce more value than they are paid for, while the owner keeps the difference. Workers may accept these terms because they need wages to buy food and pay rent, even if they think the arrangement is unfair.

3. These critics also argue that private ownership can reward selfishness. An owner seeking a larger profit might keep wages low instead of sharing gains with workers. The owner can use profits to buy more machines or another mill, while workers who spend most of their wages on necessities may struggle to save. Over time, this pattern can widen the gap between people who own productive property and people who must work for them. Defenders of private ownership disagree: they say owners risk their money and that businesses can create jobs. The critics' claim focuses on who controls production and who receives its rewards.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why do the critics in the passage call the mill arrangement exploitative?

2. What choice could critics call selfish, and why?

3. How could the owner and workers end up farther apart financially over time?

4. Why does the passage distinguish owning a coat from owning the mill's machines?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Invent a workplace other than the textile mill, and name a tool or building its owner controls that others need to work. In four or five sentences, explain how critics could argue that this ownership permits exploitation, rewards a selfish choice, and increases inequality over time.

ANSWER KEY

Who Owns the Mill?

HIGH SCHOOL · TOT.C.1.3.B

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline a detail showing why critics call the mill exploitative, circle an owner's choice they might call selfish, and number two steps that could widen inequality. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why do the critics in the passage call the mill arrangement exploitative?	**They argue that workers create more value than they receive in wages, while the owner keeps the difference as profit.**
2	What choice could critics call selfish, and why?	**The owner might keep wages low to increase profit instead of sharing gains with workers.**
3	How could the owner and workers end up farther apart financially over time?	**The owner can use profits to buy more productive property, while workers who spend wages on necessities may struggle to save.**
4	Why does the passage distinguish owning a coat from owning the mill's machines?	**A coat is for personal use, but owning the machines gives one person control over tools others need to work and over the terms of their work.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

At an orchard, one person owns the land and the cold-storage building that fruit pickers need for their work. Critics could argue that the owner exploits the pickers by keeping money their work helps produce instead of paying it all to them. The owner might choose low wages to keep more money, a choice critics would call selfish. The owner could use that money to buy more land. Meanwhile, pickers who spend their wages on necessities might struggle to save, widening the gap between them and the owner.

Accept answers that clearly present exploitation, selfishness, and inequality as arguments made by critics, not as undisputed facts. For Part 3, the invented workplace must differ from the textile mill and explain a plausible link between ownership and each claim.