

**Dutch Ships, British Industry and the Birth of Shopping:  
A dialogue for teacher and students, grades 5-8**

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TEACHER: (to the class) What would you say if I offered to pay you for coming to school?

STUDENT: How much?

T: Twenty-five dollars a day.

S: Oh, cool. Sign me up.

T: Wait. It gets better. Every Friday, you'll have a choice. On those days, you can either come to school and get paid, or you can skip school and do whatever you want.

S: Do I still get paid if I ditch?

T: No., it's one or the other...either money or freedom. Which would you take?

S: I'll take the money.

T: Why?

S: So I can buy stuff.

T: Like what?

S: Shoes, CDs, clothes...

T: But don't you already have enough shoes, CDs and clothes? Do you really need more?

S: You can never have enough.

T: All right, stop right there. I want you to think about what you just said. "You can never have enough." Where does that kind of thinking come from?"

S: We're born with it.

T: No, you're not. A baby doesn't lie in his crib thinking, "I can't wait 'till I get out of here so I can go shopping."

S: But when you get older it seems natural.

T: But why does it seem natural? How did you get turned into someone who'd rather go to a mall than skip school, sit by a brook and watch the water flowing over the stones?

S: Shopping is more fun than sitting by some brook.

T: What's fun about it?

S: It's fun to try on the latest styles and buy new stuff.

T: You know, this idea of going out with money and coming home with stuff is relatively new. For thousands of years, nobody went shopping.

S: Where would they get their stuff?

T: They'd make it. They'd grow their food and sew their clothes and stitch their shoes and weave their baskets and saw and hammer their tables.

S: That would take way too much time.

T: They had no choice. In Europe, until around 1500, life, for most people, was a struggle for survival. If you had a full belly, one pair of shoes and a roof over your head you were lucky. Having anything extra was unusual. Luxuries were unheard of.

S: What would be considered a luxury back then?

T: Having a book or your own bedroom or taking a vacation. Books, other than the Bible, were rare, houses were one or two rooms, and people stayed pretty close to home.

Then, at the beginning of the 1500s, something happened that would, eventually, change the way people think about the world and their place in it.

What happened in those early years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was that young men began to leave their homes in Europe and risk their lives on sailing voyages to the Far East. Now, I know you've heard of people leaving home and risking their lives for gold and silver. But these men were not in search of precious metals. They were looking for something that you and I would consider ordinary. These men were on a quest for pepper.

S: Pepper?

T: Yes, pepper, which you could find very little of in Europe.

S: Even so, why go all that way just for pepper?

T: Let me put it this way. Pretend you don't have a refrigerator. Would you eat a fish that's been lying around for five days? Would you get near a fish that's been lying around for five days? But what if you were really hungry and the fish was the only thing to eat. Well, your nose would say, "no," and your belly would say, "yes," and so you'd probably force it down the way you'd force down foul tasting medicine if you were sick. But what if there was a way to make rotting fish or rancid meat or moldy biscuits more appetizing? What if there was a way to hide the awfulness? That was the magic of pepper and other spices. They were a kind of culinary camouflage. They could turn an ordeal into a meal and a meal into a delicacy.

Spices were in demand for other reasons. There was, for example, the aroma factor. You see, cities in the 1500s (and for centuries after that) stunk. Sailing up the Thames, for instance, you could smell London from 20 miles away. It wasn't only the primitive plumbing and the animal droppings and the boatloads of five day old fish. It was also the tens of thousands of people who hadn't bathed in months. Now in those days it was thought that bad smells were unhealthy, so people, if they could afford to, would carry little pouches full of spices, and when they walked through a smelly zone, they'd hold the pouch under their noses.

Spices were also used as medicine. Cinnamon could ease digestion, ginger root could sooth a sore throat and clove oil could numb the pain from a toothache. As you can imagine, people paid dearly for these remedies and for the special smells and tastes from the Far East. One pepper ship returned a profit of 220%, and cloves, nutmeg and mace brought even more money than pepper.

S: Did the Asians trade among themselves?

T: Oh yes. In the early years of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, between 1405 and 1433, the Chinese sent huge ships – some of them 400 feet long – from Taiwan to Africa. Some historians think these ships also visited North and South America almost 80 years before Columbus. One of the main stopping points for all the Asian ships was the trading hub of Malacca on the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. This is where the Indian Ocean meets the China Sea. Malacca was ruled by Moslems who welcomed traders from all nations no matter their race or religion.

S: Why did the Chinese stop sailing after 1433?

T: They decided they were the world's most advanced civilization and they needed little or nothing from inferior countries. Also, the new emperor said that young men should not leave China as long as their parents were alive. That was a nice idea, but it, more or less, put an end to the Chinese navy.

S: Which European countries got involved in the Asian spice trade?

T: Starting in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Asian spices were shipped to Constantinople and then to Venice, Italy where they would be sold throughout the Mediterranean and small amounts were sent on to northern Europe. Then, in 1498, a Portuguese sailor named Vasco da Gama rounded the southern tip of Africa – called the Cape of Good Hope – and sailed to India. Other Portuguese ships followed, and those sailors liked what they saw. In fact they liked Malacca so much that they took it over in 1511. When the boatloads of spices got back to Lisbon, those not sold in Portugal or Spain would be put on Dutch ships and exported to other European Countries?

S: Why would the Portuguese put their spices on Dutch ships?

T: The Dutch knew water. In fact much of their country was under water until they built a series of canals and dikes and “reclaimed” the land. No surprise then that the Dutch were great boat builders. With the largest merchant fleet in Europe, they could transport the spices to ports all around the Baltic Sea.

S: How did this relationship between the Portuguese and the Dutch work out?

T: It worked out great for the Dutch. They slipped some spies onto Portuguese ships. These spies secretly studied the maps and got to know the Portuguese sailing routes. Thanks to this maritime espionage the Dutch, by 1595, were ready to send out their first expedition to Asia. Four ships left Holland, and two years later, three of them returned each laden with pepper.

S: Two years? For one trip?

T: It would take two years if conditions were favorable. If there was bad weather, you could add another year or two. Imagine going off to work one morning and not coming home for four years.

S: How were conditions on board ship?

T: Cramped, smelly and filthy. These boats were not nearly as roomy as the Chinese Treasure Ships. Most were no longer than 120 feet. They were 35 feet wide, and on board were canons, gunpowder, barrels of food and water and beer and wine, 100 sailors, an equal number of rats and mice and usually a few Dutch merchants who would get the only private room. The sailors slept on a thin layer of hay, and near the back of the ship there were a few toilet seats with no privacy but a great view of the ocean. On later voyages there would be a surgeon and a chaplain.

S: What would the surgeons do?

T: Blood-letting, teeth pulling and limb amputation which was done with a saw. After surgery, the chaplain would pray for you. If you didn't pull through, the chaplain would preside over your burial at sea.

S: What did the sailors eat?

T: Pickled beef, biscuits, beans, biscuits, dried peas, biscuits, oatmeal and moldy biscuits. Each sailor was given a daily ration of two pints of beer and two pints of wine. Anyone with scurvy would be given lemon juice.

S: Didn't they catch and eat fresh fish?

T: Most sailors don't like to swim or eat fish. I guess it reminds them too much of work.

S: Did most of them survive the voyage?

T: The voyage was usually not the problem. The problem was the diseases they caught in Asia. Dysentery, cholera, malaria and typhoid were usually death sentences. Of all the men who sailed from the Netherlands, two thirds never returned.

But there were always people to take their places. In 1598, the Dutch sent 22 ships to India. In 1601, they attacked and destroyed a Portuguese fleet in the Bay of Bantam. Portuguese merchants abandoned Bantam and the Dutch took over the pepper market there. In 1602, the Dutch formed the United East India Company which, over the next 193 years, would send hundreds of ships and a million men to the East Indies.

S: How did the Company find so many sailors?

T: It had recruiting agents all over Holland, which, in those days, was the northern, half of the Netherlands. These agents would roam the cities searching for people who looked like they could use a meal and a place to sleep. Many of these tired and hungry folks were immigrants who had no relatives or friends in Holland and no money in their pockets. After buying a lonely fellow a fish dinner and a mug of beer and before paying for his lodging, the recruiter would take him to the office of the East India Company where he'd be asked to sign a seven-year contract.

S: Seven years? That's way too long. I wouldn't have signed.

T: You're not desperate. These men were. If there were no immediate jobs, the recruiter would pay the fellow's food and hotel bill until the Company needed a sailor. In return for finding and babysitting the sailor, a recruiter would take the man's paychecks for the first five years of the contract.

S: You're kidding!

T: No, that was the deal.

S: So the sailor would only be paid for the last two years...

T: If he survived.

S: That's outrageous!

T: The world of business was, and still is, a world of winners and losers. Many of the sailors ended up as losers. The winners were the businessmen who ran the East India Company. Every ship that made it back to Amsterdam meant more money in their pockets.

S: So, were the Dutch now in control of the spice trade?

T: Not exactly. When big money is involved, there's always someone else who wants a piece of the action. In this case it was the English who formed their own East India Company on the last day of 1600. The first English ships arrived in Asia in December, 1602.

S: What did the English and the Dutch have to offer the Asians?

T: Very little. The biggest English export was wool. Not a lot of demand for wool near the equator. The Dutch exported herring.

S: What's herring?

T: A fish. Not something you'd want to travel with to Asia. So the English and Dutch brought silver which they'd either bought or stolen from the Spanish who'd taken it from the Aztecs in Mexico and the Incas in Peru. So you can see the beginnings of a global economy. Silver from the New World was paying for pepper to be shipped from Indonesia to London and Amsterdam and then on to Liverpool, Manchester, Copenhagen, Stockholm and Warsaw.

S: How did the Dutch and English get along?

T: They were about to fight each other when a truce was signed in 1620.

S: How long did that last?

T: Long enough for the Dutch and English to team and beat up on the Portuguese.

S: It sounds like there's not much difference between trading and war.

T: In fact the language of war and the language of trade are similar. You capture markets. You protect your territory and your trade routes. You destroy your

competition. For the Dutch and later the British, success in the spice trade required a powerful navy that was prepared to do battle for pepper and nutmeg. You could say that trading is just war by another name.

S: So when did the Dutch and English finally have it out?

T: They fought three wars starting in the 1650's plus one in the 1780's.

S: Was anything resolved?

T: Not much, although after the second war, in 1667, the British traded its sugar producing island of Surinam for a Dutch colony in the New World. The British called this colony, "New York."

S: So who finally came out on top?

A: The Dutch had the upper hand through most of the 1600s. They had more men, more ships, and they were more aggressive in taking over the spice producing areas of Indonesia.

But as lucrative as the spice trade was, it was just one of the many businesses in which Dutch merchants were involved. To cities all over Europe and to Russia, they were also shipping grain, cloth, sugar, chocolate, tobacco, Spanish wool, Turkish mohair, dyes from Spanish America, sail canvas, Gouda pipes, whale oil, paper (made from rags), and a blue and white pottery called Delftware which is still being made. Today a Delftware coffee mug costs \$120.

This was a good time to be Dutch. In fact the first 70 years of the 17<sup>th</sup> century is known as the Dutch Golden Age. This was a time when the Netherlands was not only prosperous, but great strides were being made in science and medicine and technology and philosophy and when Dutch painters were producing masterpieces that can still be seen in museums all over the world.

S: What were some of the inventions of this period?

T: Streetlamps, fire-fighting pumps, telescopes, microscopes, the thermometer. At the University of Leiden, professors gave the first practical demonstrations in medicine and discovered the structure of human brains, lungs and spinal marrow.

In 1655, a Dutchman named Huygens looked through his huge, 12-foot telescope and discovered the rings around Saturn. A year later he invented the pendulum clock. If you go to the clock museum in Leiden, you can see a clock built in 1670.

In 1676, Anthonie Van Leeuwenhoek discovered bacteria and then there was Levinus Vincent who engaged in a past time that is dear to all Dutchmen and woman. Namely, to collect and classify everything around you. Vincent's cabinet of rarities

included insects, shells, birds, herbs and flower pictures. His little museum was so famous it was visited by European princes including Peter the Great of Russia.

There were also men who came up with new philosophical ideas and got into trouble for it.

S: What is philosophy?

T: It's rules to live your life by.

S: Why were they getting in trouble?

T: The Church didn't like that they were saying and writing.

S: What were they saying?

T: Well, one man named Descartes said we shouldn't take the Bible literally. He didn't think, for instance, that God really parted the Red Sea or turned the staff of Moses into a serpent. He thought we should treat these stories as lessons or myths.

Another philosopher named Spinoza said there was no such thing as Satan or witches. He said that was all superstitious claptrap. Luckily for Descartes and Spinoza, the Dutch, at this time didn't have a religious king who could imprison or behead them. In fact the Dutch didn't have a king at all. They had a form of government called a republic, and power was divided among a group of men called regents and stadtholders. They were like senators. Many of these men tended to tolerate new ideas and new ways of looking at the world. That's why the Dutch felt free to invent and question and hypothesize. When there is a free flow of ideas, then there is progress, and when there is progress peoples' lives become a little easier. But of course not all people were tolerant. Religious leaders called for dangerous books to be banned or burned.

S: Can books really be dangerous?

A: Only when people are terrified by new ideas. Spinoza said it was the prejudices of the religious teachers that were the greatest obstacle to people thinking about philosophy.

S: Why were there so many good, Dutch painters at this time?

A: One reason is you had so many rich merchants who wanted to fill their homes and their offices and their government buildings with beautiful works of art. So a good painter could end up with a fat wallet and more time to paint. Some of the artists painted portraits, others painted naval battles and townscapes. The most famous townscape is of a little Dutch town called Delft. The artist was Jan Vermeer and his painting seems to shimmer.

S: How did he do that?

T: If you look closely, you can see that he rubbed sand into the paint. That causes the light to dance when it hits the canvas. That was a 17<sup>th</sup> century, special effect.

Another well known painter was Rembrandt. His most famous painting is of a group of partying policemen. It's called The Night Watch. But my favorite is the Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp. That was Rembrandt's first commission. In the painting a bunch of wide-eyed, medical students are staring at the bloody arm of a man. The arm has been cut open and veins and tendons are hanging out, and Dr. Tulp is squeezing some of these ganglia with a pair of tongs.

S: Is the patient screaming?

T: No, he's dead. He probably died in prison. Dead prisoners were the ones on whom the student doctors would practice. I hope Dr. Tulp's skill as a surgeon was better than his advice to patients. He told them to drink 50 cups of tea a day.

S: So it sounds like painters were the rock stars of the Dutch Republic.

T: They were until 1672 when the French invaded the Netherlands.

S: It seems like the Dutch were always fighting someone.

T: That's the trouble with being rich. People want what you have. This war was not good for art, business, trading, building or banking. We know exactly how bad it was for Vermeer's widow, because she testified that, "her husband during the war with the King of France and the next years, had been able to earn very little, or almost nothing, so that the works of art which he had previously bought had to be sold off, at very great loss, to feed their children." Vermeer's own paintings were auctioned off at reduced prices. Of course you know who this war was good for.

S: The gun-makers.

T: Yes. And...?

S: The English.

T: Correct. And in 1689, England got a new King. Now, do you want to hear something ironic?

S: What's ironic?

T: It's one of those jokes that makes you shake your head rather than laugh.

S: Okay, let's hear something ironic.

T: The new English king was William III, and he came from the Netherlands.

S: You're joking.

T: Is that ironic or what?

S: How did that happen?

T: William knew the right people.

S: Who were the right people?

T: His wife, Mary, was the daughter of the previous, English King, James II. The English were not big fans of James II ever since he tried to grab too much power. So they got rid of him and brought his daughter and her husband over from the Netherlands. And it was under the joint rule of Mary and William III that the English vaulted ahead of the Dutch in the area of world trade.

If the Dutch owned the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the English owned the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And they went the Dutch one better, because England became the home of the industrial revolution. And with the help of their big factories and their iron and steel and their mighty navy, the British would build the greatest empire since Rome.

S: How did they do it?

T: Well, once upon a time, England was a country of farmers. And since England was blessed with good soil and plenty of rainfall, they were able to grow fruits and veggies and lots of grain which is used to make bread and cereal and beer. These farmers were so good at farming and Mother Nature was so good to England that soon there was a food surplus. What does that mean?

S: It means you have more than you need.

T: Correct. And when you have a surplus, what happens to the price of the grain?

S: It goes down.

T: Correct. High supply, low demand means low prices. Well, the landowners didn't like to see a drop in prices, because that meant lower profits. So they looked for ways to make more money. And they hit on sheep-raising. Why?

S: For the wool.

T: Correct. Wool is warm. English winters are cold. So lots of farms were converted into pastures for sheep grazing. This meant there were fewer jobs for farmers, but more jobs in the wool business. So people who once raised their own food now went to work shearing and carding and spinning wool into thread. So now the question is, how did these former farmers get food for themselves and their families?

S: They had to buy it.

T: Correct. They had to buy it, because they were no longer self-sufficient. It seems like a small change, but it's the beginning of a huge transformation. Because once people leave the farms and start to trade their time and their talent for money, then you have a new kind of work force...one that depends not on sunshine and rain, but on paychecks from a boss.

In the beginning, the people making the woolen sweaters and blankets all worked at home. But from the boss's point of view, this wasn't the best situation, because he couldn't keep an eye on his workers. So the boss found investors, and the investors put up money to build big buildings. And then the workers had to leave their homes and do their work in these giant factories. They had to show up at a certain time, and learn how to operate new and complex machines, and they couldn't leave until they'd put in a 10 or 11 hour workday. And it wasn't just men who were doing this work. Women and children became part of this new, industrial work force.

S: Why didn't the Dutch make the same kind of change?

T: They were too busy fighting wars with the French and the Spanish, and also they lacked a vital ingredient for an industrial revolution. Namely, coal. The Dutch drew their power from windmills and they warmed themselves by burning peat, which is a mixture of dirt, grass and really old twigs and leaves. Burning peat will dry your wet socks but, unlike coal, it doesn't get hot enough to heat a factory or power a big steam engine or fire the ovens in which iron and steel are forged. In England, this iron and steel would be used to strengthen the walls of the factories and build the new power looms and manufacture the train tracks and locomotives of the world's first railroad system.

Out of these factories came more textiles and knives and bricks and soap and beer and refined sugar than ever before, and on the new railroads these products were carried to customers throughout England and Scotland. On merchant ships, these goods were sent off to colonies and countries throughout the world. And wherever the merchant ships went, the navy was there to protect them and if a ship was lost at sea, there was an insurance company (called Lloyd's of London) to pay back the investors. Combine all those assets and you have the first, modern, industrial economy.

S: Where does the shopping come in?

T: Right now. In the beginning of this social transformation, the workers in the factories bought only the food and clothing and the kitchen goods they needed. But then, as they walked to and from work, they saw all the new and often exotic products in the shop windows, and they saw other people buying knives from Sheffield and tea from Bombay and wine from Bordeaux. In time, working people began to buy not only the necessities but also things they didn't really need. For the first time in history, great numbers of people become aware of changing fashions and new styles and having as much stuff as the neighbors have. Take shoe buckles, for example. For thousands of years, people lived without shoe buckles. Today, people live long, happy lives without shoe buckles. Yet, in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, there was suddenly a demand for shoe buckles. Shopkeepers couldn't keep them on the shelves. And once you create a demand for something as unnecessary as shoe buckles, then you've created a shopping culture.

Remember this though. Even though luxuries are all around you, no one is making you buy anything. Shopping is still a choice. It is possible to resist the lure of the mall. So next time I give you the option of skipping school, why not try it. Go sit by a stream, watch the water flow over the rocks, and while you're sitting there, think of life the way it used to be, before the English, with an assist from the Dutch, gave us a world in which people suddenly start craving shoe buckles.

THE END