SPHERE Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

Peak Human: The Dutch Republic

BY SEAN KINNARD

Lesson Overview

In *Peak Human*, Johan Norberg says, "At the end of the Eighty Years' War between Spain and the United Provinces of the Netherlands, [the Dutch Republic] had become a strong, independent country and a military superpower. The band of rebels had become the world's richest people, and in just two generations they built a world empire."

In this lesson, students will learn how capitalism and openness to new ideas have produced a society that remains one of the world's happiest, most well-educated, and most tolerant countries.

JOHANNES VERMEER'S MASTERPIECE, *GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING*, CELEBRATES AN ANONYMOUS GIRL WITH INDIVIDUALITY AND EMPATHY, HALLMARKS OF THE HUMANISTIC ATTITUDE OF THE DUTCH REPUBLIC DURING ITS GOLDEN AGE. THE LARGE PEARL ALSO NODS TO THE DUTCH REPUBLIC'S GLOBAL COMMERCIAL REACH, ESPECIALLY ITS CONTACT WITH ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST THROUGH THE DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY, COMMONLY ABBREVIATED AS VOC AFTER ITS DUTCH NAME, *VEREENIGDE OOST-INDISCHE COMPAGNIE*.
SOURCE: HTTPS://COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG/WIKI/FILE:GIRL_WITH_A_PEARL_EARRING.JPG

Warm-Up

What's it like to grow up in Amsterdam?

Aren't you curious to learn how people in other countries live? Watch this video to learn about Cosmo, a 19-year-old Amsterdam native. Answer the following questions as you watch.

- Why do Cosmo and most other young people still live with their parents in Amsterdam?
- How does the natural environment of the Netherlands affect what Dutch children learn from an early age?
- What is Cosmo's family connection to the former Dutch Empire? How are those imperial links still evident in his everyday life?
- A group of Dutch teenagers publishes their own newspaper. What does that fact say about the education system and regard for fundamental human rights in the Netherlands?
- Identify one way the Dutch government supports students' quality of life.
- How are the traditional Dutch values of tolerance and respect for individual choices manifested in Cosmo's life?

Questions for Reading, Writing, and Discussion

Read two excerpts from the book *Peak Human*, pages 304–9, "The Economy Saves the Revolution," and pages 329–31, "The Rise and Fall of Dutch Art," then answer the questions below.

Questions for Pages 304–9

- After the influx of new immigrants to northern Holland, what was the surprising effect on living standards there?
- Describe the impacts of the new type of ship called the fluyt.
- Which Dutch technological innovation made shipbuilding much more efficient?
- Why did the Dutch Republic grant a monopoly on trade with Asia to the Dutch East India Company?
- Explain how the Dutch did not apply their progressive values overseas regarding (1) the Atlantic slave trade and (2) the Banda massacre.

Questions for pages 329–31

- How did the needs and tastes of the bourgeois middle class shape the production of art in the Dutch Republic?
- Which two factors prompted the experimentation of Dutch painting during the period?
- What were the impacts of the large size of the art market on painters?

- Identify three characteristics of the paintings of these two masters:
  - Vermeer—
  - Rembrandt—

Extension Activities / Homework

MAKE A STOCK PURCHASE RECOMMENDATION

The Dutch East India Company was the first global corporation. Its trading posts and fleets connected three continents—Europe, Africa, and Asia—and its board of directors oversaw vast operations in spices, textiles, porcelain, tea, and the slave trade. The conglomerate had many of the elements of a modern corporation: shareholders, dividends, advanced accounting methods, and a legal identity separate from its founders.

Norberg describes how the company was formed to deal with the intense competition of the global spice trade:

> The result was the formation of the East India Company of 1602, a joint-stock corporation with shares tradable on the Amsterdam stock market. The revolution of this, the world's first official stock market, was that anyone could now raise money on a market rather than having to rely on a few powerful, wealthy people. This broad capital base made the Dutch East India Company more successful than the English version that had been founded two years earlier, which had to raise separate funds for every journey.

Investing in the VOC made some Dutch shareholders extremely wealthy. It was the first company to issue publicly traded shares on a stock exchange: Any individual in the Dutch Republic, including women and religious minorities, such as Jews, could buy its stock and share in the company's profits.

Instructions

- Think of a corporation that you are familiar with. For example, you may buy Nike shoes, order books from Amazon, or complete this assignment on an Apple laptop. Nike, Amazon, and Apple are gigantic companies with many of the same features of the VOC.
- Choose a public corporation you would like to learn more about. Public corporations sell shares to the public on stock exchanges like the New York Stock Exchange. In the United States, anyone over 18 can buy them. Companies such as IKEA, Trader Joe's, or the firm that owns TikTok are privately held and cannot be purchased by individual investors (yet).
- Research one public corporation of your choice. Go to CNN Money to read profiles of the world's 500 biggest corporations. Use the information to complete the chart.

Corporation name	
Headquarters	
Business sector(s)	
Competitive advantages (large size, strong brand, unique tech, etc.)	
Number of employees	
Area(s) of operation	
Current challenges	
Chief executive officer	
Revenues/sales[1]	
Profits[2]	
Share price[3]	

[1] Revenue/sales: The total amount of money a company brings in from selling goods or services. Example: If Walmart sells $500 billion worth of groceries, electronics, and other products, that's $500 billion in revenue.

[2] Profits: What's left over after expenses are subtracted from revenues. Example: Walmart buys goods to sell and pays salaries, rent, taxes, and many other costs. In other words, profits = revenue – expenses.

[3] Click the company name next to "Get Quote" to see the current share price.

- Write a corporate profile and your stock purchase recommendation in 2 paragraphs. Write 1 paragraph describing the company. Use the chart in no. 3 above to identify its primary business(es), its geographic scope, its competitive advantages, and any current challenges affecting its operations (scandals, competition from rivals, changes in technology, etc.). Write a second, persuasive paragraph recommending why an individual investor should or should not buy the company's stock at this time. Provide specific evidence for your recommendation based on your knowledge of the corporation and an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses. Use the table below for ideas of what to include.

Corporation feature	Why is it important?	Example of corporations with this feature
High profits	Demonstrates efficiency	Apple
Large size	Lowers costs	Amazon
Strong brand	Protects future profits	Coca-Cola
Increasing sales	Signal popularity/success	Chipotle
Network effects[4]	Keeps other companies out	Facebook
Growth potential	Stock price goes up	Google
Low debt	Reduces risk	Microsoft
Strong management	Inspires confidence	Berkshire Hathaway
Unique technology	Faster innovation	Tesla

[4] Network effects: Each new user adds value to the entire network. Example: When more people join Instagram, there's more content, more interactions, and more reasons to use it.

INTERPRET A VERMEER PAINTING

Norberg writes, "By the early sixteenth century, the Netherlands had already become a highly urbanized market economy, with markets for labour, goods and capital, and where goods and services were produced for internal and international markets. High productivity and technological progress made rapid economic growth possible."

During its golden age of the 1600s, the Dutch Republic was the wealthiest and most innovative society in Europe. Due to its prosperity and openness to new ideas, this small country produced some of history's most fantastic works of art.

Johannes Vermeer, though he never achieved success during his lifetime, is widely admired today for his incredibly realistic paintings that convey extraordinary emotional depth and subtlety. Vermeer's subject matter also often showcases the global reach of the capitalist economy and the middle-class values of the Dutch Republic during its golden age.

Your task is to interpret a Vermeer masterpiece to describe how it represents key elements of Dutch life from the period, create a slideshow, and explain your findings to the class.

Instructions

- Go to The Complete Works of Vermeer. Review all the paintings and choose one that depicts elements of 17th-century Dutch life: its society, politics, culture, economy, and technology. Some of those elements include:

  Society

  - Large middle class: There were many merchants, artisans, and professionals with disposable income.
  - Urbanization: The Dutch Republic had the highest proportion of its population in cities in all of Europe.
  - Literacy: The Dutch Republic had the highest literacy rate in the world at the time.
  - Religious tolerance: Jews, Catholics, and other Protestants could practice their religions.
  - Immigrant-friendly: The Dutch Republic was welcoming to refugees, including dissidents and free thinkers from abroad.
  - Women's rights: Women had legal rights to own property and run businesses.

  Politics

  - Republican government: The Dutch did not have a monarchy.
  - Decentralized: Political power was divided among provinces, cities, and guilds.

  Culture

  - Painting: The Dutch Republic was home to world-renowned masters, such as Rembrandt and Vermeer.
  - Scientific and technological: Significant discoveries were made by Dutch scientists, such as Christian Huygens and Antoni van Leeuwenhoek.
  - Publishing: Amsterdam was a major printing center and published many books, including those that were banned.
  - Individualistic: Similar to Renaissance Italy, human potential and individual achievement were celebrated.

  Economy

  - Global trade dominance: The VOC was the wealthiest, most powerful private company in the world.
  - Stock markets: Amsterdam had the first stock market.
  - Finance: The Dutch Republic was home to banking and insurance innovations, such as joint-stock companies.

Technology

- Shipbuilding: The Dutch were the most efficient shipbuilders, focusing on trading vessels like the *fluyt*.
- Optical tools: The Dutch invented microscopes and telescopes.
- Windmills: The Dutch used wind energy for many tasks, including pumping water and powering sawmills.

- Analyze your chosen Vermeer painting. Describe at least 1 specific element of Dutch life in the painting. Use the chart to organize your analysis.

Name of Vermeer painting: ____________________________________

Element of Dutch life depicted in the painting	
Society	
Politics	
Culture	
Economy	
Technology	

Example Analysis

Name of Vermeer painting: *Girl with a Pearl Earring*

Element of Dutch life depicted in the painting	
Society	Middle-class prosperity: Even a typical girl could wear delicate foreign fabrics and expensive jewelry from Asia.
Politics	Republican: This is a dignified portrait of an ordinary girl, not a queen or noblewoman. The Dutch were republicans without a monarch.
Culture	Clothing: The exotic fashion hints at interest in and contact with Asia.
Economy	Wealth: The pearl earring shows the influence of global commerce and high living standards.
Technology	Scientific observation: The painting does not show machines, but its ultrarealism reflects the value placed on precise observation.

- Create a slideshow in which you address this question: How does this painting depict elements of 17th-century Dutch life, including its society, politics, culture, economy, and technology?
  Make a slide for each theme—society, politics, culture, economy, and technology—and point out specific details from the painting. Present your slideshow to the class.