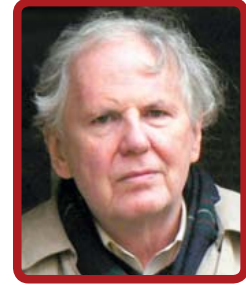


**Background** A writer on history, culture, and design, **Thomas Hine** coined the word *populuxe* as the title of his first book. The word has become commonly used to describe the enthusiasms of post-World War II America. Hine was born in a small New England town near Boston. He lived in a house that was built in 1770, a very different setting from the modern world he writes about now.



# Always Wanting More

## from I WANT THAT!

Informational Text by Thomas Hine

**SETTING A PURPOSE** What keeps people in our consumer society always wanting more? And when is having more enough? As you read, consider how Thomas Hine answers these questions.

Throughout most of history, few people had more than a couple of possessions, and as a consequence, people were very aware of each object. Life was austere. The ability to be bored by a material surfeit<sup>1</sup> was a rare privilege. There are many stories of kings and emperors who sought a simpler life, if only briefly. Now, that emotion has become widespread, and those who wish to simplify are identified as a distinct market segment. Whole lines of “authentic” products have been created to serve this market, and magazines are published to tell people what they need to buy to achieve a simpler life. In our age of careless abundance, austerity is a luxury, available

<sup>1</sup> **surfeit** (sûr´fit): an excessive amount.

only to multimillionaires, the occasional monk, and the really smart shopper.

“The standard of life is determined not so much by what a man has to enjoy, as by the rapidity with which he tires of any one pleasure,” wrote Simon Patten, the pioneering economist-philosopher of consumption, in 1889. “To have a high standard of life means to enjoy a pleasure intensely and tire of it quickly.” Patten’s definition of the standard of life was based  
20 on **superfluity**: He expected that people would always have more than they need and would never have all they might want. That was a novel idea in Patten’s time, and it is one that still makes many people uneasy. In material terms, it seems terribly wasteful, a misuse of the resources of a finite world. And in psychological terms, it seems to trap us in a cycle of false hope and inevitable disappointment. We work in order to consume, and we consume in order to somehow compensate for the emptiness of our lives, including our work. Indeed, there is some evidence that people who feel least fulfilled  
30 by their work are the most avid shoppers, while those who love their work find shopping a burden, though they don’t necessarily buy less.

Our materialism is oddly abstract, a path toward an ideal. The things we acquire are less important than the act of acquiring, the freedom to choose, and the ability to forget what we have and to keep on choosing. We don’t aspire, as people in China did during the 1970s, to “Four Musts”: a bicycle, a radio, a watch, and a sewing machine. We aspire instead to such **intangibles** as comfort and modernity,  
40 qualities for which standards change so rapidly that the buying can never stop. “Progress is our most important product,” Ronald Reagan used to say during his tenure as spokesman for General Electric. And in 1989, after the Berlin Wall fell, multitudes throughout Eastern Europe disappointed intellectuals in the West by behaving as if freedom was the same thing as going shopping. Even China moved on in the 1980s to the “Eight Bigs”: a color television, an electric fan, a refrigerator, an audio system, camera, a motorcycle, a furniture suite, and a washing machine. Now China is moving  
50 beyond the specific “Biggs” and aspires to more, a quest that will never end. A large super-store chain is opening stores there.

**superfluity**

(sōō’pər-flōō’ī-tē) *n.*  
*Superfluity* is overabundance or excess.

**intangible**

(ĭn-tān’jə-bəl) *n.*  
An *intangible* is something that is hard to describe because it cannot be perceived by the senses.



It is amazing to think that from the dawn of time until the time of Adam Smith,<sup>2</sup> a bit more than two centuries ago, people believed that wanting and having things was a drain on wealth, rather than one of its sources. That doesn't mean, however, that they didn't want things or that they didn't, at times, go to great lengths to attain them.

Now, as I move, mildly entranced, behind my cart at a  
60 super store, grabbing items I feel for a moment that I need, I am assumed to be increasing the prosperity not merely of my own country, but of the entire world. Indeed, in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks, Americans were **exhorted** not to sacrifice, as is usual in wartime, but to consume.

There are those who disagree. Can the massive deficit that the United States runs with other countries, which is driven by our hunger for ever more low-priced goods, be sustained indefinitely? Does our appetite for inexpensive goods from overseas exploit the low-wage workers who make them, or  
70 does it give them new opportunities? And more profoundly, are there enough resources in the world to provide everyone with this kind of living standard and still have enough clean air and clean water? How many super-store shoppers can one planet sustain?

**exhort**  
(ĭg-zôrt´) v. If you *exhort*, you make an urgent appeal to others.

<sup>2</sup> **Adam Smith:** a Scottish economist who lived in the 18th century.

These are serious questions that need to be addressed, but those who raise such issues have rarely considered the power of objects and the fundamental role that acquiring and using objects has played since prehistoric times. In this story, the big box stores, boutiques, malls, Main Streets, Web sites, and  
80 other retailers that constitute the buyosphere<sup>3</sup> represent the fulfillment of an ancient dream. The local super store is a wonder of the world. Never before have so many goods come together from so many places at such low cost. And never before have so many people been able to buy so many things.

Nevertheless, we yawn at a super store rather than marvel at it. That such a store could provoke **apathy** instead of amazement is a perverse tribute to the plenitude of our consumer society and the weakness of the emotional ties that bind us to the many objects in our lives. Never before has so  
90 much seemed so dull.

And even if a super store is not the noblest expression of personal liberty or the highest achievement of democracy, we should consider that it does provide a setting for exercising a kind of freedom that has threatened tyrants and autocrats for thousands of years. We go to a super store to acquire things that prove our own power. It is a place where people really do get to choose.

**apathy**

(ăp'ə-thē) *n.* *Apathy* is indifference or the lack of interest or concern.

**COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION** The author presents ideas about wanting and having things in the past, the present, and the future. What does he say about how wanting and having things change over time? Talk about your ideas with other group members.

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<sup>3</sup> **buyosphere:** a term the author uses to describe all the places that modern consumers buy things.

## Determine Meaning

ELA RI.7.4  
ELD PI.7.8

Often, a written work is a reflection of an author's **style**, a manner of writing that involves how something is said rather than what is said. An author can share ideas or express viewpoints by using stylistic elements like these:

- **Word choice** is an author's use of words. Well-chosen words help an author to express ideas precisely and artistically. Word choice is part of **diction**, which involves the use of vocabulary and word order. An author's word choice can be formal or informal, serious or humorous.
- **Tone** is the author's attitude toward a subject. Like word choice, a tone can convey different feelings. The tone of a work can often be described in one word, such as *playful*, *serious*, or *determined*.
- **Voice** is an author's unique style of expression. The use of voice can reveal an author's personality, beliefs, or attitudes.

Consider the word choices in this sentence from "Always Wanting More," which describes the author's feelings about being part of a consumer culture:

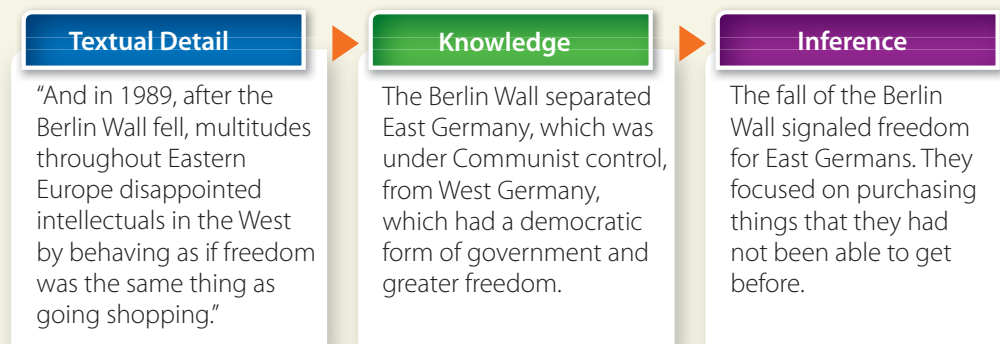
**Now, as I move, mildly entranced, behind my cart at a super store, grabbing items I feel for a moment that I need, I am assumed to be increasing the prosperity not merely of my own country, but of the entire world.**

The tone in this sentence could be described as self-mocking, meaning the author is making fun of himself. What word choices are examples of this?

## Make Inferences

ELA RI.7.1  
ELD PI.7.6

To grasp an implied or unstated idea in a text, readers can make an **inference**—a logical guess based on facts and a person's own knowledge. The chart shows an inference made from a section of the text you've just read.



What inference can you make about the reason "intellectuals in the West" were disappointed?



## Analyzing the Text

### Cite Text Evidence

Support your responses with evidence from the text.

- 1. Interpret** A contrast between what is expected and what actually happens is called **irony**. Authors who use irony are often adding a humorous touch in expressing their ideas. In the first paragraph, what words and phrases does the author use to show an ironic tone?
- 2. Analyze** An author may express more than one kind of tone in a piece of writing. Reread lines 26–32. What word would you use to describe the author’s tone here? What words or phrases contribute to this tone?
- 3. Summarize** Reread lines 65–78. How would you summarize the “serious questions” that the author refers to?
- 4. Infer** Reread lines 85–90. What point is the author making when he says that we “yawn at a superstore”?
- 5. Compare** Reread to compare the ideas in lines 1–13 with the ideas expressed in lines 91–97. What does an ordinary person in modern times now have in common with the kings and emperors of the past?
- 6. Analyze** Based on this informational text, what are your impressions of the writing style of Thomas Hine? Explain how the author’s word choice, tone, and voice support his style and express his ideas about consumerism.

## PERFORMANCE TASK



### Speaking Activity: Discussion

In small groups, prepare for a class discussion about the claims, or positions, that Thomas Hine shares about our consumer culture.

- First, identify a list of the claims.
- Consider the following questions: How well does the author support his claims? Are there any I would challenge? How does my own experience as a consumer connect to these claims?
- With your other group members, discuss responses to the questions.
- Participants who disagree with Hine’s ideas can present their own views. Be sure to support points with evidence.
- For the class discussion, each small group might choose a reporter to present your responses to the questions.