

# Revision Guide

## A CONSUMER'S REPORT

PETER PORTER



Scrbblly.

I HAD  
IT AS A  
GIFT.

# A Consumer's Report

**Peter Porter**

'The name of the product I tested is Life,  
I have completed the form you sent me  
and understand that my answers are confidential.'

*(Full poem unable to be reproduced due to copyright restrictions)*

## VOCABULARY

**The form:** this phrase refers to the survey that, according to the conceit of the poem, the speaker is using to complete a "Consumer's Report."

**Confidential:** "And understand that my answers are **confidential**" is in line 3 of the poem. Refers to something that is not to be disclosed to others; private.

**Deposit:** "But left an embarrassing deposit behind (line 8 of the poem). Refers to a substance spread out or left behind as a residue; in this context, it refers to faeces or other bodily fluids.

**Economical:** efficient or inexpensive; producing little waste.

**Put in the way of:** "given to" or "put near" in this context.

**Maker:** a manufacturer (but with a secondary meaning implied: the "Maker," as in God)

**Incidentally:** similar to the expression "by the way," which is used to start an aside or parenthetical sentence.

**The respondent:** someone who replies to something, in this case, one who replies to a consumer survey by filing a "Report" after testing a product.

**Waterproof:** the ability to resist being affected by water when exposed to it.

**Market researchers:** Researchers are employees work for companies to gather data, market researchers specifically work for companies and corporations, providing insight into their client bases (for instance, through conducting surveys).

**Lawmaker:** Legislators, people who make laws. Here, the phrase is a **metaphor** for the individuals who create the rules that the rest of society abides by.

## STORY + SUMMARY

The name of the product I tested is Life, and I have completed the form you sent me and understand that my answers are confidential.

I was given it as a gift, I didn't feel much while using it, and I think I'd have liked to be more excited by it. It seemed gentle on the hands but left an embarrassing deposit behind. It was not cheap, and I have used much more than I thought (I suppose I have about half left, but it's difficult to tell) - although the instructions are reasonably large, there are so many of them I don't know which to follow, especially as they seem to contradict each other. I'm not sure such a thing should be put in the way of children - It's difficult to think of a purpose for it. One of my friends says it's to keep its maker in a job. Also, the price is much too high. Things are piling up so fast; after all, the world got by for a thousand million years without this, and do we need it now? (By the way, please ask your man to stop calling me 'the respondent', I don't like the sound of it.) There seems to be a lot of different labels, sizes and colors should be all the same and regular, but the shape of Life is awkward, it's waterproof but not heat resistant, it doesn't keep yet it's challenging to get rid of: whenever they make it cheaper they to put less in - if you say you don't want it, then it's delivered anyway. I'd agree it's a popular product; it's got into the language; people even say they're on the side of it. Personally I think it's overdone, it's only a small thing that people are ready to behave badly about. Let us take it for granted. If its experts are called philosophers or market researchers or historians, we shouldn't care. We are the consumers and the last law-makers. So as a final comment, I'd buy it. But I'd like to leave the question of 'best buys' until I get the other competitive product that you said you'd send to me first.



## SPEAKER + VOICE

The poem's speaker is a consumer who reviews 'Life' as a product, which they have tested out for a number of years. There is no mention of the speaker's background or demographic, although we understand that he has 'about half [of his life] left', meaning he must be middle aged at the time of speaking. He claims that he has completed the survey form that was given to him and is aware that his answers won't be disclosed to anybody else.

The speaker claims that life was given to him randomly, it left him feeling numb and he seems to have genuinely wished that it had been more exciting. Other complaints include the difficulty in defining Life or pinning it down to make sense of it, the expenses that come along with it and the idea that so called 'experts' - phillt isn't easy to consider what life is really about. According to a friend, the "maker" merely created life so that they might be worshipped as God - just as a 'job' for something to do.

The speaker says Life comes with complicated vocabulary; things like the sizes and colors of bodies need to be standardized; the body is heavy; it can live in water but not in high temperatures. Despite being fragile, life is also difficult to terminate intentionally. When life is seen as disposable, it seems less rewarding, and if you attempt to avoid it, you end up with more of it anyhow. The speaker acknowledges that many individuals love life. But to the speaker, life is a frivolity that causes people to behave recklessly. The speaker doesn't think we should see it differently. The people who use life (its ordinary "consumers") have the last say in it, regardless of whether those who analyze it are called "philosophers," "market researchers," or "historians." They would ultimately buy life, as the speaker says. However, they'd want to wait to decide whether it's the best use of their money until they've had an opportunity to sample the alternative.

## LANGUAGE

**Metaphor:** "The name of the product I tested is Life" - . In this case, the poet contemplates "Life" through an extended metaphor whereby he fashions himself as a consumer who has purchased Life as a product to try out. God is, without a doubt, the producer of the product - though the seller is potentially unclear.

**Simile:** "I had it as a gift" In this line, the poet uses a simile to liken life to a gift.

**Irony:** The poem immediately conveys irony. Its premise is ironic by nature in several ways, including the fact that even if "Life" were a product, there would be no way to review it with objectivity because the evaluation would be a component of life, no basis for comparison because we don't know what death is like, etc. Additionally, it is hard to look back on life before it is ended, for example, if you only have "about half" of your life remaining, as the speaker does in line 11. Life incorporates everything. Hence the "product's" nature might drastically change at any given time.

**Paradox:** "...it's waterproof /but not heat resistant" (Used in lines 32-33). The poet creates a paradox in this phrase by stating that the flesh is "waterproof" but not "heat resistant." This indicates that although it is perishable, it is tough to preserve it.

**Business jargon:** the speaker uses many business-related terms to make the situation sound like a professional correspondence between consumer and producer. The title further alludes to the notion that this is a professional report being compiled by a man who has bought and used the product - which is, in this case, 'Life'.



## STRUCTURE + FORM

**Free verse:** the poem is a 51-line **free verse** poem. The report's first three lines serve as its prologue, and the speaker's comments on the report are included in the second portion. The free verse structure adds to its conversational style, contributing to its format of a formal dialogue.

**First-person:** The speaker uses **first person pronouns** to demonstrate that the review of 'Life' as a product is conducted by an individual consumer, who gives his personal thoughts and opinions on it - therefore, the poem is in the form of a **dramatic monologue** as it is a single response from one character, to an imagined **addressee**.

**Stanzas:** The poem consists of two stanzas, one short and a long stanza. The poem's central **metaphorical conceit** is established in the opening stanza. The second stanza addresses an unidentified market researcher and offers the "answers" promised in the first.

**Rhyme Scheme:** **The poem has no set rhyme or metre.** This prevents it from feeling too "literary", thereby enhancing the **comedic and satirical elements** of the report - turning it into a **parodic** piece which imitates typical **business jargon**, using a **semantic field of consumerism** to comment critically on the way in which we view Life in modernity.



## CONTEXT

**The poem was written by Peter Porter in 1970.** The Poet Peter Porter was born in Australia; in 1951, he relocated to England. In addition to writing more than 15 books of poetry, he has edited and translated several other collections. Porter's writing demonstrates a thorough understanding of literary and social history, while also commenting on modern culture through its use of modern vocabulary.

There is no clear context in the poem. This survey "form" might be submitted by the "Consumer" from almost anywhere on the planet. After all, "Life" occurs almost everywhere on Earth, the "product" they are assessing! Yet, we could say that the temporal context for the poem is certainly modern or postmodern, as it is reflecting on a consumerist society which uses capitalistic principles to assess the popularity of its products.

**Consumerism** - throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, a rise in population and a focus on profits in business has led to **mass production**, where products are made and sold on a large scale for maximum financial reward. Market research is part of this phenomenon, where companies conduct surveys to determine customer satisfaction and thereby amend their products according to feedback. Porter criticises the reductive nature of this feedback loop between consumer and producer, exposing the irony that this type of social structure ultimately devalues the importance and beauty of life by turning it into a commodity to be bought, sold and reviewed rather than experienced and enjoyed.



## ATTITUDES

Though its context is vague, the poem does, however, take place in a certain kind of society: one which promotes a consumer culture. It **mocks current capitalistic cultures** that use market research (a customer report or reaction to a survey after a product test) to reduce important, beautiful or complex aspects of life down to the level of statistics and data, in order to maximise financial profit. Even if readers have never personally taken part in this sort of study, the parody partially relies on their general familiarity with it.

In addition to taking place in a consumer culture, the poem's satire also **mocks this society's tendency to breed cynicism and discontentment**. In other words, the business cliché that 'the consumer is always right' and the whims of those with disposable wealth determine how society is governed. It also means that "the consumers [are] the last / lawmakers in a capitalist system." They ultimately decide whether "Life" is worth living, and whether it consists of valuable elements. Particularly the ending, where the speaker seems to feel that the other product they could have potentially had may have been better than the one they were given, demonstrates a constant anxiety which numbs him from the truth and prevents him from expressing gratitude for any good things in his life.

The persona is also **cynical** about people who are part of consumer culture, these individuals display anxieties about needing constantly new or improved products, and are typically concerned with the latest fashions or appearing wealthy - the poet invites us to question our trust in the speaker and his ability to make a good judgement on his own life, given his critical and disappointed tone.

## THEMES

Existence

Economics

Capitalism,  
consumerism  
and materialism

Modernism

Postmodernism

## TASK

Pick two of these themes, make a mind map and add four separate quotations from the story that relate to it. Make short notes of analysis, explaining how and why each one relates to your theme. What, in your opinion, is the author's final message or statement about each theme that you chose?



## EXERCISES

1. Identify and discuss the humorous use of irony in this poem.
2. What events and trends in the mid-1900s might have compelled Porter to write this poem?
3. Identify and exemplify the two distinct moods that are conveyed throughout this poem.

## ESSAY QUESTION

1. What do you think is the speaker's attitude towards life? Support your answers with evidence from the poem.
2. "The modern world is shallow and disappointing." To what extent do you agree, in reference to the viewpoint presented in the poem?
3. In what ways does Porter comment on capitalism in "A Consumer's Report"?

Find more English Literature and Language resources at [www.scrbbly.com](http://www.scrbbly.com)