A Consumer's Report

SUMMARY

The speaker says that the product they tried out (as a consumer being surveyed) is life itself. The speaker asserts that they've filled out the survey form they'd been provided with, and the speaker is aware that their responses won't be shared with anyone else.

The speaker says that they received life for free. It left them somewhat numb; actually, they wish it had been more thrilling. The speaker's body felt soft to the touch, but it generated awkward waste material (i.e., excrement). Life didn't run efficiently, either; the speaker has used up more of it than they realized (they guess their life is roughly half over, though it's hard to know for sure). It comes with prominent rules, but the rules are so numerous and conflicting that the speaker can't tell which ones to obey. The speaker also wonders whether life is safe for kids. It's hard to imagine what life is really for. A friend claims that the "maker" created life only in order to be worshipped as God. Besides, life costs way too much. Really, there's so much stuff going on, and Earth survived without life for eons, so is it necessary at this point? (In an aside, the speaker asks to no longer be addressed as "the respondent," because that term annoys them.) Life (or the body) comes with all sorts of confusing vocabulary, the speaker continues; things like the sizes and shades of bodies ought to be standardized; the body is burdensome; it can survive in water but not extreme heat. Life is perishable but extremely hard to end on purpose. Whenever life is treated as cheap, it seems to become less fulfilling, and if you try to reject life, you get more of it regardless. It's true, the speaker says, that lots of people enjoy life; it's a part of our common vocabulary, with some people even claiming they're on its side. But to the speaker, life is overrated, something trivial that makes people act foolish. The speaker doesn't believe we should treat it as anything special. It doesn't matter whether life's analysts are labeled "philosophers," "market researchers," or "historians"; those who actually *use* life (its average "consumers") have the final say over it. Ultimately, the speaker concludes, they'd purchase life. But they'd like to hold off on saying whether it's the best use of their money till they've gotten a chance to try the alternative (i.e., death) that the company promised.

THEMES

THE DISAPPOINTMENTS AND REWARDS OF LIFE

A parody of a skeptical product review, "A Consumer's Report" evaluates "*Life*" itself. The consumer who "tested" this "product" is largely unimpressed with life, despite their eventual admission that "I'd buy it." Most of the poem consists of complaints about life as an experience, from the report that "I'd have liked to be more excited [by it]" to the observation that "it doesn't keep / yet it's very difficult to get rid of." (In other words, we all die eventually, but it's hard to die *willingly*.) Throughout, the poem conveys existential angst, dread, disappointment, etc. in the language of a dissatisfied consumer, implying that life isn't all it's advertised to be. At the same time, the poem implies that even a disappointing life is better than the "alternative" (that is, death).

Through its jaded "Report," the poem depicts life as inherently flawed, confusing, and disappointing: an experience one might tolerate as a "gift" but wouldn't wholeheartedly recommend. The speaker, or "consumer," gives "*Life*" an unfavorable review almost from start to finish. For example, they claim that they "didn't feel much while using it," that "the price is much too high," and that "the shape is awkward." All these "consumer" complaints translate to deeper philosophical objections about life: that it can leave you depressed and numb, that suffering and death are too steep a "price" to pay for its benefits, and that it's unwieldy and burdensome in general.

The speaker also questions the "purpose" of this "product," worries that it might be unsuitable for "children," and opines that it's ultimately "small" and overrated. Again, these complaints translate to common philosophical objections about life's apparent meaninglessness, injustice, triviality, and so on. Meanwhile, the speaker has little praise for life beyond the remark that it "seemed gentle" at first and that it's "popular" with others. Their own experience with life has clearly left them frustrated and disenchanted.

The speaker does, however, seem to appreciate the power to judge their life, and to engage with it in full (as if testing out a product) rather than staying detached from it. In making their "Report," the "consumer" takes on the role of the critic, pointing out life's flaws in the apparent hope that these can be corrected. (Or, at least, the hope that complaining will provide some form of catharsis.) The speaker proudly declares, "We are the consumers and the last / law makers," elevating their own power above the "expert[ise]" of "philosophers," "historians," and "market researchers" (like the one surveying them). The implication is that life belongs to those who truly *use* it—"test[ing]" its strengths and weaknesses and forming opinions about it in practice—rather than those who evaluate it in the abstract or study how others live *their* lives.

In the end, the "consumer" reluctantly accepts life on its own terms but withholds their highest rating until they've had a

chance to test alternatives. Even when people come to grips with life's disappointments, the poem suggests, they hold out hope for something better. Somewhat surprisingly, the speaker decides that "[they'd] buy" the product in spite of all their reservations. In other words, they accept life regardless of its flaws.

Still, they won't decide whether to award life a "best buy" rating "until [they] get / the competitive product you said you'd send." Whether this other "product" represents some sort of afterlife or plain old death, it's clear the consumer still hopes for greater satisfaction than ordinary life provides. The poem implies that even reasonably satisfied "consumers" of life always wish life were different and better than it is. Yet it's ultimately a bit silly to nitpick life when it's all we've got.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-51

CONSUMERISM AND CYNICISM

By framing life as a "product" to be reviewed, "A Consumer's Report" satirizes the pervasive consumerism of modern times. Today's capitalist society, the poem implies, commodifies everything, to the point where existence itself is just another consumer item to be approved or rejected at whim. Ordinary members of this society tend to become cynical, greedy, and disenchanted, the poem suggests. As "consumer" culture endlessly stokes people's appetite for more and better, it distracts them from appreciating the life they already have.

The poem's premise takes consumer culture to an absurd extreme, reviewing "*Life*" as if it were something customers could take or leave. In principle, life isn't like a product at all: it's not supposed to be for sale, it has no known "maker" (though the poem winks at the existence of God), and it encompasses everything we know (there's no clear alternative).

But the satire playfully treats life as if it *were* a product. It notes that human life can be "cheap[]"—as in disregarded by others and correspondingly diminished ("whenever they make it cheaper they seem / to put less in"). It suggests that life's purpose might be "to keep its maker in a job" (i.e., God might have created humans solely in order to be worshipped). Finally, it toys with the idea of death (a "competitive product") as an alternative to, and improvement on, life. All these ideas reflect a deep philosophical pessimism, if not total cynicism.

Through its speaker's attitudes, the poem illustrates how consumer culture leaves people bored, jaded, and dissatisfied, craving greater stimulation even where none is possible. The consumer's complaint that they "didn't feel much while using" life suggests that consumer society, with its relentless overstimulation, can desensitize people to any kind of pleasure or pain. The consumer is so jaded, in fact, that they view life as completely "overdone"—something people *should* "take for granted."

Again, it's implied that this attitude arises naturally from consumer culture: in a world where you can buy anything and rate everything, even existence eventually feels overrated. The consumer won't even award a "best buy" rating to life—which, in theory, contains all the best things—due to the fantasy that there's still something better out there. They want to test the "competitive product," because who knows what might lie on the other side of the grave?

Through these satirical distortions, the poem shows how consumerism breeds perpetual disenchantment—making everything, even life itself, seem optional and for sale. In theory, consumer culture might lead people to aspire to more, but at worst, it leads them to disdain every conceivable satisfaction life has to offer.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-51

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

The name of ...
... answers are confidential.

Along with the title, lines 1-3 establish the poem's premise, or conceit: The speaker is a consumer filling out "A Consumer's Report," or review of a product they've "tested." As line 1 establishes, that product "is *Life*" itself! (A few actual products carry the brand name "Life," including Life cereal and *Life* magazine, but the poem goes on to establish, through context, that it's talking about life as in human existence. Some of its descriptions wouldn't make sense if applied to the cereal or the magazine; they could only apply to something much broader.)

Having tested this "product"—at least, for a certain number of years—the consumer is now offering their assessment in response to some sort of market research survey. Who could be conducting such a survey on behalf of life itself? The poem, mischievously, leaves this question unresolved. The consumer says that "I have completed the form you sent me," but "you" is never identified, nor is the nature of the "form" specified. The poem's premise is based on real-life market research involving consumer tests and reviews, but the equivalent process for something as cosmic as "*Life*" is left to the imagination. The speaker acknowledges that their "answers are confidential"—perhaps a joke about the private nature of one's inner communications with the universe, God, etc.

Basically, these first lines set up an extended metaphor

comparing life to a consumer product. This metaphor carries throughout the poem, as the poet explores the premise in depth. Although life isn't a product, the poem invites readers to consider what the two things have in common—and how they themselves might review life if they had the chance. (Do they find life satisfying? Easy to manage? And so on.) The poem also satirizes the kind of hyper-capitalist society that treats *everything* as a product, even the most profound experiences imaginable.

As a parody of real-life consumer reviews, the poem's style is flat and prose-like. Its free verse sounds slightly dashed off, as if the consumer were casually jumping from one opinion to the next. Note that the speaker here is separate from the poet; the poem adopts this jaded consumer's voice in a variation on the dramatic monologue.

LINES 4-8

I had it ...
... embarrassing deposit behind.

After the poem's single stanza break, lines 4-8 start to describe the consumer's experience of "*Life*." (This is the beginning of the "Report" itself; lines 1-3 are introductory.)

Having established a world in which life is being reviewed as a consumer product, the poem (via its speaker) makes statements that—in the real world—could apply equally to life *or* products. First, the consumer says they received life "as a gift." Products are often gifted, of course, and consumers who participate in market research will often receive sample products for free. At the same time, according to a popular idiom, life is a gift: something to be appreciated and cherished.

Next, the consumer claims they "didn't feel much while using" life, and "in fact" would "have liked to be more excited." Again, this is the kind of comment a consumer might naturally make in a product review, but it's potentially applicable to life as well. This speaker seems to feel numb, depressed, and/or desensitized to life's pleasures. This is the first clue that the speaker is a jaded character; the poem will go on to express a good deal of skepticism toward, or disenchantment with, life.

The description in lines 7-8 at first seems more applicable to particular products than to life in general. "It seemed gentle on the hands," the consumer complains, "but left an embarrassing deposit behind." One can easily imagine saying this about a hygiene or cleaning product, for example. Applied to life, it's a little more jarring, but it might suggest the particular difficulties of life *in a body*. One's outer body may seem soft and pleasurable to the touch, but it creates potentially awkward "deposit[s]" in the form of excrement, bodily fluids, etc.

Other, metaphorical interpretations are also possible: for example, life might have seemed "gentle" (i.e., pleasant) in youth, but left a "deposit" of "embarrassing" memories as the speaker aged. In other words, the speaker might look back on earlier phases of life with more shame than nostalgia.

LINES 9-16

It was not ...
... contradict each other.

Lines 9-16 continue the speaker's litany of complaints. The sentence in these lines begins with "It," just as the previous sentence did: an example of anaphora. Anaphora also occurs in lines 4 and 5, both of which begin with "I." These repetitions create a list-like structure, as the consumer rattles off one opinion or objection after another (*I experienced this, I experienced that*, etc.). Although anaphora fades in later lines, it lends a touch of initial structure to this free verse poem.

Having warmed up in lines 4-8, the speaker *really* starts complaining here. They object that life "was not economical," meaning that it didn't yield good value in return for the time spent on it. They're surprised to find that they "have used much more" of life "than I thought"; they seem to have only "about half left," though "it's difficult to tell." In other words, they've reached middle age and started wondering where the time went; as a "use[r]" of life, they haven't gotten to experience nearly as much as they'd hoped. They can't even be sure they're halfway through life, because life could end at any time. It sounds as though this speaker might be having a minor mid-life crisis, expressed through the unconventional medium of a product review! (Peter Porter himself was about 40 when he wrote the poem.)

The following lines (13-16) metaphorically express a common complaint: that it's hard to find trustworthy guidance through life. The speaker admits that "the instructions are fairly large"; in other words, rules and guidelines loom large in everyone's life, whether they're issued by parents, teachers, clergy, politicians, or society in general. The problem is that "there are so many of" these instructions, it's hard to "know which to follow, especially / as they seem to contradict each other." For example, the rules imposed by parents might conflict with those imposed at school; the lessons of religion might clash with those of art, and so on. In this way, life is like a product that comes with a big instruction manual, but one so confusing and self-contradictory that the owner practically gives up on making sense of it.

LINES 17-22

I'm not sure ...
... much too high.

Lines 17-22 express the speaker's most serious doubts and objections yet. Previously, they've voiced their *personal* disappointment with the "product" called life. Now they suggest that life might not be suitable for *anyone*—especially kids.

"I'm not sure such a thing / should be put in the way of children," the speaker muses, meaning that it might not be fair to expose

kids to something so complicated and dangerous. The irony is that all living children, by definition, have already encountered life! There's no way to shelter them from it, the way a parent might keep them from playing with a hazardous toy.

Beneath the comic irony, though, lies a serious question that philosophers and ordinary adults alike have wrestled with: is it fair to bring new life into a world full of pain? To have kids is to create beings who will suffer and someday die. Would it be better to prevent that suffering by remaining childless?

The speaker adds that "It's difficult to think of a purpose for" life, again echoing common philosophical questions: in this case, about the ultimate significance and purpose of life. Even people who are relatively satisfied with life often wonder what it's all *for*. In the poem's extended metaphor, then, life is a product with no obvious benefits—and some serious drawbacks.

Building on these ideas, the speaker cites a friend's claim that life exists solely "to keep its maker in a job." This phrase plays on two different meanings of "maker":

1. A manufacturer (of a product).
2. God, a.k.a. "the Maker" of life or the universe.

By implication, if this second kind of "Maker" creates life just to stay employed, God is an insecure being desperate to be worshipped—or a bored being desperate for something to do. Either way, the speaker (or their friend) again expresses a kind of philosophical pessimism. In their view of the cosmos, life might "just" be trivial.

Almost as an afterthought, the speaker tacks on a related complaint: "Also the price is much too high." Metaphorically speaking, the "price" of life is suffering and death; you can't live without experiencing both. The poem suggests, then, that something as confusing, seemingly pointless, and potentially trivial as life can't possibly justify so steep a cost. Like a gloomy philosopher, the speaker appears to believe that life just isn't worth that much.

LINES 23-29

Things are piling ...
... sound of it.)

Lines 23-29 are rich with irony, as the speaker keeps questioning the value of "*Life*" with a capital L—but also gets annoyed over a minor detail.

First, the "Consumer" poses a grand, world-weary rhetorical question:

> Things are piling up so fast,
> after all, the world got by
> for a thousand million years
> without this, do we need it now?

It's literally true, as far as scientists know, that Earth didn't host any life until it was about a billion years old. ("A thousand million" equals a billion.) Clearly, the *planet* doesn't need life. But it's pretty ironic for a living person to question whether "we need it now"!

The phrase "Things are piling up so fast" implies that the speaker has bigger problems and priorities than life—but of course, that's impossible, because life encompasses everything. Even if the speaker is tired of life, it's presumptuous to expect that *others* could do without it; after all, many people and animals are happy with their lives. Here, the poem seems to satirize the kind of overindulged consumer who's bored and dissatisfied with everything under the sun. More broadly, it makes fun of a consumer society that treats everything—even the grandest things—as optional and disposable.

Adding to the irony, the speaker grumbles about the nameless "man" conducting the survey: "please ask your man / to stop calling me 'the respondent,' / I don't like the sound of it." This parenthetical aside is about as petty as a complaint can get. Though the speaker has been acting as if they don't care about anything in life, they clearly care about their personal feelings! Yet again, the speaker sounds spoiled, especially because "respondent" is a harmless and standard term for a survey participant. At the same time, their discomfort may suggest that they feel dehumanized by this anonymous survey process—and by consumer society as a whole. Maybe they want more out of "*Life*" than to be a nameless data point.

LINES 30-33

There seems to ...
... not heat resistant,

In lines 30-33, the speaker goes back to listing objections. In their view, life brings one problem after another: as a product, it's a total mess.

"There seems to be a lot of different labels" suggests that life comes with lots of confusing terminology. The world is full of languages and words within a given language. It takes a long time to learn the right "labels" for everything, and if we call people or things by the wrong labels, we can get into trouble. (Words can cause misunderstanding, offense, harm, etc.) As a metaphor, then, the speaker's concern about life's "labels" reflects a problem we all share. And, of course, it plays on the fact that packaged products typically come with labels, too.

The next few complaints are a bit more ambiguous in terms of how they fit within the poem's extended metaphor:

> [...] sizes and colours should be uniform,
> the shape is awkward, it's waterproof
> but not heat resistant,

These might be complaints about the bodies that *contain* life.

Bodies come in all "shape[s]," sizes, and shades; they can feel "awkward" to manage; they can handle immersion in "water[]"—think baths, showers, pools, etc.—but don't do so well with extreme "heat." The differences among, and limitations of, bodies cause some of the major complications of human life. (People discriminate based on bodily differences, are often physically awkward around each other, etc.) The complaints about shape, size, and color could also be interpreted more broadly: perhaps this speaker finds reality itself awkward and confusing to manage.

LINES 33-37

it doesn't keep ...
... it's delivered anyway.

If the previous few lines seemed to describe the bodies that *contain* life, lines 33-37 are once again about the nature of life in general.

The speaker complains that life "doesn't keep / yet it's very difficult to get rid of." In other words, life ends for everyone eventually (as a "product," it's perishable), but it's extremely hard to end one's own life (to dispose of the "product" on purpose). This is an existential complaint about human mortality and the difficulties and taboos surrounding suicide.

The speaker also notes that "whenever they make [life] cheaper they seem / to put less in." This complaint plays on the idiom, or cliché, about life being "cheap" in troubled regions: war-torn countries, for example, and radically unequal societies that exploit or enslave the poor. Like an inexpensive product whose manufacturers shortchange the consumer by "put[ting] less in," life in such places is often abbreviated and diminished. (The powerless have shorter life spans and get less out of their lives.)

The speaker adds that "if you say you don't / want" life, "then it's delivered anyway." In other words, even if people get tired of life, they keep on living. They have no control over the process (short of the drastic step of suicide). For the bored, exhausted, despairing, etc., life can feel like a product subscription that's nearly impossible to cancel. Once again, the poem uses its extended metaphor to frame existential angst in the everyday language of consumerism.

LINES 38-43

I'd agree it's ...
... behave badly about.

In these irony-drenched lines, the speaker treats life (the "product") as unremarkable, trivial, and overrated.

Though not an enthusiastic fan of life, the speaker grudgingly concedes that "it's a popular product." Of course it is: it's life! Nearly every living person wants to keep being alive. And therein lies the irony: the speaker takes a detached and skeptical view of something we can't truly detach ourselves from.

The speaker adds that "people / even say they're on the side of it," referring to an idiom or talking point about being "on the side of life." (This language sometimes appears in debates over abortion and other political issues, but it can also be a more general positivity cliché.) Apparently, though, the speaker isn't one of those people. They claim that they "Personally" believe life is "overdone," as in overemphasized or overhyped. They dismiss life as "a small thing people are ready / to behave badly about." In other words, people make too much of a fuss over it and even commit evil in its name.

This could be read as an extremely cynical attitude, born of a consumerist society that seems to cheapen and sell everything. Alternatively, it could be an attitude of philosophical or spiritual detachment, the kind monks take when retreating from the world. (Notice the reference to "philosophers" a few lines later.) It's true that people sometimes justify evil actions (bad "behav[ior]") in the name of "life" (saving or improving lives). Still, calling life "popular" is a major understatement, and calling life "small" is ironic—whether the irony is intended or not. Life includes everything human beings know! Like many lines in the poem, this passage is ambiguous and allows for markedly different readings depending on one's own attitude toward life.

LINES 43-48

I think ...
... law makers.

Having called life "a small thing" in line 42, the speaker now expands on that judgement. Contrary to the cliché that we shouldn't take life for granted, the speaker claims that "we should." Again, they feel life isn't worth making a fuss over. They add that if the "experts" on life "are called philosophers or market / researchers or historians, we shouldn't / care." The enjambment in lines 46-47 stresses both "shouldn't" and "care" (the words that fall just before and after the line break), adding extra emphasis to this blunt opinion.

We shouldn't care what these experts think, according to the speaker, because "We are the consumers and the last / law makers." That is, in a consumer society, consumers make the rules. "Philosophers," "historians," and "market / researchers"—like the researcher surveying the speaker—may study the nature of life from their different perspectives, but everyday people, expressing their preferences in the marketplace, determine society's overall direction. Ultimately, they determine what life in their society is like. The speaker's statement may also imply that life should be *lived* in a hands-on way—tested out, like a product—rather than just *studied* from an intellectual distance.

Whether the poet agrees with these statements is another matter. The poem clearly satirizes the consumer's arrogant, anti-intellectual attitude, as well as the cynicism that consumer society breeds. The poet certainly doesn't agree that life should be taken for granted. However, he *might* agree that people who

"consume[]" life have a certain advantage over those who stand back and "research[]" it. These ambiguities add some nuance to the satire.

LINES 48-51

So finally, I'd ...
... said you'd send.

Lines 48-51 conclude the poem with a double ironic twist. First, after their long criticism of life as a "product," the speaker reaches a surprising verdict: "So finally, I'd buy it." It seems that, for all their reservations, the speaker doesn't actually want life to end. They want to keep investing in life, flawed as it may be.

But in one last irony, the consumer holds off on giving life their highest possible rating:

> But the question of a "best buy"
> I'd like to leave until I get
> the competitive product you said you'd send.

The "competitive product" could only be death, or some sort of afterlife. Of course, it's true that the speaker *will* be receiving this "product" eventually—as we all will! Whatever force "send[s]" life (nature, the universe, God, etc.) also sends death. But it's far from clear that we'll be able to rate life from beyond the grave, so "leav[ing]" the "question" open is risky at best and incoherent at worst. Many people, though not all, would simply assume that death isn't an enticing "product" compared to life.

Again, the poem hints at real philosophical questions under its layers of irony. At the same time, it satirizes the attitudes and values of consumer society, which seems to trivialize even the loftiest things. To this pampered consumer, life and death are no more than competing brands: the Coke and Pepsi of the cosmos.

POETIC DEVICES

IRONY

The poem is full of irony from the start. Its premise (conceit) is inherently ironic in various ways: even if "*Life*" were a product, there would be no way to stand back and review it objectively (the review itself would be part of life), no basis of comparison (we don't know what death is like), etc. It's also impossible to review life with any confidence before it's over—say, if you have "about half" your life "left," as the speaker does (line 11). Life encompasses everything, so the nature of the "product" can change radically from moment to moment.

The poem builds on these underlying ironies throughout. For example, the comment in lines 17-18—"I'm not sure such a thing / should be put in the way of children"—is ironic because children, by virtue of being alive, have already been exposed to life. At the same time, this comment hints at the more familiar, straightforward idea that having kids (bringing new people into a world full of suffering) is morally complicated.

In lines 20-21, the speaker suggests that the "maker" of life (implicitly, God) might be manufacturing their "product" solely in order to keep a "job." This conception of God as needy and insecure ironically conflicts with common religious depictions of God as powerful, loving, etc.

Some of the poem's clearest ironies come when the speaker minimizes life's importance. They ask rhetorically, "[D]o we need it now?" and call life "a small thing" that "we should take [...] for granted." Their jadedness is ironic in that living people can't possibly have priorities above or beyond life itself. The speaker also clearly sweats small things, like being called "the respondent" (lines 27-29), so they're not quite as above-it-all as they think. However, these ironic opinions mirror, in exaggerated form, common philosophical doubts about life's ultimate significance.

In the final lines, the consumer decides to hold off on giving life their highest rating until they've tried "the competitive product." Again, the irony is blatant: this "competitive product" must be death, and you can't rate anything from beyond the grave! (Also, even if you're somehow able to *experience* death and decide you dislike it, there's no way to switch back to life.) The speaker ironically treats life and death as if they're competing brands of soap—two consumer options to waver back and forth between—rather than profound, all-encompassing states.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-1:** "The name of the product I tested is / Life / ,"
- **Lines 17-18:** "I'm not sure such a thing / should be put in the way of children—"
- **Lines 20-21:** "One of my friends says / it's just to keep its maker in a job."
- **Lines 23-26:** "Things are piling up so fast, / after all, the world got by / for a thousand million years / without this, do we need it now?"
- **Lines 27-29:** "(Incidentally, please ask your man / to stop calling me "the respondent," / I don't like the sound of it.)"
- **Line 38:** "I'd agree it's a popular product,"
- **Line 39:** "it's got into the language;"
- **Lines 41-44:** "Personally I think it's overdone, / a small thing people are ready / to behave badly about. I think / we should take it for granted."
- **Lines 48-51:** "So finally, I'd buy it. / But the question of a "best buy" / I'd like to leave until I get / the competitive product you said you'd send."

REPETITION

The poem repeats several important words and phrases. These repetitions emphasize key themes, contribute to the voice of the "Consumer," and help structure the poem's free verse.

Two recurring words, for example, are "product" and "buy." "Product" appears in both the first and last lines of the poem. These repetitions underline the poem's conceit: that the speaker is a "Consumer" reviewing a product available for purchase. The recurring phrase "I think" (lines 6, 41, and 43) helps suggest that this is a very opinionated consumer, eager to share just how *they* feel about this overhyped product called life.

The poem also uses some anaphora, particularly toward the beginning (lines 4-9):

> I had it as a gift,
> I didn't feel much while using it,
> in fact I think I'd have liked to be more excited.
> It seemed gentle on the hands
> but left an embarrassing deposit behind.
> It was not economical [...]

These repetitions of "I" and "It" give the lines a list-like structure, as the consumer rattles off point after point about the "product."

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "product"
- **Line 4:** "I"
- **Line 5:** "I"
- **Line 6:** "I think"
- **Line 7:** "It"
- **Line 9:** "It"
- **Line 38:** "product"
- **Line 39:** "people"
- **Line 41:** "I think"
- **Line 42:** "people"
- **Line 43:** "I think"
- **Line 48:** "buy"
- **Line 49:** "buy"
- **Line 51:** "product"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The entire poem is an extended metaphor comparing "*Life*" to a consumer "product." In the speaker's world, life really *is* a product under review in some sort of marketing survey. But in our world, it's not—so, as a metaphor, this equation invites readers to consider how real life might *resemble* a product. Alternatively, readers might consider how they'd judge life if it *were* a product: whether they'd consider it satisfactory, user-friendly, etc.

The poet gets a lot of comic mileage out of the overlap between products and life. Both can be a "gift," for example (line 4): people can receive products for free, and everyone alive receives life without asking for it. (Colloquially, people who enjoy life often call it a "gift": something to cherish and use to its fullest.) One can "use[]" products more quickly than one intended (line 10), and one can also "use[]" life (that is, grow older) more quickly than one expected. Many products come with "instructions" (line 13), and so, in a sense, does life: for example, parents, teachers, art, and religion can all tell younger people how to live. Indeed, the many instructions younger people receive can "seem to contradict each other" (line 16), becoming as confusing as a poorly written users' manual. The poem also toys with the idea that life, like products, might have a "maker" (i.e., God, imagined here as a kind of manufacturer).

The poem explores these kinds of similarities throughout. Perhaps the most fundamental similarity is that life, like many products, inspires conflicting feelings; any given group of people would give it a mixed review, and most individuals probably would, too. Like the speaker of the poem, many of us buy products we have reservations about and live our lives without being fully satisfied by them.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-51

ENJAMBMENT

Nearly half the lines in the poem are enjambed. This heavy enjambment serves a couple of purposes. First, it appears almost haphazard, adding to the casually dashed-off quality of the consumer's "Report." This speaker's writing contains informal diction, punctuation, sentence construction, etc., so it's not surprising that they don't seem concerned about where their line breaks fall. The poem is a parody of a prose "genre" (a response to a product survey), and the erratically broken lines contribute to the prose-like flatness of its rhythm.

However, the *poet* (who is different than the speaker) also uses enjambment to emphasize key words and phrases. These fall just before or after the line breaks, as in the consistently enjambed lines 43-48:

> [...] I think
> we should 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 finally, I'd buy it.

Here, for example, enjambment stresses the phrase "I think" at the end of line 43. The speaker may be stressing what *they* think because their opinion is so contrarian. (Whereas most people believe life shouldn't be taken for granted, the *speaker* believes it *should*.) Similarly, enjambment emphasizes "shouldn't" and "care" in lines 46 and 47, respectively. Once again, the speaker is emphatically voicing a counterintuitive

opinion. Most informed people would agree that philosophers, market researchers, and historians analyze life in meaningfully different ways. But the speaker believes we "shouldn't" distinguish between—or even "care" about—their analyses, because what consumers think is all that matters. Consumers are the true shapers of society, the "last / law makers": another important phrase (and debatable opinion) stressed by enjambment.

Notice, too, what happens at the end of this passage. After six straight enjambments (lines 42-47), line 48 is end-stopped. Here, the *break* in the pattern is noteworthy; it gives a more decisive ring to the consumer's surprising verdict: "I'd buy it."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "me / and"
- **Lines 7-8:** "hands / but"
- **Lines 9-10:** "economical / and"
- **Lines 13-14:** "large / there"
- **Lines 14-15:** "them / I"
- **Lines 15-16:** "especially / as"
- **Lines 17-18:** "thing / should"
- **Lines 19-20:** "purpose / for"
- **Lines 20-21:** "says / it's"
- **Lines 24-25:** "by / for"
- **Lines 25-26:** "years / without"
- **Lines 27-28:** "man / to"
- **Lines 32-33:** "waterproof / but"
- **Lines 33-34:** "keep / yet"
- **Lines 35-36:** "seem / to"
- **Lines 36-37:** "don't / want"
- **Lines 39-40:** "people / even"
- **Lines 42-43:** "ready / to"
- **Lines 43-44:** "think / we"
- **Lines 44-45:** "its / experts"
- **Lines 45-46:** "market / researchers"
- **Lines 46-47:** "shouldn't / care"
- **Lines 47-48:** "last / law"
- **Lines 49-50:** "buy" / I'd"
- **Lines 50-51:** "get / the"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem contains only one rhetorical question, but it says a lot about the speaker's perspective and the poet's satirical intentions. In the middle of their "Report," the consumer complains:

> Things are piling up so fast,
> after all, the world got by
> for a thousand million years
> without this, do we need it now?

Remember, "it" means life itself! The question implies that life might be just one more disposable product, an unnecessary hassle in a "world" that "got by" for ages without it. And while it's true that life didn't appear on Earth till the planet was roughly a billion years old, it's ironic that the consumer would imagine *they* could do without life!

The consumer obviously "need[s]" life—at least, if they want to keep being a consumer—but they're so spoiled by excessive choice, they assume there must be some better alternative. Alternatively, they may be so disenchanted with life in their culture of overconsumption that they're ready to contemplate *death* as an alternative. Either way, the poet is poking fun at their jadedness and the culture that breeds it.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 24-26:** "the world got by / for a thousand million years / without this, do we need it now?"

VOCABULARY

The form (Line 2) - Refers to the survey form via which (according to the poem's conceit) the speaker is filling out a "Consumer's Report."

Confidential (Line 3) - Private; not to be shared with others.

Deposit (Line 8) - A substance laid down or left as a residue; here referring to excrement and/or other bodily fluids.

Economical (Line 9) - Low-cost and/or efficient; operating with minimal waste.

Put in the way of (Line 18) - Here meaning "given to" or "placed in the vicinity of."

Maker (Line 21) - Manufacturer (but with a secondary meaning implied: the "Maker," as in God).

Incidentally (Lines 27-28) - Like "by the way," a term used to introduce an aside or parenthetical statement.

The respondent (Lines 27-28) - Someone who responds to something; here, specifically, someone who responds to a consumer survey (by filing a "Report" after testing a product).

Waterproof (Lines 32-33) - Capable of withstanding exposure to or immersion in water.

Heat resistant (Lines 32-33) - Capable of withstanding exposure to high temperatures.

Market researchers (Lines 44-46) - Researchers who collect data about consumers (e.g., via surveys) on behalf of businesses.

Law makers (Lines 47-48) - Legislators. Here meaning, metaphorically, the people in charge, the people who make the rules the rest of society follows.

"Best buy" (Line 49) - Implied to be the highest rating the

consumer can give the "product" under review.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Consumer's Report" is a free verse poem containing two stanzas: one short, one long. The first, introductory stanza establishes the poem's conceit (i.e., the speaker is a "Consumer" reviewing "*Life*" itself as a product). The second, longer stanza elaborates on that conceit, delivering the "Report" as if in response to a marketing survey. Basically, the second stanza provides the "answers" promised in the first, addressing a nameless market researcher (a god? some other representative of Life?) who will apparently keep the answers "confidential."

The choice of free verse makes sense for a parody of actual consumer reports. Such reports are typically written in straightforward prose, so elaborate poetic techniques like meter and rhyme would make this parody a less convincing imitation.

The poem does contain line breaks, unlike the typical consumer report, but these appear almost haphazard, as if the consumer is writing quickly and paying no attention to them. One could even imagine that the consumer is writing in a narrow column on a survey form, rather than intentionally creating verse. (Of course, the *poet* knows that the line breaks help control pace and emphasize key phrases, such as "last / law makers" in lines 47-48.) In terms of form, then, the poem sticks as closely as possible to the prose "genre" it's mimicking without actually turning into a prose poem.

METER

As a free verse poem, "A Consumer's Report" has no meter. Its rhythm is flat and prose-like, in imitation of the "genre" it's parodying (a consumer's response to a marketing survey). Its tone hovers somewhere between formal and informal; this is supposed to be a marketing study conducted for business purposes, so the consumer uses some professional language (e.g., "I have completed the form you sent me / and understand that my answers are confidential."). But as they give their candid response, they also slip into colloquial phrases, such as "I don't like the sound of it" and "Personally I think it's overdone." Elaborate formal structures, such as meter, would risk weakening the parody by disrupting the prose-like rhythm and colloquial tone.

RHYME SCHEME

"A Consumer's Report" has no rhyme scheme. It's prose-like free verse, written in imitation of real-life consumer responses to marketing surveys. Strict musical devices, such as rhyme or meter, would make the style sound much more "literary"—and much less effective as a parody of this non-literary genre.

SPEAKER

As the title implies, the poem's speaker is an individual "Consumer" filling out a "Report." The "product" they're reviewing is life in general. Their age, gender, geographical location, etc. are never stated. It's fair to assume that they're a character separate from the poet (who didn't literally act as a product tester for human existence!). For most of the poem, they speak as an individual, describing what they "Personally" think of life. Occasionally, however, they also speak on behalf of a collective "we," which encompasses "consumers" in general and/or society as a whole.

One example of this shift happens in lines 43-48. Notice how the speaker uses the singular "I," then the plural "we," then "I" again:

> [...] I think
> we should take [life] 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 finally, I'd buy it.

The "we" who "should take [life] for granted" might refer to people in general. But "We are the consumers" refers, more specifically, to people with disposable income to spend. These are people who buy products of their choice in a capitalist economy, rather than (for example) scraping by on the bare essentials, or using goods distributed in a centrally planned economy. These consumers, according to the speaker, are "the last / law makers." Their tastes, desires, and whims shape global culture; they set the rules the entire planet lives by.

SETTING

The poem has no defined physical setting. The "Consumer" could be filing this survey "form" from just about anywhere on earth. After all, the "product" they're reviewing is "*Life*," which happens just about everywhere on earth!

However, the poem does take place within a particular type of society: a consumer society. It parodies a non-literary genre (a consumer report, or response to a survey following a product test), which is found only in the kind of modern capitalistic culture that gives rise to market research. The parody depends partly on readers' loose familiarity with this kind of research, even if they've never participated in it themselves. (Readers who are completely *un*familiar may miss some of the humor.)

The poem's satire not only takes place within a consumer society but *targets* this kind of society, spoofing the kind of cynicism and dissatisfaction it tends to foster. It implies that, in a capitalist economy, "the consumers [are] the last / law

makers": in other words, the customer is always right, and the whims of people with disposable income govern the direction of society as a whole. Ultimately, they even determine what "*Life*" is and whether it's worthwhile.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Peter Porter (1929-2010) was an Australian-born poet who lived most of his adult life in the UK. "A Consumer's Report" appears in his fourth collection, *The Last of England*, published in England in 1970. Many of the poems in this book, like "A Consumer's Report," contain wry satire and biting commentary on modern Western life. Although some of their references are no longer quite so modern, others remain sharply relevant to today's mass media and consumer culture.

Porter was a member of the informal school of UK poets known as "The Group." Active in the 1950s and 1960s, this group discussed and promoted one another's work while attempting to take postwar UK poetry in a fresh direction. Besides Porter, key members included Philip Hobsbaum, George MacBeth, and Edward Lucie-Smith. The posthumous reputations of some "Group" poets have faded a bit, and "The Group" itself is less famous than "The Movement," another informal school active around the same time. However, Porter himself remains a well-remembered poet in the UK and his native Australia, and a few occasional "Group" members, including Ted Hughes and Fleur Adcock, have retained an international audience among poetry lovers.

As a critique of consumer society, "A Consumer's Report" had plenty of company in the art and literature of the post-WWII period. In the 1950s, American Beat poets denounced mainstream consumer culture as oppressive and inauthentic; Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," for example, describes "Madison Avenue" (the heart of New York's advertising scene) as a kind of hell for artists. In the 1960s, Pop artist Andy Warhol, with his famous Campbell's Soup can paintings and Brillo box sculptures, adopted a coolly ironic, love/hate stance toward advertising and mass consumption. Porter's poem takes a gently satirical approach to its subject, spoofing a society so immersed in consumerism that it might see life itself as a product. (But suggesting, at the same time, that if life *were* a product, it would leave something to be desired!)

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"A Consumer's Report" parodies real-life consumer reports (more specifically, responses to market research surveys). It's framed as one "Consumer's" anonymous review of a "product" they've "tested." The opinions of this consumer will presumably be pooled with those of other survey respondents, and the aggregated feedback may prompt changes to the product or its marketing campaign. In 1970, when the poem was published, the real-life equivalent of this process would have been entirely analog; the consumer would have been "sent" their "form" via snail mail and mailed their responses in return.

The poem is a commentary on post-war capitalist society, both in the UK and the Western world overall. By 1970, the UK had largely recovered from the struggles of the immediate post-war period and experienced an economic boom. As families gained more disposable income, the market supplied a widening range of products to meet growing consumer demand. With those products came marketing and advertising—which, as TV and other mass media flourished, became ever more pervasive features of ordinary life. Market researchers (see lines 44-47) developed increasingly sophisticated methods of pinpointing consumers' wants and needs. Indeed, the poem slyly suggests that they've become the peers of "philosophers" and "historians" (they know just as much about the human experience).

The poem's parody takes all these trends to a logical extreme. Its jaded speaker has been surveyed about "*Life*"—as in existence, not the cereal—and expresses both disappointment in *and* a desire for this "product." (Like many late 20th-century Western consumers, they're affluent enough to afford products they don't necessarily love or need.) Accustomed to a range of choices for everything, the speaker also wants to try "the competitive product," as if death were just another brand. Ultimately, the poem suggests that these trends dehumanize and disillusion the very consumers they seem to empower. On the one hand, the speaker declares consumers like themselves "the last / law makers" (lines 47-48), implying that in this society, the customer is king. On the other hand, the speaker seems unhappy with their anonymity in this cold, impersonal market research process (lines 27-29): "please ask your man / to stop calling me 'the respondent,' / I don't like the sound of it."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Life of the Poet — Read a short biography of Porter at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/peter-porter)
- Peter Porter: A Retrospective — Read the Guardian's 2010 obituary for the poet. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/apr/23/peter-porter-obituary)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of "A Consumer's Report." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51x0865DXy8)
- More on Porter's Life and Work — Browse the Poetry Archive's exhibit on Peter Porter.

(https://poetryarchive.org/poet/peter-porter/)

- An Interview with the Poet — Watch a cozy chat with Peter Porter about poetry, music, and more. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=varlc8Eqv-o)

HOW TO CITE

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