**Survivor**

Junior stepped out of the event horizon and took a moment to adjust to his surroundings, reciting the Department of History’s First Protocol — *You are only here to observe*. The air carried humidity and the smell of organic matter — the smell of the earth after rainfall — so different from the industrial atmosphere of his own time. Nothing could prepare him for the way his senses were heightened by his ‘shell’, the almost indestructible cyborg body housing his consciousness. His human body would be pulled apart by the forces of the wormhole.

He began to walk through the long grass, reciting the Second Protocol — *Do not change the past*.

Approaching his destination, Junior ensured his audiovisual input was being recorded. The grass, still wet from recent rain, parted to reveal a curved bitumen road, slick with moisture. The driver of a yellow sedan, on its side a hundred metres along the road, had lost control as he came around the curve, well above the posted speed limit. Fresh skid marks on the road testified to it.

Junior used his shell’s advanced sensors to collect data. Leaking fuel had spread across the road. In a few short decades, the accident’s lone survivor would use her absolute authority to outlaw internal combustion engines.

Historical texts were unclear on what happened next. That was why Junior was there. The girl never spoke of the accident and, after she seized power, brutally punished those who investigated her past. Junior would return home with evidence of the event some said was the seed of the girl’s madness.

Over the ambient sounds of nature, Junior discerned two distinct voices. A girl’s steady voice offered reassuring words, while a male infant screamed in terror. Fascinated, Junior approached the sedan.

The police report indicated a single survivor, the girl sitting behind the driver. Her younger brother was supposed to have died. Walking around the car so he could see through the windows, Junior saw the boy, with his curly black hair, struggling against the child restraint. His side of the car was closest to the ground. His flame-haired sister, also restrained by a seatbelt, offered a calmer demeanour.

Noticing Junior, she called out for help. Why was he just standing there? she screamed. Disbelief and anger poisoned her voice.

The sound of sparks from the engine told Junior the car would soon explode, correlating with the police report. But there was only supposed to be one survivor. Do not change the past, he reminded himself, but he could not see how the girl could escape the coming inferno. She was determined to save her brother.

Assessing his options, Junior realised he would have to break one Protocol to follow another. He reached through the broken rear window, using his great strength to snap the girl’s belt. Her initial smile at her rescuer became a scream as he carried her across the road to safety. “What about my brother?” she cried.

Don’t change the past, he reminded himself. The car exploded behind them. There was only one survivor, and thanks to Junior she would grow up to become history’s bloodiest villain.

**Introduction**

A central theme running through the short science fiction text, ‘Survivor’, is the **dehumanising** effects of technology. In this respect, the short story demonstrates a key aspect of the conventions of the science fiction genre, as these texts often involve reflection on the effects of development in technology. In this text, it is implied that futuristic practices involving time travel and transplanting human consciousness into cyborg bodies, causes individuals to **lose aspects of their humanity**. At the same time, this text also implies that this **dehumanisation** can never be complete, as its central protagonist, Junior, breaks protocol by rescuing ‘the girl’ at the end of the text.

**Body Paragraph 1 – TC Theory**

The key binary opposition that underpins this text is between an unspecified future time, and a ‘present’ that resembles our own time. The future is represented as a highly industrialised and technologically advanced place, in contrast to the more naturalistic present. This distinction is shown in the first paragraph, in which Junior notices the air carried ‘humidity and the smell of organic matter’ so different ‘from the industrial atmosphere of his own time.’ Junior’s cyborg body, and the fact that he has travelled through a wormhole, further reinforce this opposition. The reference to the organisation that Junior works for, the Department of History, as well as Junior’s constant bringing to mind of protocols – a word that the typical reader associates with bureaucratic systems of authority – gives the impression that the future is one in which instrumental reason is highly valued, perhaps over ‘soft’ human emotions. Even Junior’s name is important in this respect: it is infantilising and demeaning, and it reflects that those who have placed the protagonist in his cyborg body and sent him into the past see him more as an object to be manipulated and used than as a human being.

**Body Paragraph 2 – TC Theory**

The distinction between the two times is most emphasised when it comes to describing Junior’s reactions to the car accident that he encounters in the story. Even though the story is written using third-person, non-diegetic narrator, the narration is focalised through Junior’s perspective. This narrative technique has allowed the author to emphasise the lack of humanity and compassion in Junior’s response to the children who are trapped in the car. After he hears a girl’s voice and the male infant screaming, Junior’s reaction is described as being ‘fascinated’ rather than horrified or upset. The cold and understated style of narration used to describe the plight of the two children who are trapped likewise shows that Junior lacks any emotional response when witnessing the distress of the trapped children:

*The police report indicated a single survivor, the girl sitting behind the driver. Her younger brother was supposed to have died. Walking around the car so he could see through the windows, Junior saw the boy, with his curly black hair, struggling against the child restraint. His side of the car was closest to the ground.*

Additionally, when the girl in the car notices Junior’s lack of willingness to help, and calls out for assistance, her voice is described as ‘poisoned’ by anger – implying that Junior sees emotion as something pathological and toxic, rather than natural or desirable. This lack of empathy for the children in distress is contrasted by the concern shown by the girl when Junior rescues her: ‘Her initial smile at her rescuer became a scream, as he carried her across the road to safety. What about my brother, she cried?’ The narration of the story implies that whatever has happened to Junior in the future world has resulted in his dehumanisation, or at least has made him less susceptible to emotional and sympathetic reactions to other humans.

**Body Paragraph 3 – WC Theory**

The story emphasises how Junior and his reactions have been largely determined by the dominant ideologies of his own context, which no doubt favour instrumental knowledge and technological advancement over concern for human well-being. The very fact that the Department of History has sent Junior back in time just to observe a child dying in a car accident, and so add to their own knowledge of what occurred in the past, reflects a privileging of the desire for knowledge over a desire to collect information only in an ethical way. Nevertheless, the story implies that ideology’s hold on Junior is not complete. At the end of the text, Junior, when he realises that the girl trapped in the car will not save herself, is faced with a dilemma. He is only allowed to observe, not interfere with, events from the past, but if he does not interfere, the girl, who is supposed to survive the accident, will die: ‘Assessing his options, Junior realised he would have to break one Protocol to follow another. He reached through the broken rear window, using his great strength to snap the girl’s belt.’ Junior thus, paradoxically, can only keep the protocols by breaking them. Junior’s actions can be read as a type of immanent critique of the ideology of his cultural context: ideology can never be total or complete as, because of its discursive nature, it will always contain inconsistencies, antagonisms and contradictions when put into practice in the real world. In this way, the text reminds us that ideology is never sufficient to completely control or determine our actions.

**Conclusion**

It is in this final part of the story that the ambiguity of the title becomes apparent. ‘Survivor’ refers not only to the girl who is rescued from the car, but also to the irreducible skerrick of humanity that has survived the transfer of Junior’s consciousness to his cyborg body. In this way, **the text serves as not only a warning and critique of the totalising tendencies of instrumental reason in the industrial world**, but also as **a reinforcement of the belief that ultimately a human being is not completely determined by, or reducible to, the social and physical conditions of its world**.