**Reading “*Survivor*” – other ideas (this is not a unified reading!)**

A central theme running through the short science fiction text, ‘Survivor’, is that you can’t change history. An ‘expert reader’, **New Critical** theoretical approach suggests that in an example of **situational irony**, a man named Junior has made a terrible lapse of judgement, for which the world has paid a high price, in saving a girl who grows up to be “*history’s bloodiest villain*”. However, the **text is not as necessarily unified** and whole as this **objective formalist approach** would suggest. The application of **deconstructive techniques**, including the analysis of what Derrida called **‘violent hierarchies’**, **destabilizes the fixed meaning of the text**, suggesting a number of possible alternatives including that ‘the girl’ has been represented in discriminatory ways. This new understanding invites a **feminist reading** which acknowledges the **phallocentric language** and **myth** employed in the representation. A **Freudian reading** achieved through the application of **Freud’s tripartite conception** of the human psyche, together with the application of **Julia Kristeva’s concept ‘the abject’**, further enriches the reader’s understanding of female character.

**New Critics** ask, “*How does this text work*?” before looking for **a unifying idea or theme** which may resolve any tensions caused by **ambiguity, irony or paradoxes** within the story. Here, the ‘hero’ of the narrative is caught in a conundrum – he must only observe and he must not change history but if he fails to save the girl, history will be changed. This paradox is unsatisfactorily resolved when Junior decides to save ‘the girl’ rather than her brother. The **third person omniscient narrator focalizes** on Junior’s perspective suggesting that he is the protagonist of the story. **Negatively connoted evaluative language**, for example, *‘seized power’, ‘brutally punished’, ‘absolute authority’, ‘bloodiest villain’,* in descriptions of the girl further positions the reader to adopt the viewpoint of Junior. The **symbolic use** of “*flame-haired sister*” establishes the girl as being hot-tempered and over-emotional and the **stable binary hero/villain** naturalizes our acceptance of woman as villain. In the story, the purpose of which is to entertain, the shock ending in which the girl is revealed as a future despot evokes a satisfactory jolt to the reader while also establishing unity of meaning. A **deconstructionist reading**, however, undermines this ‘one, true meaning’.

**Jaques Derrida** posits that moments of **aporia, or internal contradiction, destabilize meaning.** The reader might ask, ‘*Why is Junior sent to the past, as an historian if the risks are so great and the protocols contradictory*? “Why did girl “*brutally punish those who investigated her past*?” These questions remains unanswered, opening up the text to **multiple interpretations**. An analysis of the ‘**violent hierarchies**’ in “*Survivor”* makes **resistant reading and multiple meanings** possible as the girl now appears to be the victim rather than the victor. In the **hero/villain binary**, the hero emerges as the privileged member. The woman becomes the unhinged villain by virtue of her over-reliance on emotion; the accident is said to be “*the seed of the girl’s madness”* when her emotion could equally be read as quite understandable grief, guilt and fear. The story can thus be said to be underpinned by **patriarchal ideology** which unfairly represents women.

**French feminists** may view the writing itself is **phallocentric,** or male-oriented. For instance, the girl is not named but the word ‘girl’ activates what **Roland Barthes called myth**. Here, the word ‘girl’ has connotations of being young, silly and emotional. In contrast, ‘Junior’ suggests sturdy American white male privilege. Also, a forensically logical male **perspective** is adopted. Junior calmly adjusts to his surroundings, “*assessing his options”.* In contrast, the girl is represented as being unhinged, positioning the reader to sympathize with Junior’s plight: “*Her initial smile at her rescuer became a scream”* and *‘Disbelief and anger poisoned her voice.”* The harmful **myth** of the irrational and unhinged woman is thus activated in the story.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, **second wave Anglo-American feminists**, point to the **angel/madwoman binary** and to the way these **stereotypes** have been internalized and perpetuated in Western culture as derogatory **archetypes.** The angel is selfless and compliant but the girl, like the madwoman, refuses to stay in her place, acting autonomously, to the detriment of society, seizing power and brutally punishing anyone who investigates her past. The activation of this myth opens up **questions of character motivation.**

The representation of the ‘girl’ is a prime example **of Freud’s tripartite psyche** concept which is comprised of **the id, the ego and the superego**. The **id** is our reserve of animal instincts which seeks to gratify prohibited desires; the **superego** is our social programming, a mechanism for telling us what we should and what we should not do; the **ego** mediates between the id and the superego, channeling the desires of the id into socially acceptable behaviour. Freud postulates that these are constantly at war with one another. This tension is evident in the girl as initially, in the past, her superego urges her to seek help for her brother but “*the seed of the girl’s madness*” is already evident. After her brother’s death, in the future, she swings violently into id mode, satiating her desire for power and revenge.

The ‘girl’ in “*The Survivor*” is in a state of transformation at the end of the story, moving from being a loving sister to a vengeful bloody “*villain*”. **Julia Kristeva’s concept ‘the abject’**, drawn from **Jacque Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory,** refers to a place where meaning collapses as ‘***the abject*’** threatens life and can take the form of, for example, death, murder and decay. When we are propelled into the world of **the abject**, our imaginary borders disintegrate and **the abject** becomes a tangible threat because our identity system and conception of order has been disrupted. The horrific and explosive death of her young and innocent brother propels ‘the girl’ into a different mindset, setting her on a course to villainy.

Whereas **New Critical theory** champions the unity of the text and one true meaning’, **poststructuralist theorists,** for example **feminist** literary critics, ask “*In whose interests was this text written?*” **Derrida** also points to the **slipperiness of language** and to the **continual deferral of meaning down a chain of signifiers,** as well as to moments of **aporia** and **violent hierarchies**, which upset the construction of stable meaning. These later theoretical approaches, including **psychoanalytical approaches**, suggest that the construction of a fixed meaning is unattainable. Junior is either the hero or the villain and the girl either villain or victim depending on the theoretical approaches adopted yet these are only two alternatives among **a great range of different possible readings**.

1087 words

Does this response “**demonstrate a central idea** that is based on a consistent, astute and purposeful interpretation of aspects of theoretical approaches in response to both parts of the question”?

**Comment:** This eclectic response explicitly mentions theory and theorists while the model response provided by QCAA does not.

*Students apply their knowledge of how aspects of* ***text-centred and world-context-centred theoretical approaches*** *can be used to* ***analyse the chosen literary text*** *(stimulus) provided and develop* ***a theorized reading*** *in response to the question.*

**QCAA Exemplar Response**

A central theme running through the short science fiction text, ‘Survivor’, is the dehumanizing 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.

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 organization 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.

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.*

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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.

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.

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.

**983 words**

1. **Central idea:**

* Use a highlighter to trace the references to the central idea throughout the response.
* Did the student adequately refer to their central thesis in each paragraph? How did they do this?
* Did they vary their vocabulary, using synonyms to express the same idea?

1. **Application of theory:**

* Now underline every reference to the reading strategies mentioned in the QCAA ***Unit 4: Text-centred and world-context-centred strategies for short literary texts.***
* Has the student adequately applied both t-c and w-c-c reading strategies?

1. **Cohesion:**

* Highlight the text connectors used. Are they appropriately used?
* Do distinct paragraphs contain valid and complex ideas?
* Do topic sentences signal the content of the paragraph and link to the central idea?