

DECONSTRUCTION OF HUMANITY AND MORALITY IN OVERLORD: BEYOND THE BINARY OF HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN

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Abstrak

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Literary studies often rely on binary oppositions such as human versus non-human and moral versus immoral to construct meaning and ethical judgment. However, poststructuralist thought, particularly Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, challenges the stability and hierarchy embedded in these binaries. This study examines the deconstruction of humanity and morality in *Overlord*, a Japanese light novel by Maruyama Kugane, which subverts traditional fantasy conventions by placing non-human entities at the moral and existential center. Previous studies on deconstruction have largely focused on Western literary texts and human-centered narratives, leaving discussions of Eastern popular literature and non-human moral subjectivity limited. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing how *Overlord* deconstructs the binary opposition between human and non-human and represents morality as a relative and unstable concept. Using qualitative textual analysis, this study employs systematic observation of the narrative structure, character actions, and dialogue from Volumes 1–5 of the novel. The findings demonstrate that *Overlord* reverses traditional hierarchies by depicting humans as weak and immoral, while positioning the non-human protagonist, Ainz Ooal Gown, as the legitimate moral authority. Furthermore, morality in the narrative is shown to be context-dependent, shaped by perspective, power, and authority, rather than universal ethical principles. This study concludes that *Overlord* demonstrates the instability of moral and humanist binaries, offering a post-humanist reinterpretation of morality that challenges anthropocentric assumptions in literary discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is a form of expression that uses language as its medium, revealing the depth of the author's imagination (Ramirez, 2023). Literature typically has a structured, orderly writing structure, as if there were a structure that binds the rules of its writing (Hani, Ajmal & Haider, 2024). However, Poststructuralism, such as Jacques Derrida's (1967) theory of Deconstruction, critiques this structure and deconstructs meaning and refracts it (Gaikwad & Mudgal, 2021). Derrida's theory of binary oppositions attempts to dismantle the hierarchy within pairs of opposing concepts. Hierarchical structures such as human vs. non-human, morality vs. immorality, and humanity vs. inhumanity are analyzed and refuted, emphasizing that these oppositions are never absolute, but rather fluid and open to reinterpretation (Yancun, 2025).

Maruyama Kugane's *Overlord* light novel is one of the masterpieces that subverts this hierarchy. Originating from Japan, this light novel is interesting to study using Derrida's (1967) theory of deconstruction because of its unique main character, Ainz Ooal Gown, a non-human in the form of a human skull who plays the role of savior, wise king and respected by his subordinates (Vasquez 2023). In contrast, humans in this light novel are depicted as amoral, cunning, weak, corrupt, and greedy (Ramirez 2021). This depiction is a reversal of the binary hierarchy described by Derrida (1967): the positions of moral and existential superiority are reversed. Humans, once symbols of virtue, now have flaws. Meanwhile monsters, once symbols of evil, are elevated to the moral center. Thus, *Overlord* deconstructs the classic fantasy trope in which humans embody goodness while monsters embody evil.

Several previous studies such as a study conducted by Bowta and Puluhula (2018) which explored moral reflection and the blurred distinction between human and monster in Mary Sharley's novel *Frankenstein* using Derrida's theory. The second was a study by Tomomatsu (2019), which examined how Mary Shelley herself used deconstruction in *Frankenstein* to dismantle binary oppositions such as man vs. monster and man vs. God. The third was a study by Lu and Li (2022), which investigated the application of deconstruction to relationships such as self vs. other, male vs. female, and cause vs. effect. The fourth, a study conducted by Noor, Ali, Waheed, and Iqbal (2025), discussed the deconstructed moral values in Albert Camus's *The Outsider*, in which their findings suggested that moral dichotomies such as right vs wrong or rational vs. irrational were uncertain and unstable, supporting the idea that deconstruction revealed ethical systems as non-absolute. And the last, a study conducted by Aprilia and Arianto (2021) analyzed Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*, arguing that character roles were never absolute: good and evil, honesty and deceit, or worth and worthlessness coexist in complex and dualistic human behavior.

Previous research has described Derrida's deconstructive research, which focuses on morality, existence, and social meaning in the context of Western or modern literature centered on human existential figures. Meanwhile, this study attempts to fill this gap by placing monsters as the moral and existential center. This study offers a new perspective by using the Eastern literary form, the light novel, as the foundation for deconstructive analysis. Through Maruyama Kugane's *Overlord*, this study examines the shifting moral hierarchy between humans and non-humans, specifically between Ainz (the monster) and humans as his opponents.

This research expands Derrida's ideas on human ethics, demonstrating that moral and humanitarian values apply not only to humans but also to non-human entities. It

provides new insights into how Maruyama reinterprets classic fantasy by reversing its moral perspective, where monsters become the protagonists and moral centers, and humans embody weakness and corruption. Therefore, the researchers formulate the following questions:

1. How does Maruyama Kugane's *Overlord* deconstruct the binary opposition between humans and non-humans?
2. How is morality represented as a relative and unstable concept through interactions between human and non-human characters?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Derrida's Concept of Deconstruction and Binary Opposition

Derrida's concept was first introduced in *Of Grammatology* (1967), which presented a challenge to the meaning of stability in texts by revealing that language is inherently bound by binary pairs of concepts, where one is privileged over the other (Smith, 2022). This theory states that within a binary opposition, there is no natural and fixed hierarchy, but rather a concept that is not absolute and can be dismantled and reconstructed (Johnson & Patel, 2023). In literary analysis, deconstruction requires readers of literary works to better understand the text and sentences that assert the primacy of a context and subvert it, encouraging a fluid understanding of meaning (Yancun, 2025).

Deconstruction is a concept that reconstructs and challenges binary oppositions such as human versus monster, good versus evil, moral versus immoral, and humanity versus inhumanity (Gaikwad & Mudgal, 2021). Derrida argues that these pairs are interdependent, with the notion of "superior" to one concept and inferior to another, thus creating a false absolute hierarchy (Thomson, 2024). By deconstructing such concepts, texts can reveal the instability of contexts, such as monsters possessing morality and humans are not (Lee & Kim, 2023), aligned with the theme of this study which focuses on the deconstruction of binary oppositions in Maruyama Kugane's novel *Overlord*.

The view of meaning deconstructed through binary oppositions such as human vs. non-human, good vs. evil, morality vs. immorality, and humanity vs. inhumanity focuses on Derrida's view that no term can stand alone (Noor, Ali, Waheed, & Iqbal, 2025). This concept of binary opposition produces Difference, a process of endless delay of meaning where the meaning will continue to shift and contradict, preventing a concept from always being absolute (William, 2022). In fantasy literature such as *Overlord* itself, a new representation is put forward where non-human entities such as the main character Ainz opposes the human moral center which is considered always superior in literature context (Chen, 2024).

Theory of Posthumanism

The dichotomy between humans and non-humans has long served as a way to understand identity and morality, placing non-humans such as animals, plants, and monsters as entities beneath humans (Wolfe, 2020). In a literary context, this dichotomy gives one entity a higher status and devalues the other (Haraway, 2021). Posthumanism is a form of thought that emerged as a critique of the concept of human exceptionalism, specifically focusing on humanism and anthropocentrism, asserting that humans are unique and superior because they possess consciousness, reason, and morality (Manson & Powell, 2021). This thinking creates a reconfiguration of subjectivity, questioning the concept of the subject (human), which must be reconstructed to connect with the cycle

of life (Braidotti, 2022). However, this research questions the dichotomy and posthumanism, opening up a broader exploration of subjectivity in which no entity is superior to another and stands alone, but rather is interconnected (*Ibid*).

Criticism of anthropocentrism in contemporary theory is related to posthumanism, which rejects the idea that humans are the center and ultimate measure of existence (Wolfe, 2020). This is illustrated by analyzing the characters' interactions with the protagonist in *Overlord*, Ainz Ooal Gown, who appears cruel and terrifying, but he is the moral center and center of existence (Haraway, 2021). Essentially, this critique centers on a deeper consideration of the perceived biased and interconnected roles of human absolutes in literature and life (Rivera, 2023).

Theoretical Perspectives on Morality

Literature is a prime vehicle for exploring moral ambiguity, particularly the role of the narrator or characters who cannot be implied to be between good and evil, challenging fixed binaries (Tartt, 2023). These elements highlight how ethics can emerge from complex interactions, rather than from absolute values (Žižek, 2025). Within this perspective, we can analyze the ambiguous moral values of whether an action is good or bad without being bound by rigid rules (Yancun, 2025).

Morality is a complex concept. The concept inherent in morality is not bound only by the two concepts of good and evil, but a complexity influenced by the category of changing contexts and perspectives (Gray & Pratt, 2024). Context changes are categorized into situations, social and political, and culture (Xie & Wu, 2025). Situations allow people to lie if it is for the good; social and political view rebels as evil because they consider their politics wrong, and culture provides a broad view of morals and immorality, while perspective provides an assessment of morality to who sees (Butler, 2022). Meanwhile Instability in the category of morality influenced by the context of change and perspective not only provides a new view of the concept of good and evil which is only conceptualized in characters, but also opens up new views on who sees and what situation is happening (Caputo, 2021).

In works of fiction such as *Overlord*, which explores the theme of dystopian fantasy, the intertwining of morality with survival and authority becomes a single and interrelated concept (Saulnier, 2020). This concept explains the interconnectedness of situations where survival and authority within a character influence morality universally (Mohammed & Abdulridha, 2024). The character's choices will destroy the general concept of "good" and "bad" example a character will commit crimes to save a loved one, and the authority he possesses gives him the right to commit such violence, making everyone accept his immoral actions (Loyens, Bors, & Heres, 2023). In the relations to the research, Ainz was the highest figure in the kingdom of Nazarick, where he was the King and Supreme Being who was tasked with leading Nazarick and its people to glory; from a human perspective, Ainz was merely the king of monsters who intended to destroy the world, but from Ainz's perspective, he was simply one of the creatures who wanted his family or kingdom to be happy. In the context of survival and authority, Ainz was a figure who did not hesitate to burn his opponents to the ground if they threatened the kingdom and its people. In terms of authority, he was also undeniable. He stood at the peak of power, and all his actions were considered good by his people. (Gao, 2024). In this case, this context raises the view again in terms of morality bias, opening things up to be more alert to rigid morality, in which morality is not only

"good" and "bad" but the factor of who and why is the basis for us not to immediately draw conclusions and think more objectively (Finden, 2024).

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach that focuses on issues of morality and humanity as represented in literary texts. This approach is chosen because it aligns with the objectives of the study, which emphasize textual analysis and enable the researcher to understand meanings and interpretations derived from the analytical process (Creswell, 2018).

The Primary data is light novel *Overlord* by Maruyama Kugane, this was chosen because *Overlord* presents a concept where non-human are the peak of existence and Morals, which is in accordance with Derrida's binary opposition deconstruction theory. Research at the limit of 5 volumes, this was taken because the volume focused on materials to identify and explore the deconstruction of the hierarchy in binary opposition and the instability of morality in non-human and human characters in *Overlord* (Tartt, 2023).

The data collection techniques used by the researcher were observation. Observation, in qualitative research, refers to the systematic and purposeful recording of phenomena in order to explore texts and understand literary meanings in depth, as data collection technique, observation allows researchers to identify patterns, contradictions, and representations embedded in textual data (Saldaña, 2021). Where the researcher read in depth and made observations, then the data was recorded and classified. The framework for implementing the data collection was to carefully read the novel *Overlord*, then record and quote from the primary data sources, after which the data was classified according to binary opposition and moral instability (Dissanayake, 2025).

For research instruments, researchers use a categorization table as a result of classifying efforts from data collection findings, the category table is as follows:

Table 1: The result of Identifying Binary Opposition

According to data collection, this data is taken from volume 1 chapter 1 to 3, where the data findings are the result of suitable and solid observations that describe how the binary opposition between Human vs Non-Human and Morality vs Immorality are related and interconnected.

No	Utterance/Quotation	Character	Vol/Ch	Category
1.	<i>.....the exposed head was a bare skull</i>	Ainz/Momonga	1-1	Physical non-human trait
2.	<i>“They knelt respectfully and lowered their heads to Momonga. Shalltear, Cocytus, Aura, and Mare all had different bodies and thus they should have each taken their steps forward differently. Yet, the way with which they knelt was identical, and</i>	The Guardians	1-2	demonstrate compliance

	<i>they lined up neatly.”</i>			
3.	<p><i>“The knight in full plate armor stood before the girl and her little sister, his sword raised high.”</i></p> <p><i>“His blade gleamed in the sun, and he poised himself, ready to end their lives in a single merciful stroke.”</i></p>	The Knight of Human	1-1	Human immorality
4.	<i>“Ah... th-thank you for saving us!”</i>	Enri Emmot	1-3	Human response to protection

Table 2: The Result of Identifying Moral Instability

According to data collection, this data is taken from volume 1 chapter 1 to 3 to where the data findings are the result of suitable and solid observations that describe how moral imbalance occurs in the Overlord light novel narrative.

No	Utterance/Quotation	Character	Vol/Ch	Category
1.	<p><i>“Momonga reached out an empty hand and cast his spell....</i></p> <p><i>A feeling of something soft crushing beneath Momonga’s fingers travelled up his arm, and the knight collapsed silently to the ground.....</i></p>	Ainz/Momonga	1-1	Identification of Morality
2	<p><i>“The elder sister squeaked in confusion as Momonga walked past her, probably in fear at the knight’s demise.</i></p> <p><i>Momonga had clearly come to rescue her...”</i></p>	Ainz/Momonga	1-3	Identification of Morality

This data analysis is in the form of in-depth reading and systematic textual observation to examine the narrative structure, character actions, dialogue, moral representation in the novel, analyzing theories with supporting data in the form of scientific data deconstruction theory, binary opposition, morality texts, humanity, and posthumanism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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Based on the data findings, the results show that Overlord consistently reverses the traditional binary opposition regarding the position of humans and non-humans. Non-humans, especially Ainz Ooal Gown as the main character, are positioned as the center of existence, power, and authority, while human characters are depicted as weak, powerless, and immoral. Even though observations were made up to volume 5, the data that matched Derrida's theoretical categorization only covered 1 volume and 3 chapters.

The first category identifies Ainz's physical characteristics visually, "...*the exposed head is a bare skull.*" This statement indicates that Ainz is not a human but a living skeleton commonly referred to as undead. This embodiment of existence serves to identify Ainz as a non-human entity who nevertheless possesses the highest level of existence, power, and authority, as supported by the data quote, "*They knelt respectfully and bowed their heads to Momonga. Shalltear, Cocytus, Aura, and Mare all had different bodies and therefore they should each have stepped forward in different ways. However, the way they knelt was identical, and they were lined up in an orderly manner.*" In this scene, the Floor Guardians kneel and declare their loyalty to Momonga, another name for the main character. and the final data finding "*Ah... thank you for saving us!*" from human little girl state that Ainz's morality as a non-human is more dominant than that of humans themselves.

Further findings demonstrate human immorality as shown by the datum, "*A knight in full armor stood before the girl and her younger sister, his sword held high.*" ... "*His sword glinted in the sunlight, and he stood ready, ready to end their lives in one merciful blow.*" The data explains that a human knight consciously and without hesitation intended to kill a young girl and her younger sister, demonstrating immorality in the human character. This contrasts with the common view of humans, stating humans as the concept of morality itself which explains there should be a narrative that expresses doubt in such immoral acts. The results show that in *Overlord*, humans do not hesitate to show immorality and cruelty to a human girl again stating the binary opposition of humans as a cruel inferior race.

These findings indicate that *Overlord* brings classical literature within the fantasy genre toward a reversal and a new reconstruction. Ainz is depicted as the center of existence, authoritative, respected, and moral toward his people, while humans are portrayed as cruel, immoral, and cunning. In Derrida's theory, this condition reverses the hierarchy of binary opposition, stating that the traditional meaning of "human" as the ultimate center is not fixed or stable.

Derrida's (1967) theory of the deconstruction of binary opposition is highly compatible with *Overlord*. Narratively, *Overlord* presents Ainz as a non-human figure who is superior to humans, demonstrating that hierarchical structures within binaries are fundamentally unstable and constantly shifting. This result aligns with previous research by Tomomatsu (2019), which discusses the boundary between humans and monsters in *Frankenstein*. However, while that study focuses on human center moral ambiguity, *Overlord* goes further by positioning non-humans as the moral and existential center. In addition, this research introduces a perspective that is rarely explored in deconstruction studies, particularly the perspective of Eastern literature, in accordance with the research gap stated in this study.

The connection to real life lies in the emergence of a new perspective in line with deconstructive literary criticism, which reflects and critiques anthropocentric views, particularly within literary works. This research opens a new viewpoint by asserting that non-humans can also become the center of narrative, allowing broader interpretations without the restriction of universal meaning.

The Instability of Morality in Human and Non-Human Interaction

The findings state that morality in *Overlord* is not fixed or categorized simply as “good” and “bad” in a general sense, but is represented through perspective, situation, authority as a ruler and as a non-human, and is relatively unstable and subject to change depending on context. The findings in the data, “*Momonga reached out an empty hand and cast his spell.... A feeling of something soft crushing beneath Momonga’s fingers travelled up his arm, and the knight collapsed silently to the ground.....*”, state that Ainz consciously kills a human knight, and within traditional moral concepts, what Ainz does is considered a bad act. Then, the following data, “*The elder sister squeaked in confusion as Momonga walked past her, probably in fear at the knight’s demise. Momonga had clearly come to rescue her...*”, state that although Ainz commits murder, he saves the young girl and her sister. Moral instability emerges here through perspective, point of view, and situational context; in the eyes of the knights, Ainz is a dangerous, evil, and immoral monster, but conversely, the young girl sees Ainz as a savior and expresses gratitude for his actions. In addition, his role as a non-human, the ruler of monsters, and his possession of power and authority allow Ainz to carry out executions, because this role seemingly legitimizes Ainz’s actions that are generally considered immoral. This moral instability demonstrates that morality in *Overlord* does not function as an absolute principle in a general or traditional sense. Instead, morality depends on context, situation, perspective, and relationships among characters.

The instability of morality is identified in the findings. In line with the theory presented, morality is a complex concept that is not bound solely by the terms “good” and “bad,” but is always viewed from the position, context, situation, and point of view of each character. As stated in the findings, although Ainz generally commits murder and violates common moral perspectives, Ainz’s position as a non-human, his strength and authority, and supporting perspectives present Ainz as a wise and moral being, dismantling the concept of universal and absolute morality. This finding is consistent with Žižek’s (2025) view that morality emerges from complex interactions rather than fixed rules. However, *Overlord* is slightly different, as moral instability does not rely only on complex interactions or perspective, but position, power, and role also influence the moral context.

This implies that literature can function as a medium for evaluating context through multiple perspectives, power, and authority held by characters. Ainz demonstrates that morality can shift when a character possesses the power to actualize actions, authority that is respected, and a figure that is feared, causing morality to change depending on these factors. Consequently, readers are able to view the concept of morality from a broader perspective, revealing the emergence of moral instability.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Overlord* by Maruyama Kugane effectively deconstructs the binary opposition between humans and non-humans by reversing traditional hierarchies of existence, power, and morality through the characterization of

Ainz Ooal Gown. The findings demonstrate that non-human entities are positioned as moral and existential centers, while humans are depicted as morally unstable, weak, and corrupt. Furthermore, the study reveals that morality in *Overlord* is not absolute but relational, shaped by perspective, authority, and situational context. Actions perceived as immoral from a human standpoint may be justified or even celebrated when viewed from the perspective of power, protection, and survival, indicating that moral judgment in the narrative is fluid and unstable.

This study concludes that *Overlord* deconstructs the binary opposition between humans and non-humans by reversing the traditional hierarchy of morality, power, and existence. Through *Ainz Ooal Gown*, non-human characters are positioned as moral and existential centers, while humans are portrayed as morally unstable and corrupt. The findings also suggest that morality in the narrative is not absolute but contextual, shaped by perspective, authority, and situational conditions. Consequently, *Overlord* challenges anthropocentric assumptions and demonstrates the instability of moral and humanist binaries through a posthumanist lens.

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