

# Representation of the Nonhuman and Its Ethical Implications in Japanese Web Novels: A Digital Humanities Approach

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**Abstract:** This study examines how non-human entities are represented in Japanese web novels and what ethical implications such representations entail, through a two-layered approach combining data-driven analysis and narrative analysis. Based on large-scale metadata collected from the web-novel platforms *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* and *Kakuyomu*, the study conducts morphological and keyword analyses to trace the linguistic patterns and grammatical combinations of non-human-related expressions. The results reveal that the non-human is not a fixed category but a relational Other defined by human perception and desire. Non-human beings are repeatedly verbalized as devices that supplement human growth, salvation, or deficiency, and their attributes are absorbed into or transformed by anthropocentric narrative logic. The subsequent narrative analysis demonstrates how this linguistic tendency is embodied in actual storylines. Non-human entities function not as peripheral ornaments but as structural centers that shape the direction of narrative worlds. In particular, within *isekai* reincarnation narratives, the inversion of non-human attributes through cliché inversion becomes prominent, appearing in both protagonists and companions depicted as non-human. Furthermore, the game-based systems frequently employed in these works relegate pain and death to the background, converting the suffering of others into resources for the protagonist's growth and transforming morality into a selective value contingent upon purpose or alignment. Ultimately, non-human entities operate as mirrors reflecting human desire and limitation and as narrative mechanisms that expose the boundaries of anthropocentric imagination. By integrating quantitative data analysis with close reading, this study elucidates how contemporary Japanese web novels construct the boundary between human and non-human and reveal the shifting sensibility of ethics within popular digital narratives.

**Keywords:** Japanese web novels; non-human; data-driven analysis; narrative analysis; anthropocentric narrative; ethical sensibility

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**标题：**日本网络小说中的非人类表征及其伦理意涵：数字人文方法

**内容摘要：**本文以数据分析与文本细读为双重路径，考察日本网络小说如何书写“非人类”存在及其所牵引的伦理议题。研究依托两大平台“小说家になろう”与“カクヨム”的元数据，结合形态素与关键词分析，梳理非人类相关表达在词汇选择、语法搭配与叙事语汇中的出现样态。结果显示，“非人类”并非预设完备的类别，而更像是由人类感知与欲望生成的关系性他者：此类存在反复被书写为补足人类成长、救赎或弥补缺憾的叙事装置，其属性常被人类中心的叙事逻辑吸收、改写，甚至转化为服务“人成长”的功能性资源。在叙事层面，这一语言倾向并不止于修辞，而是直接介入世界结构的搭建。许多作品使非人类角色由边缘走向中枢，进而左右故事世界的运行。尤以异世界转生类型为甚，“叙事俗套的反转”屡见不鲜：非人类特质通过反转与重组，被投射到主人公及其同伴身上，化为可被消费的“优势属性”。与此同时，普遍的游戏化系统处理使痛苦与死亡被弱化为背景变量；他者的苦难被计量为可利用的经验值或资源，道德判断亦更易随目的、立场与阵营发生选择性滑移。由此可见，非人类既是映照人类欲望与局限的镜像，也是暴露人类中心想象边界的叙事机制。通过量化分析与细读的并置，本文旨在揭示当代日本网络小说在“人/非人”边界建构上的结构性倾向，并勾勒流行数字叙事中伦理感受性的变动轨迹。

**关键词：**日本网络小说；非人类；数据驱动分析；叙事分析；人类中心叙事；伦理感受性

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## Introduction

Since the early 2000s, the term “web novel” has been used for fiction published on online platforms by their users. In Japan, such platforms have evolved into open

spaces that allow anyone to create and share stories with minimal involvement from professional writers or publishers, allowing anonymous writers to transform their imaginations into narrative form, producing distinctive grammars and conventions that require a specific kind of community literacy. As web novels value shared emotion and real-time interaction with readers above literary refinement, they function as collective archives of contemporary Japanese imagination.

One of the most remarkable features of such works is the frequent appearance of nonhuman beings. These entities serve not merely as fantasy devices but as core components in the construction of fictional worlds. Although this tendency partly reflects the predominance of the fantasy genre, its repetition reflects underlying collective structures of thought and emotion. Representations of the nonhuman thus offer insight into how contemporary Japanese society imagines—and senses—what it means to be human.

Web-novel platforms in particular constitute a new-media ecosystem in which writers and readers constantly interact. Within these novels, nonhuman beings appear in multiple contexts, shifting and recurring in ways that reveal certain narrative tendencies. Their modes of representation therefore go beyond idiosyncrasies of individual creative taste to offer insight into the community's collective structures of perception.

Accordingly, this study employs metadata collected through text-mining methods focused on the keywords and titles of major web-novel platforms to analyze how nonhuman entities are positioned and represented within the narratives of Japanese web novels and identify the narrative regularities and expressive patterns that characterize the representation of the nonhuman. Through this analysis, it seeks to explore how narratives involving the nonhuman articulate dimensions of humanity and reflect the structures through which contemporary Japanese readers perceive the Other.

To explore narratives that feature nonhuman entities throughout the corpus of Japanese web novels, this study collected and analyzed data using Python. Metadata were obtained from two major platforms, *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* (小説家になろう) and *Kakuyomu* (カクヨム), covering works published up to July 2025. After removing duplicates from the combined dataset, the 500 most frequently occurring keywords were extracted, 20 of which<sup>1</sup> were identified as referring to nonhuman beings. Works containing at least one of these keywords were then selected, yielding

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1 demon lord (魔王), inhuman being (人外), artificial intelligence (人工知能), robot (ロボット), yokai (妖怪), monster (怪獣), god (神), devil (悪魔), witch (魔女), dragon (ドラゴン), angel (天使), monster (モンスター), vampire (吸血鬼), android (アンドロイド), spirit (精霊), fiend (魔物), elf (エルフ), magician (魔法使い), beastman (獣人), fairy (妖精).

a dataset of approximately 160,000 web novels in which nonhuman entities appear.

Next, to examine the linguistic characteristics found in the actual titles, morphological analysis was conducted on the titles of the works in the dataset and noun frequencies were calculated. The analysis used libraries like pandas and MeCab, which also served to verify lexical consistency between the keywords and the titles. In general, keywords are metadata that authors register to help readers find works aligned with their preferences. Thus, while a common noun like *monster* (怪獣) may appear as a keyword, it could be replaced by other expressions or metaphors in the title.

However, the analysis revealed little difference between the two. The 20 most frequent nonhuman nouns in titles were *demon lord* (魔王), *witch* (魔女), *devil* (悪魔), *god* (神様), *goddess* (女神), *angel* (天使), *dragon* (ドラゴン), *vampire* (吸血鬼), *spirit* (精霊), *god of death* (死神), *elf* (エルフ), *fiend* (魔物), *fairy* (妖精), *magician* (魔法使い), *yokai* (妖怪), *AI*, *monster* (モンスター), *robot* (ロボット), *sorcerer* (魔術師), and *magical girl* (魔法少女). This close correspondence in words for nonhuman entities between the keyword metadata and the titles themselves confirms the reliability of the dataset constructed from keyword-based extraction, reflecting the fact that unlike traditional literary works, the titles of web novels tend to explicitly reveal key narrative information. Because the works on these platforms are largely composed by amateur writers, the title is crucial to attract readers and often includes direct references to relationships, worldviews, or main settings. Thus, as the titles generally function not merely as labels but as narrative clues, they constitute an essential dataset for analyzing how nonhuman beings are represented.

To examine the linguistic position that each nonhuman entity occupies within the narrative, the dataset was subjected to a morphological analysis focusing on the particles that follow nonhuman nouns and the verbs. In Japanese, the particles *wa* (は, topic marker) and *ga* (が, subject marker) indicate the grammatical subject of a sentence, while *wo* (を, object marker) denotes the object of an action. The particle *no* (の, genitive/attributive marker), although contextually versatile—signifying possession, attribute, or agency—was interpreted as expressing an attributive relationship of the nonhuman entity, with the following noun taken as the focus of analysis.

This approach allowed us to linguistically trace what kinds of beings nonhuman entities are within Japanese web novels, and, by analyzing how they are represented, to explore the collective sensibilities and ethical imagination through which particular roles are ascribed to nonhuman beings in contemporary Japan.

The corpus analysis establishes where nonhuman entities sit in language—

who acts, who is acted upon, and what kinds of attributes cluster around them. Close readings then show how these positions become narrative mechanisms. Role reversals turn demon lords, witches, and gods into sympathetic centers, while the same logic shapes companions and heroines. Game-like systems further compress ethical weight by making harm calculable, by softening the finality of death, and by letting morality hinge on alignment, utility, and progress.

### Data-driven Analysis of Nonhuman Representation in Japanese Web Novels

This study employed the Japanese morphological analyzer MeCab to examine how each nonhuman noun in the constructed dataset functions within sentences. Specifically, the combinations of nonhuman nouns with grammatical particles were extracted and categorized into three types: *no* ( の ), *wa/ga* ( は ・ が ), and *wo* ( を ), whose frequency and proportional distribution were then calculated. In this analysis, *no* ( の ) generally denotes an attributive or relational connection, *wa/ga* ( は ・ が ) the grammatical subject or topic, and *wo* ( を ) the object of an action. These functional distinctions allow us to clarify how nonhuman entities operate as agents, attributes, or objects within narrative syntax. The table below summarizes the frequency with which each of the 10 most prominent nonhuman entities appeared in combination with these particles.

noun	の (attributive)	は ・ が (agentive)	を (object)	total
demon lord (魔王)	2203 (49.5%)	1306 (29.3%)	945 (21.2%)	4454
witch (魔女)	845 (60.4%)	487 (34.8%)	66 (4.7%)	1398
god (神様)	522 (56.7%)	361 (39.2%)	37 (4.0%)	920
demon (悪魔)	550 (64.9%)	210 (24.8%)	87 (10.3%)	847
angel (天使)	408 (58.6%)	245 (35.2%)	43 (6.2%)	696
goddess (女神)	421 (64.4%)	187 (28.6%)	46 (7.0%)	654
vampire (吸血鬼)	304 (59.6%)	178 (34.9%)	28 (5.5%)	510
dragon (ドラゴン)	254 (59.1%)	108 (25.1%)	68 (15.8%)	430
god of death (死神)	265 (65.4%)	127 (31.4%)	13 (3.2%)	405
spirit (精霊)	236 (74.2%)	60 (18.9%)	22 (6.9%)	318

Overall, the combinations with *no* ( の ) had the highest proportion, accounting for more than 60% on average, followed by the agentive combination (*wa/ga*, は ・ が) at around 30% and the object combination (*wo*, を) at less than 10%. In Japanese web novels, nonhuman entities are overwhelmingly invoked through attributive relationships, such as “the power of ~” or “the world of ~,” suggesting that they primarily function as structural components of the fictional world rather than as

independent agents.

Meanwhile, a considerable portion of sentences featured *wa/ga*-combinations, in which nonhuman entities appeared as narrative agents. In particular, the proportions of agentive *witch* (魔女), *god* (神様), *angel* (天使), and *vampire* (吸血鬼) exceeded 30%, implying that these beings often act as central figures driving the narrative rather than remaining in the background.

In contrast, the *wo* (を) combination made up less than 10% of the cases for most entities, though *demon lord* (魔王), *dragon* (ドラゴン), and *demon* (悪魔) exceeded this threshold. These entities are often defined through relations of confrontation or opposition, functioning as others who are acted upon, resisted, or symbolically contested within the story world.

### Combination with *no* (の): Attributive Relation

To examine the overall tendency of *no*-combinations in greater detail, a clustering analysis was performed based on the semantic similarities between nonhuman nouns and the nouns that follow *no* to identify the most frequent attributes or conceptual associations of each nonhuman entity within the text. For each nonhuman entity, three high-frequency clusters of nouns appearing after *no* were extracted, and the most frequently occurring nouns within each cluster were also identified.

noun	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
demon lord (魔王)	another world (異世界), world (世界)	bride (嫁), wife (妻), bride (花嫁)	daughter (娘), son (息 子)
witch (魔女)	origin (もと), power (力)	bride (花嫁)	curse (呪い), disciple (弟子)
demon (悪魔)	strongest (最強), power (力)	king (王)	blood (血)
god (神様)	mistake (手違い), error (間違い), miss (ミス)	work (仕事)	another world (異世界), story (物語)
goddess (女神)	another world (異世界), world (世界)	divine blessing (加護), reincarnation (転生)	mistake (手違い), fault (せい), miss (ミス)
angel (天使)	like (~よう)	wings (羽), wings (翼), arrow (矢)	another world (異世界), story (物語)

dragon (ドラゴン)	king (王), magic power (魔力)	child (子), daughter (娘), baby (赤ちゃん)	egg (卵), bride (花嫁), meat (肉)
vampire (吸血鬼)	another world (異世界), true ancestor (真祖), king (王)	girl (少女), princess (姫), daughter (娘)	bride (花嫁), I (私)
spirit (精霊)	child (子), children (子供)	beloved child (愛し子), divine blessing (加護)	spring (泉), forest (森)
god of death (死神)	wish (願い事)	love (恋)	work (仕事), job (お仕事)

This analysis clarified how nonhuman entities are represented within web-novel narratives. *Demon lord* (魔王) is associated with nouns like *world* (世界), *bride* (花嫁), and *child* (子), suggesting that it is portrayed as standing at the apex of its world while simultaneously embodying familial qualities. *Witch* (魔女), on the other hand, frequently co-occurs with words like *origin* (もと), *power* (力), *curse* (呪い), and *disciple* (弟子) that represent her as a source of knowledge and magic, or as one who transmits and exercises such abilities.

An especially notable pattern appears in the clusters related to *god* (神様) and *goddess* (女神), which include terms like *mistake* (手違い), *error* (間違い), and *miss* (ミス). This indicates that divine beings—typically imagined as absolute—are frequently reinterpreted within web novels as imperfect and fallible. Similarly, *god of death* (死神) is often linked with words like *work* (仕事) and *job* (お仕事), suggesting that it is reimagined in the image of a laborer performing a professional duty. These findings imply that nonhuman entities in Japanese web novels are not merely portrayed as transcendent beings but are increasingly endowed with human attributes such as family, labor, and error—reflecting a humanization of the nonhuman within the contemporary popular imagination.

### Combination with *wa/ga* (は・が): Representation as Agent

In the next stage, the verbs that co-occur with *wa/ga* (は・が) were analyzed to identify the kinds of actions that nonhuman entities perform when they appear as agents. Because verbs are more highly context-dependent than nouns, automatic clustering was difficult. Thus, the most frequent verbs were extracted and manually grouped by semantic similarity, allowing the main types of actions performed by each nonhuman entity within the narratives to be identified.

Noun	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
demon lord	exist (いる), appear (現れる), revive (蘇る)	defeat (倒す), fight (戦う), attack (攻める)	die (死ぬ), cry (泣く), love (愛する)
witch	exist (いる), live (住む), be born (生まれる)	cry (泣く), laugh (笑う), love (愛す)	escape (逃げる), pick up (拾う), work (働く)
devil	come (来る), approach (やってくる), emerge (出る)	laugh (笑う), smile (笑む), know (知る)	die (死ぬ), aim (狙う), kill (殺す)
god	exist (いる), see (見る), be seen (見える)	give (くれる), help (助ける), say (言う)	die (死ぬ), appear (現れる), disappear (消える)
goddess	smile (笑む), love (愛す), give (与える)	appear (現れる), descend (舞い降りる), announce (告げる)	forgive (許す), work (働く), live (住む)
angel	descend (舞い降りる), come down (降りる), appear (現れる)	laugh (笑う), love (愛す), smile (笑む)	help (助ける), guide (導く), teach (教える)
dragon	exist (いる), live (住む), come (来る)	cry (泣く), suffer (病む), laugh (笑う)	burn (焼く), break (砕ける), fly (飛ぶ)
vampire	die (死ぬ), survive (生き抜く), end (終わる)	steal (奪う), begin (始める), destroy (滅ぼす)	laugh (笑える), entertain (もてなす), send (送る)
spirit	dwell (宿る), exist (いる), be seen (見える)	laugh (笑う), sing (うたう), be silent (黙る)	imprison (閉じ込める), attach (つく), gather (集う)
god of death	die (死ぬ), approach (やってくる), live (生きる)	see (見る), think (思う), become transparent (透き通る)	bestow (施す), take charge (預かる), protect (守る)

The actions performed by nonhuman entities as agents can be broadly classified into three categories. First, *exist* (いる) appears universally across almost all entities, indicating that nonhuman beings are represented as active, existing agents within the narrative world. Second, the frequent occurrence of *die* (死ぬ) suggests that these beings are portrayed not as immortal absolutes but as entities with finite lives. Third, emotional verbs like *laugh* (笑う), *cry* (泣く), and *love* (愛す) appear frequently, showing that nonhuman entities are reconfigured as subjects of emotion. In addition, verbs of giving and forgiveness like *give* (くれる), *help* (助ける), and *forgive* (許す) are often found in relation to gods and goddesses, while verbs like *bestow* (施す) and *protect* (守る) used with the god of death point to a moral or labor-oriented dimension. These findings indicate that divinity in Japanese web novels is less about transcendent authority and more about human ethical

sentiment and the ethics of labor. In short, nonhuman agents in web novels are not absolute beings, but humanized powers that perform emotions and participate in the world.

### Analysis of the Particle *wo* ( を ): Representation as Objects

In contrast to the previous section, which examined how nonhuman entities act as agents, this section analyzes how they function as objects of action. To this end, clauses in which each nonhuman noun is followed by *wo* ( を ) were extracted, and the following verbs were analyzed in the same way as that used in the *walga* ( は・が ) analysis: Verbs were separated through morphological parsing, ranked by frequency, and interpreted based on the most frequent items.

The particle *wo* ( を ) functions as an accusative marker, that is, it indicates the target or direct object of an action. Therefore, this analysis aims to identify what kinds of actions are directed toward nonhuman entities and in what relational contexts they are situated. In other words, by examining the passivity of objects in contrast to the agency of subjects, this section explores how nonhuman entities are represented and othered within the narrative.

Noun	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
demon lord	defeat ( 倒す ), kill ( 殺す ), slay ( 討つ )	capture ( 捕まえる ), seal ( 封じる ), control ( 操る )	save ( 救う ), help ( 助ける ), protect ( 守る )
witch	defeat ( 倒す ), kill ( 殺す ), slay ( 討つ )	help ( 助ける ), protect ( 守る ), save ( 救う )	search ( 探す ), aim at ( 狙う ), pursue ( 目指す )
devil	summon ( 呼び出す ), subjugate ( 従える ), accompany ( 添える )	kill ( 殺す ), destroy ( 滅ぼす ), defeat ( 倒す )	love ( 愛す ), forgive ( 許す )
god	defeat ( 倒す ), beat to death ( ぶっ殺す ), drive away ( 追い返す )	aim for ( 目指す ), search ( 探す )	quit ( やめる ), give up ( 諦める ), be troubled ( 困る )
goddess	kill ( 殺す ), strike ( ぶん殴る ), defeat ( 倒す )	help ( 助ける ), save ( 救う ), protect ( 守る )	use ( 使う ), seize ( 乗っ取る )
angel	kill ( 殺す ), kick ( 蹴る ), hit ( 殴る )	help ( 助ける ), keep ( 飼う )	embrace ( 抱く ), console ( 慰める )
dragon	defeat ( 倒す ), hunt ( 狩る ), kill ( 殺す )	pick up ( 拾う ), raise ( 育てる ), take along ( 連れてる )	help ( 助ける ), desire ( 求める ), love ( 愛す )

vampire	can defeat ( 倒せる ), kill ( 殺す ), target ( 狙う )	help ( 助ける ), protect ( 守る )	visit ( 訪ねる )
spirit	save ( 救う ), revive ( 蘇る )	capture ( 捕まえる )	adore ( 愛でる ), lure ( 釣る )
god of death	call ( 呼ぶ ), declare name ( 名乗る )	cut ( 斬る ), strike ( 殴る ), defeat ( 討ち取る )	dwell ( 宿す ), employ ( 雇う )

The *wo* ( を ) analysis found that nonhuman entities were consistently represented as objects directly acted upon by human agents—that is, as projections of human desire and emotion. Powerful beings such as demon lords, devils, and dragons frequently co-occur with verbs like *defeat* ( 倒す ), *kill* ( 殺す ), and *slay* ( 討つ ), functioning as “others to be challenged and overcome.”

In contrast, entities such as witches, goddesses, and angels often appear with emotional verbs like *help* ( 助ける ), *protect* ( 守る ), and *save* ( 救う ), positioning them as relational beings that share human feelings. The fact that such beings are predominantly characterized by “feminine attributes” suggests that even narratives dealing with the nonhuman are created and consumed within a male-centered narrative framework.

Furthermore, spirits and dragons appear with verbs such as *capture* ( 捕まえる ), *take along* ( 連れる ), and *raise* ( 育てる ), while the god of death is paired with verbs like *employ* ( 雇う ), indicating that transcendent beings are often depicted as possessions or laboring agents serving others.

In this way, the *wo* ( を ) constructions reveal how nonhuman entities are represented as instrumental beings that sustain human desire and order in a transformation of the nonhuman from a transcendent other into a “functional apparatus for the human” within the imaginative landscape of web novels.

These analyses indicate that nonhuman entities are not fixed concepts but are defined through their relationships with humans, functioning as relational others shaped by human perception and desire. In Japanese web novels, these beings tend to appear as imaginative others—figures invoked to expand humans’ self-awareness or redefine their world. By confirming these tendencies through large-scale corpus analyses, this study illustrates how nonhuman entities are linguistically constructed and imbued with meaning within anthropocentric narrative frameworks. The following section examines how such linguistic representations are embodied in actual storylines and the kinds of ethical issues that they raise.

### Representation of the Nonhuman and Its Ethical Implications

This section examines how nonhuman entities and their associated ethical

dimensions are portrayed in actual works. To this end, 30 titles<sup>1</sup> were selected from among the top 100 in the overall rankings of the Japanese web-novel platforms *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* and *Kakuyomu*, focusing on those whose titles or tags explicitly contain nonhuman elements. This selection was made to identify works in which nonhuman beings or motifs function not merely as peripheral elements in the background or as elements consumed in isolated episodes, but as core components that directly influence the composition and development of the narrative as a whole.

### Representation of the Nonhuman

Across the 30 selected works, nonhuman entities appear in a wide variety of roles: as protagonists, allies, secondary characters, tools for personal growth, or adversaries or objects of vengeance to be defeated. When the nonhuman is the central subject, it most often is portrayed as embodying a capacity that transcends human limitations or serving as a framework for alternative forms of growth.

In *The Unwanted Undead Adventurer*, the protagonist Rentt is a professional adventurer who makes a living by exploring dungeons and slaying monsters, yet he remains confined to the lower levels, unable to break through his growth ceiling. After being attacked and devoured by a dragon, he is reborn as a monster and gains

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1 〈Kakuyomu〉「誰にでもできる影から助ける魔王討伐」, 「怠惰な悪辱貴族に転生した俺、シナリオをぶっ壊したら規格外の魔力で最凶になった」, 「禁断師弟でブレイクスルー～勇者の息子が魔王の弟子で何が悪い～」, 「伝説に残らなかった大賢者」, 「俺は勇者に向けていない～主人公を譲ってあげたら世界が滅亡しかけてるんだが～」, 「極振り拒否して手探りスタート! 特化しないヒーラー、仲間と別れて旅に出る」, 「怠惰の王子は祖国を捨てる～氷の魔神の凍争記～」, 「デーモンルーラー～定時に帰りたい男のやりすぎレベリング～」, 「宮廷魔導師見習いを辞めて、魔法アイテム職人になります」, 「能ある龍は爪を隠す～無能と罵られた男爵家長男、実は世界最強の一角につき～」, 「金属スライムを倒しまくった俺が【黒鋼の王】と呼ばれるまで」 11 works in total. 〈Shōsetsuka ni Narō〉「転生したらスライムだった件」, 「ありふれた職業で世界最強」, 「ヘルモード～やり込み好きのゲーマーは廃設定の異世界で無双する～」, 「蜘蛛ですが、なにか?」, 「異世界のんびり農家」, 「神達に拾われた男」, 「ハズレ枠の【状態異常スキル】で最強になった俺がすべてを蹂躪するまで」, 「望まぬ不死の冒険者」, 「転生したら剣でした」, 「サイレント・ウィッチ」, 「愛さないといわれましても～元魔王の伯爵令嬢は生真面目軍人に餌付けをされて幸せになる～」, 「魔女と傭兵」, 「Knight's & Magic」, 「魔王学院の不適合格者～史上最強の魔王の始祖、転生して子孫たちの学校へ通う～」, 「魔王と勇者の戦いの裏で～ゲーム世界に転生したけど友人の勇者が魔王討伐に旅立ったあとの国内お留守番～」, 「信者ゼロの女神サマと始める異世界攻略」, 「ライブダンジョン!」, 「難攻不落の魔王城へようこそ～デバフは不要と勇者パーティーを追い出された黒魔導師、魔王軍の最高幹部に迎えられる～」, 「魔王様の街づくり! ～最強のダンジョンは近代都市～」 19 works in total.

strength through a process called “existential evolution” in which he evolves step by step from skeleton to ghoul, wight, and finally vampire.

These structures illustrate how the conventions of the *isekai* reincarnation genre are realized through the narrative device of nonhuman entities. In most *isekai* narratives, reincarnation or transference is accompanied by the acquisition of extraordinary abilities. In the novels discussed above, the use of a nonhuman as protagonist serves to subtly subvert or modify standard *isekai* clichés, diversifying the modes of growth<sup>1</sup> and creating new forms of conflict—such as discrimination by human societies—through abilities unattainable by humans.

This use of nonhuman entities as a narrative mechanism often manifests in what may be termed “cliché inversion.” This tendency is most prominent in stories where the demon lord (*maō*) appears not as an antagonist but as a protagonist, companion, or ally.

Traditionally, the demon lord represents overwhelming power and embodies the principle of evil—an adversary to the hero, a harbinger of war, and a figure intent on conquest or destruction. However, these traits are largely diluted when the demon lord is the protagonist or central figure, and the character’s personality is reconstructed around the consciousness of a reincarnated or transferred human self.

In *Creating a City for the Demon King!*, the protagonist, though a demon lord sustained by human despair, seeks to establish a city built upon coexistence with humankind. Similarly, in *The Misfit of Demon King Academy: History’s Strongest Demon King Reincarnates and Goes to School with His Descendants*, the desire and efforts of the protagonist Anos, despite being a demon lord, to achieve world peace form the moral and narrative center of the work. The same holds true for *Silent Witch*, whose protagonist Monica is portrayed not as a malevolent sorceress but as a timid young girl with extraordinary magical abilities and a compassionate heart. Her identity as a witch does not mark her as a source of fear or corruption but as an emblem of warmth and emotional depth.

In these cases, nonhuman identity becomes a vehicle for humanization—a means of reversing the polarity between the monstrous and the moral. What was once defined as the domain of evil or otherness is reimagined as a site of empathy, virtue, and ethical reflection, revealing a broader transformation in how contemporary web novels negotiate the boundaries between the human and the

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1 In *In That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime and So I’m a Spider, So What?*, Rimuru and White exploit their inherent characteristics as monsters to devour their opponents and grow stronger, while in *The Unwanted Undead Adventurer*, Rentt takes advantage of his undead nature—being immune to poison—to conquer monsters that would normally be impossible to defeat alone.

nonhuman.

This narrative tendency is also evident in the depictions of nonhuman entities who appear as companions or supporting figures. In *Creating a City for the Demon King!*, for instance, one central supporting character is a beast-type demon lord who functions as a maternal figure and the main heroine, actively aiding the protagonist while showing no interest in conquest or destruction. Other demon lords portrayed in the same work are similarly depicted as benevolent and protective beings who cherish and care for their subordinates.

A comparable pattern is found in *I Quit My Apprenticeship as a Court Mage and Became a Magic Item Craftsman*, where the demon lord Belial appears not as an adversary but as a protective ally who assists the protagonist in times of crisis. In *So I'm a Spider, So What?*, the demon lord Ariel<sup>1</sup> is portrayed as the protagonist White's closest friend and comrade. Likewise, in *A Breakthrough Brought by Forbidden Master and Disciple*, Tre'ainar, a demon lord, becomes both mentor and spiritual guide to Earth, the hero's son. Although Tre'ainar was once sealed away by Earth's father—the legendary hero—for being a “great demon lord,” the story later reveals that her invasion of the human world stemmed not from malice but from curiosity and goodwill.

This “cliché inversion” also extends to the representation of divine beings. Gods are depicted in these narratives not as flawless omnipotent entities but as emotional, fallible figures who experience failure and struggle to make amends. They may pity reincarnated protagonists and bestow upon them divine powers<sup>2</sup>, or conversely, abandon those whose abilities disappoint them, thereby becoming objects of resentment and revenge.<sup>3</sup> At times, they observe the protagonist's journey for amusement<sup>4</sup>, and in other cases, they relinquish their divinity entirely to live among humans—occasionally even taking the role of a heroine.<sup>5</sup>

This subversion is not limited to the representation of gods. In *So I'm a Spider*,

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1 In the story, the demon lord Ariel despises humans and wages war against them; however, this is because the cause of the world's destruction lies with humanity itself. She is herself portrayed as a savior who rescues vampires oppressed by humans and as an ally who joins forces with the protagonist to defeat the true mastermind, Potimas, and save the world.

2 Farming Life in Another World, By the Grace of the Gods, and Hell Mode: Gamer Who Loves Grinding Becomes Unmatched in a Trash Setting, etc.

3 Failure Frame: I Became the Strongest and Annihilated Everything with Low-Level Spells.

4 *So I'm a Spider, So What?* and *Creating a City for the Demon King!*—however, the gods depicted in these works are portrayed as nearly omnipotent beings who often function as a kind of *deus ex machina* to instantaneously resolve the narrative's conflicts.

5 Full Clearing Another World under a Goddess with Zero Believers.

*So What?*, the cyborg elf Potimas appears as the true antagonist who brings about the world's destruction in pursuit of divinity, triggering the reincarnation of White and her classmates. In *Creating a City for the Demon King!*, the protagonist's subordinates include a sadistic elf who delights in slaughter and a skeleton who also serves as a strategist and advisor.

The inversion of these archetypes is taken even further in *The Impregnable Demon King's Castle*. Like *Live Dungeon!*, this work features dungeon conquests that are broadcast in real time, transforming battles into a spectacle of entertainment directly tied to social status, fame, and profit. Dungeon raids by heroes are no longer acts of self-sacrifice or missions to protect the world, and a demon lord's defeat is no longer a symbol of destruction or domination.

An intriguing pattern in many of these nonhuman configurations is that they serve primarily to enhance the individuality, narrative significance, and emotional appeal of the heroines who accompany the protagonist. Together, these heroines construct what may be described as an *isekai* harem—a narrative space in which numerous heroines coexist within an alternate world centered around the protagonist.

Within this structure, each heroine must be distinguished through unique visual and narrative traits, a function that the motif of the nonhuman performs quite effectively. In *Farming Life in Another World*, for instance, the heroines include elves, vampires, dragons, and angels. In *Creating a City for the Demon King!*, the three main heroines are a fox beastwoman, a dwarf, and an elf. These nonhuman traits—silver hair, long ears, tails, and other distinct features—highlight physical allure while also justifying the heroines' extraordinary strength and capacity to act as the protagonist's equal or companion. Moreover, her nonhuman identity frequently affords each heroine an independent backstory that enriches the broader narrative world.

Typically, these heroines possess abilities that complement the protagonist's shortcomings in combat, magic, knowledge, or survival. In many works, elves assist through spirit magic or their affinity with nature; vampires and beastkin excel in battle; and dwarves contribute through mechanical or blacksmithing expertise. As the heroines accompany the protagonist on his journey, their skills evolve in tandem, strengthening the protagonist's development and the narrative itself.

At the same time, the nonhuman attributes of each heroine often serve as the foundation for independent storylines that reinforce emotional intimacy with the protagonist. In *Witch and the Mercenary*, the heroine Saoirse lives as a persecuted

witch<sup>1</sup> on a continent where magic has disappeared. The mercenary protagonist, Zig, empathizes with her plight—seeing in her his own marginalization—and accepts her request for protection as they travel together. In *The Impregnable Demon King's Castle*, the heroine Camilla is attacked by humans because she is a vampire, only to be rescued by the protagonist. Her gratitude soon deepens into affection, and she eventually recruits him into the demon lord's ranks. Such structures not only strengthen emotional bonds between hero and heroine but also demonstrate how the nonhuman motif is actively employed as a narrative mechanism to generate central storylines.

Taken together, these observations reveal that nonhuman entities in web novels are not peripheral decorations or fantastical backdrops but central narrative agents that determine the thematic direction and moral tone of the work. When depicted as protagonists, they embody capabilities and paths of growth inaccessible to ordinary humans, thereby reinterpreting the grammar of the *isekai* genre. This inversion of conventional roles transforms the demon lord into a figure of creation, peace, and coexistence, while reimagining the divine as emotional and imperfect. Similarly, nonhuman allies and companions mirror the same logic: They differentiate the heroines' individuality, deepen affective relationships with the protagonist, and sustain the architecture of growth and storytelling itself.

### **The Nonhuman and the Ethics of Web Novels**

How then is the ethical dimension of the nonhuman depicted in actual works?

To address this question, we must first consider the game-based systems that are particularly prominent in *isekai* reincarnation narratives. In many of these works, the world operates under a visible system revealed by a god or some unknown higher being through which one can identify numerical attributes such as level, occupation, skills, or current health and stamina. This system typically endows the protagonist with a special ability unique to himself that he uses to grow, survive, and advance the storyline.

However, once the elements of health points (HP), magic points (MP), levels, occupations, and skills are rendered visible through such a system, the protagonist begins to perceive reality itself as a game. When an opponent's strength can be numerically confirmed through level and skill, the protagonist calculates whether to evade or fight, determines strategies based on the opponent's traits, and monitors

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1 In the story, witches are portrayed as a distinct race, and it is said that humans instinctively feel aversion or fear upon encountering them. However, magic still exists in the continent to which Saoirse and Zig relocate, and thus persecution against witches is notably absent.

personal crises by checking remaining HP or MP.

Through this structure, moments of extreme danger or suffering gradually lose their gravity through dilution by the logic of gameplay. This process is accelerated through mechanisms such as perfect recovery upon leveling up or by consuming restorative items. In *So I'm a Spider, So What?*, for example, the protagonist White does not fear losing limbs or being burned, reasoning that she will simply heal after gaining a level.<sup>1</sup> In *Hell Mode: Gamer Who Loves Grinding Becomes Unmatched in a Trash Setting*, the protagonist Allen repeatedly overcomes otherwise fatal crises with the aid of recovery items. Consequently, death and pain recede into the background of the growth narrative; as these patterns repeat, such experiences are no longer perceived as irreversible but as obstacles that can always be overcome.

Moreover, this attenuation of death and pain is not confined to the protagonist; it extends to other characters, producing a profound ethical void. In *The Impregnable Demon King's Castle*, for instance, the protagonist casually severs the arm of a former comrade who invades the demon lord's domain or commands monsters to kill without hesitation.<sup>2</sup> In *So I'm a Spider, So What?*, despite retaining memories of her human life, the protagonist regards the massacre of humans who trespass into her territory as entirely justified.

Through such portrayals, beings who stand in opposition to the protagonist—whether human or monster—are gradually reduced to instruments of growth. The lives of others are translated into quantifiable experience points, their deaths absorbed into the mechanics of the system. As the protagonist's development becomes the central axis of the narrative, others are objectified and their suffering erased.

This utilitarian logic is even more pronounced in *Hell Mode*, where the protagonist Allen, a summoner capable of commanding numerous familiars, pursues “efficient” combat by repeatedly sacrificing and resummoning his familiars as disposable resources.<sup>3</sup> Similar events occur in *Creating a City for the Demon King!*, where the protagonist, able to reverse time, slaughters the subordinates of the demon

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1 In this work, there exists a system that allows the protagonist, White, to predict when she will level up based on the amount of experience gained. By timing her level-ups precisely, she restores her health at critical moments and continues to grow by resetting crises through this recovery mechanism.

2 Of course, as in *Live Dungeon!*, resurrection is a premise built into the work; however, since pain is not entirely absent from the process, the narrative does not avoid ethical concerns.

3 It is established in the story that when a summoned creature dies and is later resummoned, it inherits the memories of its previous incarnation; however, this does not in any way signify a true resurrection.

lord who will later become his ally, justifying the act as a temporary reset. He also shows little emotional response to the deaths of his own skeleton minions.

This ethical erosion intensifies when combined with the “ease of killing” facilitated by game systems. In works like *Failure Frame: I Became the Strongest and Annihilated Everything with Low-Level Spells and Hell Mode*, which employ game mechanics as major narrative devices, characters acquire abilities effortlessly and eliminate enemies by uttering activation words or merely willing them to die. Such indirect, automated acts of violence without physical contact reduce the moral burden of ethical decision-making. By allowing protagonists to “solve” problems without dirtying their own hands, the system effectively neutralizes moral hesitation as killing becomes routine and emotionally sanitized.

At the same time, while game-based systems contribute to the dilution of pain and death, another major cause of ethical collapse lies in the selective application of morality itself. In many web novels, ethics are not treated as absolute principles but as values that can be invoked or ignored as convenient. Protagonists frequently adjust their moral judgments according to whether a target is classified as friend or foe—or, more pragmatically, whether that target obstructs their objectives.

In *Failure Frame: I Became the Strongest and Annihilated Everything with Low-Level Spells*, the protagonist Mimori exploits his abnormal status skills—poison, paralysis, and similar abilities—to brutally torture and kill adventurers who once bullied him and experiences catharsis by framing these acts as justified revenge. Facing powerful enemies, he manipulates their emotions to lower their guard and then poisons them, claiming that such actions are natural for the weak, necessary for survival, and therefore morally defensible. Although the narrative provides background explanations like his childhood abuse, classroom ostracism, and experiences of humiliation, nevertheless, within the narrative logic of “revenge” and “growth,” his ethical transgressions are systematically overlooked.

Interestingly, the protagonist’s moral compass operates selectively toward heroines. For women he has only recently met, he disregards his self-interest and risks his life to save them in violation of his own survivalist principles. A similar contradiction appears in *Creating a City for the Demon King!*, where the protagonist Proquel is portrayed as a peace-loving ruler compassionate toward his subordinates. He volunteers to act as bait in battle to minimize casualties, and even when facing enemies far stronger than himself, he fights to protect his comrades. Yet toward those designated as enemies—whether other demon lords, monsters, or humans—he shows no hesitation in resorting to lethal force, employing firearms or even napalm bombs without moral restraint.

In *Witch and the Mercenary*, this moral ambivalence becomes even more extreme. The mercenary Zig, who travels with the witch Saoirse to another continent, encounters his childhood companion Raiel. When Raiel warns him that Saoirse is the witch who killed his family, Zig refuses to abandon his employer and ultimately kills Raiel himself. Saoirse likewise kills or massacres without remorse whenever her objectives demand it. Such selective ethics—governed by personal purpose rather than universal norms—also surface in *Failure Frame: I Became the Strongest and Annihilated Everything with Low-Level Spells and Arifureta: From Commonplace to World's Strongest*, where protagonists rationalize acts of vengeance and domination as expressions of justice.

These examples demonstrate clearly that the game-based system in web novels functions as a mechanism that inevitably relegates pain and death to the background as the suffering of others is absorbed into the logic of growth, converted into “experience points” that propel the hero’s advancement. As a result, morality in these narratives is not an absolute norm but instead a selectively applied value, contingent upon a character’s alignment—ally or enemy—and upon whether others serve or obstruct the protagonist’s purpose.

### Conclusion

This study examined the modes of representation and the ethical implications of nonhuman entities in Japanese web novels. Through large-scale metadata and corpus analysis, this study revealed that the nonhuman is not a fixed category but a relational other defined by human perception and desire. As an “other,” the nonhuman repeatedly functions as a linguistic and narrative medium that supplements human growth, redemption, or deficiency. Nonhuman entities do not exist merely as peripheral or decorative elements outside the story; rather, they constitute essential structures that shape its direction and coherence. Such “cliché inversion” appears not only in depictions of nonhuman protagonists but also in the portrayals of the nonhuman companions and allies of the main character.

Meanwhile, the game-based systems that appear in many of these works inevitably relegate pain and death to the background, generating ethical tension as the deaths of others are subsumed into the protagonist’s growth narrative, in which ethics is transformed from absolute norms into selective values applied according to pragmatic distinctions like “friend or foe” and “obstacle or ally.” This study thus demonstrates that nonhuman entities in Japanese web novels operate as mirrors reflecting the desires and limitations inherent in human-centered imagination.

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