

BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE: ANALYSIS OF MEANING INSTABILITY IN THE FILM MALEFICENT

Antara Hitam dan Putih: Analisis Ketidakstabilan Makna dalam Film *Maleficent*

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Abstract: *This study examines the instability of meaning in the film Maleficent by deconstructing the conventional binary between good and evil commonly found in classic fairy tales. Rather than reinforcing moral absolutes, Maleficent challenges them by presenting a complex protagonist whose identity evolves from victim to villain to redeemer. Using Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction and a qualitative-descriptive method, this research analyzes how narrative structure, symbolism, and character development disrupt fixed moral categories. The findings reveal that the film does not simply invert traditional roles but destabilizes the very foundations of moral storytelling. Meaning is portrayed as fluid, relational, and continuously shifting, emphasizing that identity and ethics in popular narratives are not fixed but open to reinterpretation.*

Key Words: *Maleficent, deconstruction, binary opposition, morality, fairy tale*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji ketidakstabilan makna dalam film *Maleficent* dengan mendekonstruksi oposisi biner antara kebaikan dan kejahatan yang lazim dijumpai dalam dongeng klasik. Alih-alih memperkuat batas moral yang absolut, *Maleficent* justru menantanginya dengan menampilkan tokoh utama yang kompleks, yang identitasnya bergerak dari korban, menjadi penjahat, hingga penebus. Menggunakan teori dekonstruksi Jacques Derrida dan metode deskriptif-kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana struktur naratif, simbolisme, dan pengembangan karakter mengguncang kategori moral yang mapan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa film ini tidak hanya membalik peran tradisional, tetapi juga meruntuhkan landasan moral dari struktur narasi dongeng. Makna dalam film digambarkan sebagai sesuatu yang cair, relasional, dan terus berubah, menekankan bahwa identitas dan etika dalam narasi populer bersifat terbuka untuk ditafsirkan ulang.

Kata-Kata Kunci: *Maleficent, dekonstruksi, oposisi biner, moralitas, dongeng*

INTRODUCTION

Fairy tales have long operated through a system of binary oppositions good versus evil, light versus dark, hero versus villain. These structures not only function as narrative devices but also encode moral lessons, shaping the ideological imagination of audiences, especially children (Thwaites, Davis, & Mules, 2009). A fairy tale usually departs from folklore that contains cultural elements, one of which is (Sapountzis, 2017). Here, a fairy tale titled *Sleeping Beauty* with its character named Maleficent and a movie titled *Maleficent* becomes one example of classic literary works and modern literary works representing human life and its unique characteristics (Wansink & Park, 2001; Codispoti et al., 2008). Within such stories, identity is often defined through opposition: a character is good because they are not evil, a savior because they are not a threat. This



simplistic dichotomy leaves little space for ambiguity or contradiction. Deconstruction in literary studies can improve critical thinking skills, academic appreciation skills, and awareness of actual problems associated with cultural change and shift. Jacques Derrida was an actual figure behind deconstruction discourse in the philosophy of post-structuralism. Deconstruction is inevitable, and the process involves affirmation, the latter being the link to [veneer] (Adji et al., 2018). Deconstruction is the name Derrida refers to the activity of "destruction" and sedimentation of all meanings derived from logos (Ozdemir, 2014).

However, postmodern retellings of fairy tales increasingly challenge these narrative binaries. Stories such as *Wicked*, *Cruella*, and *Maleficent* reframe the villain as the protagonist, often exploring the historical and psychological contexts behind their actions. These revisions reflect a broader cultural shift that questions authority, destabilizes truth claims, and embraces moral complexity. As a result, viewers are no longer asked to simply condemn or cheer but to understand, reconsider, and empathize. The film *Maleficent* presents a complex narrative that challenges traditional binaries of good and evil, creating a space where meaning is unstable and open to interpretation. This instability is primarily driven by the film's reimagining of Maleficent as a multifaceted character who embodies both villainous and sympathetic traits. The film explores themes of disability, social exclusion, and maternal love, which contribute to the nuanced portrayal of Maleficent as more than just a traditional antagonist. This complexity is further enriched by the film's engagement with ecological and gender ideologies, which provide additional layers of meaning.

Through an ecocritical lens, the film portrays Maleficent's transformation from a protector of nature to a vengeful figure, ultimately emphasizing the importance of nurturing relationships between humanity and nature, and advocating for a reconciliatory approach to restore ecological balance in the face of environmental crises (Raheemah & Alhelal, n.d.)

The paper highlights the ambivalence in the portrayal of Maleficent, indicating that despite her characterization as a powerful woman, she still experiences oppression and is positioned within a dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' women. This suggests a gap in exploring how these dualities affect the perception of female empowerment in Disney narratives and the implications for broader gender ideology (Wendranirsa, 2017).

In *Maleficent* (2014), directed by Robert Stromberg, the titular character is no longer portrayed as a figure of pure malevolence. Instead, the film constructs her as a betrayed guardian, a loving surrogate mother, and ultimately, a victim of patriarchal violence. This repositioning dismantles the viewer's expectations and blurs the boundaries between heroism and villainy. Through symbolic imagery, narrative reversals, and emotionally layered performances, *Maleficent* invites us to reconsider the very foundations of moral storytelling.

Numerous scholars have investigated *Maleficent* from diverse critical perspectives. Andini (2023) examines the psychological defense mechanisms exhibited by Maleficent and Stefan, drawing on Freudian theory. Nurhalidasia et al. (2016) compare character construction in the original *Sleeping Beauty* with the reimagined *Maleficent*, finding evidence of postmodern fragmentation and re-narration. Diani et al. (2017) analyze feminist elements in the film through semiotic analysis, while Fadiyah et al. (2023) explore ecological relationships using the Gaia hypothesis. Studies by Werdarini et al. (2023), Alvina & Rudianto (2023), and Cornelia & Limanta (2022) focus on psychological shifts, archetypal structures, and internal moral conflict. Meanwhile, Saputri et al. (2024)

offer a linguistic lens, and David (2020) critiques the gendered implications of narrative power in *Maleficent*.

Although these studies offer meaningful insights, they generally stop short of engaging with the instability of meaning itself. They identify what has changed, but not how or why meaning collapses under scrutiny. This is where deconstruction as developed by Jacques Derrida offers a crucial intervention. Derrida argues that meaning is always deferred and relational, and that binary oppositions conceal internal contradictions. By applying this lens, *Maleficent* can be read not only as a revisionist narrative but as a self-aware text that exposes the fragility of fixed moral structures.

This study, therefore, investigates the instability of moral meaning in *Maleficent* through a deconstructive framework. It argues that the film dismantles traditional binaries not only in its characters, but also through its structure, symbolism, and visual language. In doing so, *Maleficent* becomes more than a retelling; it becomes a critique of storytelling itself.

Furthermore, the film's visual and narrative strategies emphasize contradiction and paradox. The same character who casts a curse later becomes the one to break it; the supposed villain is revealed as the only source of genuine love. This narrative dissonance highlights how *Maleficent* functions not as a moral guide, but as a space of ethical reflection. It rejects the certainty of traditional fairy tales in favor of emotional and philosophical complexity.

This shift mirrors broader discourses in cultural theory, where meaning is understood not as essential or stable but as constructed and contingent. Cultural texts like *Maleficent* become battlegrounds where ideological assumptions are questioned and renegotiated. Through its retelling, the film critiques the very logic of categorization and forces viewers to confront the limitations of moral absolutism in contemporary storytelling.

By positioning *Maleficent* within a framework of deconstruction, this paper contributes to discussions on how popular media destabilizes inherited narratives. It shows that even mainstream, commercial cinema can serve as a vehicle for post structural critique one that deconstructs not only plot and character but also the cultural codes that inform them. In addition, the film operates within a larger cultural discourse of rehabilitation and reclamation. The narrative structure of *Maleficent* reflects a growing interest in re-narrating the lives of those who have been historically silenced or demonized. This approach resonates with Gayatri Spivak's (1988) notion of the "subaltern" those who cannot speak within dominant discourse without being overwritten. In the original *Sleeping Beauty*, Maleficent has no voice, no origin, and no motivation beyond evil. In *Maleficent* (2014), she becomes the narrator of her own story, reclaiming authorship and agency that was previously denied. The act of telling a "different story now," as echoed in the film's opening and closing, becomes a performative gesture of resistance against narrative colonization.

Moreover, this act of narrative re-appropriation aligns with feminist and poststructural critiques of historical grand narratives. Where traditional tales often serve to reinforce gender roles, moral certainty, and hierarchical power, *Maleficent* complicates those messages by introducing contradiction, irony, and emotional ambivalence. The film resists closure there is no pure redemption, no ultimate villain punished, no singular truth restored. Instead, what emerges is a fragmented, polyphonic text in which the moral center remains elusive. This study thus situates *Maleficent* not merely as entertainment, but as a text that functions within the postmodern condition of a story that knows it is a story, and uses that awareness to critique the assumptions that define storytelling itself.

METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative-descriptive approach, which is suitable for analyzing the layers of meaning in cultural texts. The primary objective of this method is not to quantify phenomena but to understand, interpret, and describe them in depth. Through this approach, the researcher closely examines the film *Maleficent* (2014) as a narrative artifact that reflects and challenges social constructions of morality, identity, and binary oppositions.

The primary data source in this study is the full-length feature film *Maleficent*, directed by Robert Stromberg and released by Walt Disney Pictures in 2014. Data were collected through repeated viewings of the film, allowing the researcher to observe its narrative structure, visual symbolism, dialogue, character development, and thematic oppositions. Specific scenes that illustrate shifts in moral alignment or disrupt binary structures were transcribed and analyzed as textual units.

To support interpretation and strengthen the contextual understanding of the film, the researcher also referred to relevant secondary sources, including scholarly journal articles, film reviews, and interviews with the creators. These references serve not as the object of study but as supplementary discourse to frame the analysis.

The theoretical foundation of this research is built upon Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, with emphasis on his concepts of binary opposition, *différance*, and the instability of meaning (Derrida, 1978). Deconstruction is not used here to dismantle the film in a negative sense, but to critically examine the assumptions and contradictions embedded within its moral framework. By applying deconstruction, this study aims to uncover how *Maleficent* subverts dominant narrative logics and invites alternative readings.

The analysis proceeds through a thematic and discursive reading of the film. First, the researcher identifies key binary structures portrayed in the narrative, such as good versus evil, love versus hatred, and human versus non-human. Then, each binary is examined in light of its visual, linguistic, and symbolic representation in the film. The goal is to trace how meaning is deferred, contradicted, or dissolved across different moments of the film, thereby revealing its deconstructive power.

This method allows the study to treat *Maleficent* not merely as a fictional story, but as a cultural text that speaks to broader philosophical and ideological questions, questions about identity, justice, memory, and the ethics of storytelling.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that *Maleficent* resists and reconfigures the dominant narrative structures typically found in classical fairy tales. Rather than presenting morality as fixed or binary, the film constructs a narrative that is ethically fluid and ideologically unstable. The character of Maleficent herself embodies this instability: she is both the curse and the cure, both destroyer and redeemer, both feared and loved. These contradictions are not resolved by the film but are instead emphasized, inviting the audience to re-evaluate their assumptions about villainy, love, justice, and agency.

Through visual symbolism, narrative reversal, sound design, and emotional nuance, *Maleficent* demonstrates that identity and morality are not essential traits, but rather constructed positions that shift across time, context, and perspective. The film challenges not only what a villain is, but how that idea is created, circulated, and sustained through storytelling practices. By disrupting the boundaries between good and evil, victim and villain, mother and monster, *Maleficent* performs a narrative and ideological deconstruction.

These findings align with Jacques Derrida's theory of *différance*, where meaning is never fixed but constantly deferred through relational difference. They also support the idea that signification whether visual, verbal, or symbolic is always vulnerable to contradiction. As the film unravels and rearranges familiar tropes, it opens space for alternative readings that resist closure and singular interpretation. It is within this interplay of contradiction, ambiguity, and emotional depth that *Maleficent* becomes not just a revisionist fairy tale, but a cinematic act of deconstruction.

The Politics of Naming: "Maleficent" as a Signifier

It is this maleficent characteristic that over the years has awakened in children's minds through fairy tales and movies produced by Disney in 1959 titled *Sleeping Beauty*.¹ Marc Davis animates this story, and Eleanor Audley voices Maleficent's voice. An evil character supported by his short, elegant figure, pale green skin, yellow eyes, bright red lip, and long chin. An evil character looks like a good character with multidimensional personalities (Gubaidullina & Gorenintseva, 2017). She wears a long black dress. There is a purple on the collar and the end of her bat-winged. She is also wearing a ring with a black stone on her index finger. She wears a headgear that has horns, a symbol of the magic power of darkness that it possesses. She always carries a stick with a green ball that emits light as he utters his mantras. She has a dark army of goblins and trolls (It looks like a giant in Medieval European folklore).

In a pivotal moment of emotional vulnerability, Maleficent approaches the sleeping Aurora and utters the words, "*What I've done to you is unforgivable*." This declaration occurs shortly before she attempts to revoke the curse she once cast, marking a dramatic shift in her character arc. Rather than embodying the essence of evil, she exhibits regret, self-awareness, and moral accountability. The moment captures not only emotional complexity but also a profound contradiction between the name she carries and the identity she enacts.

This scene challenges the performative force of naming. The name *Maleficent*, derived from the Latin *maleficentia* (meaning "evil-doing"), functions throughout the narrative as a label imposed upon her by others primarily by King Stefan and his court. From the beginning, the audience is conditioned to associate her with malevolence, yet her actions continuously undermine this association. As Derrida (1978) emphasizes, signifiers are not fixed in meaning; they are fluid, relational, and often in tension with what they are presumed to represent. In this case, the name does not capture the ethical reality of Maleficent's transformation.

Furthermore, this moment aligns with Gayatri Spivak's (1988) critique of subaltern subjectivity, particularly how figures on the margins are often denied the right to define themselves. Maleficent never chooses her name; it is imposed upon her, becoming a tool of narrative and political control. The image of her whispering an apology to Aurora becomes a form of narrative reclamation an attempt to speak for herself, not through vengeance, but through remorse and care. It becomes an act of resistance against the identity constructed for her.

Visually, this contradiction is heightened by the composition of the scene: Maleficent stands in darkness, clad in black, while Aurora sleeps bathed in soft light. The *mise-en-scène* evokes the binary of evil and innocence, but their emotional connection defies this visual code. Her gesture of apology deconstructs the assumed moral alignment of appearance and action. The viewer is thus pushed to question whether names, roles, or even entire mythologies can be trusted at face value.

Picture 1
Subverting the Trope of True Love's Kiss



Maleficent, facing Aurora's sleeping body, whispers words of remorse: "What I've done to you is unforgivable." This moment reveals a deep contradiction between her name derived from "evil-doing" and her emotional state. The act of naming, imposed by others, fails to capture the ethical complexity she embodies. The scene visually and verbally destabilizes the fixed meaning attached to her identity, echoing Derrida's critique of signification and Spivak's argument about narrative framing of subaltern figures.

This image captures Maleficent in a moment of emotional intensity, leaning over Aurora's sleeping body and whispering, "*What I've done to you is unforgivable.*" Within a deconstructive framework, this scene destabilizes traditional associations between appearance and morality. Though Maleficent remains visually coded as "dark" clad in black, framed in shadow the emotional and linguistic content of the scene reveals her internal conflict, remorse, and moral self-awareness.

Semiotically, the scene presents a direct contradiction between name and action. The name *Maleficent*, derived from *maleficentia* (Latin for "evil-doing"), predisposes the audience to expect malevolence. Yet here, her tender gesture and spoken regret directly challenge that presumption. The scene exposes naming as a political act one that carries ideological weight but can be subverted through ethical behavior and narrative recontextualization.

Moreover, this moment signifies a critical turning point: Maleficent reclaims narrative agency. She is no longer passively defined by the label imposed on her by others, but actively resists and rewrites it. The analysis underscores that meaning, identity, and morality in film texts are never fixed they are contested, relational, and always open to redefinition.

Maleficent can also be considered to have become good or her ego can overcome her id when she tried to lift her curse on Princess Aurora. Maleficent's id is still hatred towards The princess driven by thanatos, and this can be seen from how Maleficent said "Good night, Beasty" to the sleeping Princess. The nickname sounds negative because beasty means that she considered The princess like a beast, and it means that the id in the form of hatred is still dominant in her. However, her ego decides to lift the curse while Aurora is asleep.

Soundtrack and Sonic Ambiguity: Aurally Undermining Moral Certainty

Sound, like language and image, plays a critical role in shaping how audiences interpret moral meaning. In *Maleficent* (2014), music is not merely a background device, but an ideological instrument that subtly guides emotional responses. As Derrida would argue, meaning does not arise solely from visual or textual signs, but also through auditory experience which itself is subject to deferment, contradiction, and instability.

The film's original score, composed by James Newton Howard, carefully maps Maleficent's emotional arc. During her youth in the Moors, the music is light, melodic, and whimsical conveying harmony and innocence. However, once she is betrayed and her wings are stolen, the orchestration shifts drastically. The tonal palette darkens with minor keys, slower tempos, and dissonant chords. And yet, even in her most ostensibly "evil" scenes, the music never fully submits to traditional villain cues. Instead of blaring, dissonant motifs that signify monstrosity, the score often layers in subtle traces of grief and melancholy.

This auditory complexity resists the binary of good and evil. The music creates emotional friction, where the visuals may suggest menace, but the soundtrack introduces pathos. Such tension invites the audience to reconsider their alignment. Is Maleficent to be feared, or pitied? Is she a villain, or a wounded figure? The soundtrack does not answer it defers. This is precisely what Derrida refers to as *différance*: the instability of meaning that is continually postponed through layers of interpretation.

Perhaps the most iconic musical intervention comes through Lana Del Rey's haunting cover of "Once Upon a Dream." Originally featured in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) as a romantic, uplifting melody, the song is radically transformed in *Maleficent*. Slowed down, filled with ominous chords and minor key modulation, Del Rey's version turns the once-hopeful tune into something tragic, eerie, and deeply ironic. The dream, it seems, has become a nightmare.

This musical reinterpretation is not merely aesthetic it is ideological. It deconstructs the very fantasy the original song represented: romantic salvation, innocence, and predetermined happiness. By distorting a classic Disney theme, *Maleficent* reveals how even sound can carry oppressive narrative functions, and how those functions can be resisted, rewritten, and re-sounded. The melody becomes a floating signifier, no longer tethered to its original meaning. Its emotional tone is ambiguous, reflecting the ethical ambiguity of the film itself.

Through its soundtrack, *Maleficent* complicates the audience's moral orientation. The film does not tell us what to feel it disorients us. In that disorientation, new meanings become possible. Sound becomes a site of ideological struggle, not harmony; of contradiction, not resolution. As with language and imagery, the film's sonic landscape invites a deconstructive reading, where every note is a potential rupture in narrative certainty.

The Irony of Protection: Ethical Reversal and Narrative Disruption

One of the most striking strategies in *Maleficent* is its use of irony not merely as a stylistic device, but as a narrative and philosophical instrument. Irony here functions to subvert traditional moral expectations and challenge the viewer's interpretive assumptions. It emerges through contradictions between appearance and action, language and meaning, name and identity. In doing so, the film reveals how storytelling itself can be a site of ideological instability.

The central irony lies in the transformation of Maleficent's role. She begins as the one who casts the curse, positioning herself as the film's antagonist. Yet, as the narrative unfolds, she gradually becomes Aurora's guardian protecting her from the very curse she created. The culmination of this reversal is the pivotal scene in which Maleficent breaks the curse not through a prince, but through her own kiss of maternal love. This moment directly undermines the long-standing fairy tale trope of "true love's kiss" as an inherently romantic and heteronormative gesture. Here, love is not romantic but redemptive, not external but intimate, not performed by a hero but by the so-called villain.

This ethical inversion aligns with Jacques Derrida's notion of *undecidability*, where binary categories such as good and evil collapse into contradiction. Maleficent is both the source of harm and its healer an impossible yet undeniable paradox. Her character becomes a space where moral certainty dissolves. Rather than resolving this tension, the film sustains it, allowing contradiction to speak for itself. As Derrida argues, such tension is not a failure of logic, but a productive site where meaning is exposed as constructed, contingent, and unstable.

Irony also operates visually. Maleficent continues to embody the classic signifiers of a villain: she wears black, has horns, speaks with a commanding voice, and occupies the shadows. Yet her actions gentle, protective, remorseful directly contradict this visual coding. The result is a destabilizing of the visual language of morality itself. The film invites the audience to reconsider what they have been conditioned to believe: is evil a matter of what one looks like, or what one does?

Furthermore, irony is embedded in the audience's shifting point of view. We begin the story expecting to fear Maleficent, but end by empathizing with her. This narrative reversal is not simply redemptive; it is reflective of how ideology shapes emotion. What *Maleficent* does, through irony, is show that emotion can be restructured by new forms of storytelling stories that expose the artificiality of traditional roles and resist their moral simplicity.

Through this strategic use of irony both narrative and visual *Maleficent* not only subverts conventional moral expectations, but also exposes the fragility of meaning itself. In doing so, irony becomes a deconstructive force: not a detour from truth, but a disruption of the very structures that claim to define it. The film does not seek to resolve contradiction, but to dwell in it inviting the viewer to question whether clarity is even possible, or whether meaning is always already in motion.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Maleficent* constructs moral identity not as a fixed essence but as a contested, shifting narrative. By positioning the traditionally villainous figure as both the cause and the cure of conflict, the film challenges binary structures of good and evil. The character of Maleficent functions as a textual site of contradiction, where acts of violence coexist with expressions of love, and victimhood merges with power. This instability is not incidental but central to the film's narrative design. Moreover, Disney can be said to have created a new trend by placing the previously antagonistic Maleficent as the protagonist in a new film, considering that previously Disney only made pure good protagonists and pure evil antagonists.

The purpose of this study was to examine the instability of meaning within the film *Maleficent* using Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. The findings show that the film does not simply invert moral categories but dissolves the boundaries between them. Through visual irony, symbolic reversals, and the fragmentation of expected narrative roles, *Maleficent* deconstructs the fairy tale's moral framework and reveals identity as fluid, relational, and perpetually deferred. Language, imagery, and even sound function not as conveyors of stable truth, but as contested spaces where meaning is constantly negotiated.

This disruption has broader implications. *Maleficent* demonstrates how popular media can function as a platform for philosophical critique, exposing how inherited myths perpetuate essentialist ideologies. By refusing to resolve contradiction, the film encourages a more nuanced engagement with ethical complexity and narrative authority.

It teaches us that stories shape not only how we perceive others, but how we define ourselves often through unstable signs and unfinished meanings.

The destabilization of meaning in *Maleficent* invites viewers to rethink their trust in archetypes, categories, and names. Rather than restoring moral certainty, the film embraces ambiguity, asking not who is good or evil, but how such labels are produced, circulated, and challenged. In doing so, it fulfills its own narrative promise: not to repeat the story we already know, but to tell it differently and in doing so, question why we believed the original in the first place.

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