



DOI: 10.31866/2410-1915.24.2023.287654

UDC 7.046:[572:316.347

Traditional Non-Human Identity in Historical and Cultural Dynamics (Using the Example of Elven Identity)

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The aim of the article is to conceptualise the self-definition type of “traditional other-than-human identities: mythological creatures” based on the material of elven identity. The research methodology within cultural studies is based on the principles of posthuman anthropology and studies of non-human identities in foreign humanities. *Results.* The transformation of perceptions about elves is considered and an analysis of elven identity among homo sapiens in the diachrony of culture is carried out. The features of its existence in premodern, modern, post-, and metamodern contexts are determined. The essence and reasons for the popularity of elven identity are revealed. The article’s hypothesis is confirmed, suggesting that other-than-human identities among biological people manifest themselves throughout human history. A comprehensive solution to these issues constitutes the *scientific novelty* of the work. *Conclusions.* The conceptualisation of the notion of “traditional other-than-human identities: mythological creatures” in a wide diachronic dimension of cultural dynamics made it possible to take a holistic view of the phenomenon of non-human identity among people. The author of the article argues that non-human identities are often transgressive in nature and belong to cultural universals of humanity. Mythological identities are represented in traditional representations of archaic and premodern. In the era of modernity, non-human identities are somewhat marginalised within the culture. Post- and metamodern actualises premodern beliefs. Mythological non-human identities among people, along with traditional interpretations, acquire new interpretations. In particular, they begin to be interpreted as parts of an individual’s psyche or as a result of a transhumanist transition to an alternative transhuman ideal.

Keywords: transhumanism; posthuman anthropology; other; otherkin; non-human; other-than-human identities; elven identity; frontier

For citation

Hots, L. (2023). Traditional Non-Human Identity in Historical and Cultural Dynamics (Using the Example of Elven Identity). *Culture and Arts in the Modern World*, 24, 8–18. <https://doi.org/10.31866/2410-1915.24.2023.287654>.

Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, researchers’ attention was drawn to the phenomenon of other-than-human or non-human identities. Currently, these identities are

most noticeable within subcultures of Western countries, the United States, high-tech Asian countries, and various online communities. They can all be labelled under the umbrella term “otherkin” (English “other” + “kin”), which can be literally translated as “of another-kind” or “foreign”. The phenomenon of non-human identities coincides with the active spread of transhumanism ideology. New, sometimes bizarre, values, meanings, thinking styles, and social orientations are emerging, necessitating a multi-faceted cultural analysis of the issues related to hybrid identities.

The existence of non-human (other-than-human) identities among contemporary individuals often raises concerns among cultural researchers. Firstly, according to some scholars, the proliferation of non-human identities challenges traditional notions of human nature and dignity. If a person can disassociate from his humanity and relate himself to another species or being, then what remains of the uniqueness and value of the human experience? How can we define the boundaries between human and non-human, reality and fiction? What ethical and legal consequences might these forms of self-identification entail?

Another reason why non-human identities concern scholars is because they can be indicative of psychological or social issues. Some researchers believe that individuals who choose non-human identities may be suffering from personality disorders, dissociation, or depression. They might use these identities as a way to cope with trauma, loneliness, or social rejection. According to this perspective, individuals with non-human identities might require psychological assistance.

These proposed interpretations can be relevant in specific cases. However, they should not be absolutized. Let’s pose a *research question*: Is the existence of non-human identities really an absolutely groundbreaking, anomalous, and dangerous phenomenon? Looking ahead, let’s note that not all scholars consider it as such.

In this work, the author investigates the *hypothesis* that the phenomenon of non-human identities in people is not a unique contemporary phenomenon, but rather a persistent yet understudied factor that constantly influences cultural processes throughout human civilisation. As the researcher of religion S. Shea (2019) writes in her work: “...other-than-human identities have been inherent in human society for thousands of years” (p. 89). This researcher presents a series of compelling facts indicating that the presence of non-human identities within homo sapiens has a long history in different cultures and epochs.

The author primarily relies on foreign research results in the fields of cultural anthropology, religious studies, and sociology related to non-human identities. In particular, the author of the article draws upon the concepts of the following scholars: S. Hall, who developed the concept of cultural identity as unstable, changeable, and situational; B. Anderson, who introduced the idea of “imagined communities” and demonstrated how identities are formed through mass communication.

D. Haraway (1991), in her article *A Cyborg Manifesto*, proposed the concept of the cyborg as a “hybrid subject” that overcomes the human/animal, organic/inorganic, male/female dichotomies, combining human and non-human elements. The cyborg concept allows us to reconsider traditional notions of what it is to be human, and it can be used to explore or create new forms of identity that are not limited by binary categories of race or species. The aforementioned researchers laid the theoretical foundation for the study of non-human identities.

The study of other-than-human identities of homo sapiens (also referred to as Non-Human Personhood, Otherkin) is a relatively new direction in the humanities. Foreign researchers in the fields of religion and cultural anthropology show significant interest in this issue. Among recent works, the following can be noted: A. Sadeleer (2016) addressed the issue of naming non-human identities and introduced the term “otherkin” to mark them. In recent decades, research has mainly focused on studying individual types of non-human identities, with a significant portion dedicated to zoomorphic and therianthropoc (man-beast) identities. M. A. Davidsen (2017) examines the presence of elven identity in contemporary popular and magical-religious cultures. C. M. Cusack (2017) and S. Shea (2019) consider the issues of identity, spirituality, beliefs, and self-realisation in non-human communities and subcultures, particularly elven ones. However, there is currently a gap in comprehensive systematic research on this topic, and the issue of the typology of non-human identities remains unexplored.

Aim of the article

The aim of the article is to conceptualise the category of “traditional non-human identities: mythological beings” using the example of elven identity within the broader context of cultural dynamics (pre-modern, modern, post-, and metamodern). This statement of the issue is carried out for the first time, representing the novelty of the work. The research objectives include studying the transformations of ideas about elves and the development of elven identity in humans in cultural diachrony, as well as exploring the origins, essence, and reasons for the popularity of elven non-human identity, considered within the context of transhumanism.

Main research material

The Elven identity is one of the most popular contemporary non-human identities. The terms “elvenkind” and “elfinkin” are now used to refer to the identity of people who consider themselves elves. It’s worth noting that characteristics of fairies (also “fay,” “fae,” “fey,” “fair folk,” or “faerie”) and corresponding non-human identities are closely aligned with elves.

Let’s consider the idea of elves in the context of the history of the emergence of elven identity in humans. Some of the first written mentions of elves appear in the collections of Old Norse myths by the Icelandic scholar and poet S. Sturluson, such as the *Prose Edda* (circa 1225) and the *Poetic Edda*, the manuscript of which dates back to the second half of the 13th century. These literary works establish a connection between elves and the Norse pantheon of gods. Old English evidence indicates that elves are related to the Irish *áes síde* — “the people of the mounds” or “the people of the Sidhe”, which includes fairies and elves, *Tuatha Dé Danann* — an ancient people of gods and warriors.

People believed in elves as otherworldly beings who belonged to the other world, yet could physically manifest themselves in the material world and influence it. Elves were thought of as “fundamentally similar” to humans, even though they were consi-

dered otherworldly (Shea, 2019, p. 13). It should be noted that the idea of such ontological duality is characteristic of various classes of spirits and deities in the cultures of different ethnic groups and eras. These beliefs are connected to the archaic idea of the transition between worlds — the human world and the spirit world, the elven world.

To clarify whether the thesis of a “flickering” frontier between the worlds of humans and gods and spirits is relevant in traditional culture, we will pose the question: Is the idea of the transition between different classes of beings reflected in traditional folklore about elves? Are cases of humans taking on an elven identity and vice versa being represented?

In the Eddas — a collection of Old Norse poems — there are no cases of the transformation of humans into elves or vice versa. However, in later folklore, there are legends about some people being able to communicate with elves, learn magic from them, and enter into family relationships. One well-known saga, recorded in the first half of the 13th century, is about the famous Icelandic poet and warrior Kormak Ogmundsson, who lived in the 10th century (Old Icelandic Kormáks saga). In some versions of this saga, Kormak had a child with an elf daughter named Steingerd (Killings, 1995). The saga showed the relationships between humans and elves as complex and contradictory. On the one hand, elves were considered powerful and potentially dangerous beings who could bless or curse humans depending on their mood and attitude. On the other hand, elves could marry humans and give them children who possessed superhuman abilities or beauty. This was the case with Kormak and Steingerd.

In Celtic myths, there are several instances where humans became síde (elves) or vice versa. For example, the Irish legend *The Wooing of Étaín* (Irish *Tochmarc Étaíne*) tells the story of how the beautiful mortal girl Étaín was reborn twice and became the wife of three different men: Ailill, the king of the Ulaid, then the elf Midir, the lord of the síde, and later Eochu Airem, the High King of Ireland, and again became the wife of the elf Midir, who led Étaín to his mounds.

In this legend, the relationships between humans and elves (síde) are also depicted as complex and contradictory. On one hand, elves are depicted as magicians who can interfere in the lives of humans by transforming them into different beings or stealing them to their mounds. On the other hand, humans can resist the influence of elves. The frontier between the worlds of humans and gods and spirits is “flickering”: folkloric heroes, like psychopomps or shamans, are capable of moving and living in both worlds (human and non-human). Eochu is a mortal man who enters into battle for his wife against a superhuman enemy. In the Irish tradition, humans can defeat even magician-gods with strength and magic. At the centre of the legend is Étaín, who serves as a link between the two worlds of the elves and humans. She not only moves from one world to another but also embodies the function of the goddess of Supreme Power, which gives the right to rule Ireland and is close to the goddesses of the Other world (Tigges, 2015).

The possibility of transitioning from one ontological status to another (human — elf/spirit, god) is reflected in the cycle of Celtic legends about Ossian — the legendary Celtic bard of the 3rd century. One of them tells that Ossian fell in love with the beautiful elf Niamh and went with her to the land of eternal youth Tir na nÓg (analogous to the Champs-Élysées), where he lived for three hundred years. When he returned to Ireland, he realised that all his friends had died, Christianity had replaced his old faith,

and he himself had become old and blind, because in the world of humans, the inexorable laws of nature prevail (Rolleston, 1910).

In the Anglo-Scottish borderlands, there were ideas that elves (or fairies) lived in “elf hills” or “magic hills”. There was a belief that they could take children and even adults and transport them to their own world (F. Doel & G. Doel, 2009). The interpenetration of the boundaries between the world of humans and elves (more broadly – spirits) is reflected in the ideas about the phenomenon of changeling, which occur in the folklore of Europe as a whole: spirits could steal a human child, leaving in its place a child of a spirit or an imitation of a child. A changeling could also be understood as a person with exceptional physical or psychological characteristics – both negative and positive. There are legends that some people were descendants of elves and possessed special abilities. For example, Halfdan the Black, the father of Harald Fairhair, the first king of Norway, was believed to be the son of an elf.

Let’s make some generalisations. As we have demonstrated, the intersection of the frontier between the world of elves and humans is understood ambivalently – both as something that carries danger and as something that offers advantages and opens the path to a world of magic and super- (or trans-) human possibilities. The character and behaviour of elves are highly similar to humans. In legends, elves have complex relationships with humans. On one hand, they can be kind to those who respect them and don’t break their laws. On the other hand, elves can be harsh and treacherous to those who offend them. They can also be jealous and envious of human beauty and happiness. Elves do not adhere to human norms and values; they follow their own logic and morality. Of course, in the mythology of different cultures, the perceptions of elves and their relationships with humans may vary somewhat: in some myths, elves are depicted as a separate people that cannot mix with humans. However, more often they are represented as beings who can take on human form and have children with humans. In some myths, humans can become elves or vice versa if they enter their realm or are exposed to their magic. It’s worth noting that in traditional beliefs, the status of an elf (a non-human identity) can be transferred to humans through various means: a) through love and marriage relationships; b) by blood inheritance through children; c) through the transfer to the otherworldly topos; d) through magical influence. Therefore, as we have demonstrated, in traditional folklore, elves are understood as beings ontologically similar to humans, albeit surpassing them in abilities, and elves (as well as some other mythological beings, spirits, and gods) can be considered prototypes of contemporary notions of super- or transhumans.

Returning to the history of the development of traditional mythological non-human identities, it’s worth noting that the 20th-century revival of belief in elves was partly initiated through pranks, hoaxes, and the influence of occultism. In 1917, there was an incident in England known as the “Cottingley Fairies photographs”, which showed how strong faith in incarnated spirits was. Two cousins, E. Wright and F. Griffiths, claimed to have photographed fairies and gnomes near a stream in the village of Cottingley. The spiritualist writer A. Conan Doyle published these photographs in *The Strand Magazine* in 1920, interpreting them as clear and visible evidence of psychic phenomena. Public opinion was divided: some accepted the images as genuine, while others believed they were faked. In the early 1980s, the girls admitted that some of these photographs had indeed been faked.

In the 1960s, the New Age movement emerged in the United States and the United Kingdom, which, by uniting various spiritual teachings and practices, became a fertile ground for the spread of non-human identities. During this period in Europe and America, there was an increase in neo-pagan movements focused on the study of Celtic and Germanic mythology, where tales of elves and other anthropomorphic spirits were of great importance. During this period, magical and religious movements based on folklore traditions and respect for nature, such as Wicca and Germanic neopaganism, came into existence.

Wicca originated in England and gained popularity in 1954. The Wiccan cult of the Triple Goddess was largely based on the book *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* by poet and writer Robert Graves (1948). Germanic neopaganism is also known as Heathenry or Heathenism, modern Germanic neopaganism, known as Ásatrú, which translates to “faith in the Æsir”, is a collection of neopagan movements that emerged in the United States in the 1970s and is based on Scandinavian mythology and culture. Scholars of religion classify it as a reconstructionist form of contemporary paganism. Many members of these groups worship various mythological beings and identify themselves with them, including the Æsir (a group of deities in Norse mythology), Vanir, Valkyries, elves, dwarves, and others.

The synthesis of J. R. R. Tolkien’s literary neo-mythology with New Age movements like Wicca and Germanic neopaganism led to both the revitalisation of traditional non-human identities and the creation of new classes of non-human identities such as “mythological beings — spirits, gods”, based on the works of J. R. R. Tolkien as well as traditional folklore that inspired the writer.

Around 1970, during a spiritual session, a spirit purportedly informed a group of American magicians that someday they would be called the Elf Queen’s Daughters. According to some sources, it was a joke, but the magicians took it partly seriously. M. A. Davidsen (2017) rightly points out that “they inspired other people to identify as elves, and these people continued to speculate about owning elven genes or elven souls. A movement of self-identified elves emerged” (p. 17).

In 1974, within the pagan and Wiccan communities, the organisation known as the Elf Queen’s Daughters was founded. It was established by two sisters, Arwen Luthien Tinuviel and Eleanor Galadriel Lorien. They were inspired by the characters of the Lord of the Rings epic by J. R. R. Tolkien and referred to themselves as elves, wrote esoteric letters about elven wisdom and philosophy, and were actively engaged in missionary work, spreading the message of “the world of the fairies”. Modern members of the group consider themselves spiritual descendants of the Elf Queen, who is a symbol of the elven people and their magic.

M. A. Davidsen (2017) notes that “the publication of *The Silmarillion* in 1977 cemented the foundation of the elven movement on Tolkien”. The release of J. R. R. Tolkien’s books *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) and *The Silmarillion* (1977) inspired the creation of subcultures and non-traditional cults based on the writer’s fantasy universe. In particular, Tolkien’s books acquired a sacred status for Hippies. They formed the basis for weddings and other rituals, including recitations from the books. The effect was intensified by the use of hallucinogens (LSD) (p. 16).

Furthermore, in the development of mythological non-human identities, mass media such as cinema (for example, numerous film adaptations of Tolkien’s works),

the computer game industry, and the growth of virtual communities play significant roles. Modern representatives of non-human identities, including elven communities, are highly active on the Internet, have groups in social networks, blogs, and also publish books (Shea, 2019, p. 14). However, it's worth noting that various types of non-human identities can now emerge and exist more or less independently of specific subcultures or religious groups, creating what are known as "distributed networks".

It is interesting to consider how representatives of elven identity perceive their otherness. Let's examine the views of the modern community known as the Silver Elves, who consider themselves a part of the previously mentioned pagan community, the Elf Queen's Daughters, founded in 1975. The Silver Elves claim to be a special race — the first humans on Earth, the "second indigenous race," or Hyperboreans, with close ties to Lemuria and Atlantis (*Elves in Paradise*, n.d.). Belonging to this race can be interpreted both materialistically (when a person considers himself a physical being of a faerie) and metaphysically. It is argued that although there is a bloodline, one does not have to have a particular DNA structure to "be" an elf. The Silver Elves do not consider themselves a religious community, but they assert that they are representatives of a "shamanistic faith" that uses magic to change their lives and the world without worshipping, praying, or propitiating deities (Silver Elves, 2017). The Silver elves are characterised by messianism: they claim that their task is to help inspire the evolution of humanity for its own good and for the good of the planet that the Elves consider a potentially sacred place. Many Elves also feel eco-anxiety: they are concerned about the "life force" of nature and the planet.

As shown in M. A. Davidsen's (2017) research on elven identity, most representatives of cults related to J. R. R. Tolkien's world consider the storyline of his work to be fictional. However, they believe that some of the mythological beings described in his work exist in the real world and can communicate through ritual. A minority sees J. R. R. Tolkien's narratives in a mythohistorical mode, viewing the actions of non-human beings as real facts of the real world (p. 17).

The organisation most inspired by J. R. R. Tolkien's legendarium is the Tribunal of the Sidhe, a neopagan organisation founded in America in 1984. Members of this group claim to be changelings — elves or similar beings from the astral world who were mistakenly incarnated in human bodies. They also assert that "magical research" has established that Tolkien himself was a changeling, and his works tell the stories of changelings in mythic form (Davidsen, 2014, p. 216). Without the ability to examine all elven communities in detail within this article, it is worth noting that similar communities can be found worldwide.

Let's summarise the existence of the traditional non-human identity "Elven" in the context of cultural dynamics. As a result of the study, the author supports the viewpoint of researcher S. Shea (2019), who asserts that non-human identities have been inherent in various cultures from antiquity to the present (p. 89) and traditionally served specific roles and functions in society. In this regard, the author of this article makes the claim that non-human identities belong to cultural universals.

Based on the presented facts, the author's observations, and employing an inductive method of understanding, we can generalise and argue that the general patterns of the existence of elven non-human identity in the context of cultural dynamics, re-

vealed in our research, can be extrapolated to the broader category we have identified, which we propose to call “traditional other-than-human identities: mythological creatures” (such as gods of upper and lower mythology, spirits, angelic or demonic creatures, fairies, elves, vampires, etc.).

In the archaic, pre-modern world, this category is widely represented by ideas about beings that seem to exist objectively and typically are subjects with a high degree of agency (endowed with individuality and will). According to traditional beliefs, these entities (much like humans) can transcend the boundaries of human/non-human, interact with each other, form symbiotic relationships (e.g., a person’s controlled obsession with spirits among shamans and magicians from various cultures), and change their nature.

In modernist societies, these ideas seemed to be relegated to the margins of global cultural processes. However, they are re-emerging in contemporary times and are now understood in a more diverse manner, with a wide range of interpretations regarding the ontological nature of non-human identities.

Currently, the ideas of the archaic and pre-modern times are being updated and new interpretations are appearing: mythological creatures and non-human identities can now be understood as: 1) objectively existing subjects, 2) as parts of the human psyche, 3) as a result of a person’s ability to change his nature, that is, in fact, to make a direct (metaphysical or physical) transhumanist transition to his ideal. This can occur through various cultural practices such as *identity* and image *construction* in the physical and virtual worlds, altering consciousness through psycho-techniques, meditation, magical practices, and the application of plastic surgery (with expectations of more radical methods of altering the physical body and appearance using high-tech, etc.). It’s important to note that transhumanist intentions have always been inherent to humanity (Hots, 2022), but they have only recently been explicitly explored and conceptualised as a separate cultural phenomenon.

Table 1

Traditional other-than-human identities: mythological creatures*

Gods, spirits (elf, sid, etc.)	
Archaic	Premodern
Widely represented in traditional beliefs as <i>objectively existing</i> subjects with a high degree of agency (1). The frontier between the human and non-human world and status is <i>mobile and permeable</i> .	
Modern	
Mythological non-human identities are relegated to the margins of culture.	
Post- and metamodern	
The beliefs of archaic and premodern times are being revitalised. Mythological non-human identities are also beginning to be interpreted as: parts of the human psyche (2), the result of a person’s ability to make a <i>transhumanist transition</i> to his ideal (3).	

* Developed by the author

Conclusions

Let's summarise the origins, essence, and reasons for the popularity of the elven non-human identity. Using a religious studies approach, belief in elves can be considered as one of the forms of folkloric religiosity that is widespread in various regions of the world. The sources of belief in elves can be traced back to animism, ancient beliefs that attribute souls or spirits to all natural objects and phenomena. Animism can explain the emergence of belief in elves as a way to interact with invisible forces of nature and seek their favour or protection. The psychological approach tends to interpret belief in elves as an indication of escapist intentions. From a cultural perspective, non-human identities undoubtedly represent a form of self-realisation, creative self-expression, and the construction of one's individuality in the conditions of globalisation and standardisation of human life. People who identify as non-human may seek to create their unique lifestyle, subculture, and community based on their interests, beliefs, and fantasies.

It should be noted that a significant component of the appeal of the elven identity lies in the powerful mythological layer beneath the contemporary popular image of elves as cute little creatures. Within this mythological layer, elves are representatives of the high civilisation of anthropomorphic gods. Powerful gods and spirits, including elves, can represent idealised images and models of trans- or superhuman nature. The elf's image typically combines beauty, wisdom, harmony, and superhuman abilities. Image of the gods-spirits elves, which are "fundamentally similar" to humans yet simultaneously possess superhuman qualities, including ontological duality, the transgressive ability to cross the frontiers of different worlds, and the magical influence to alter human nature, thus bridging the gap between various classes of beings, can be implicitly interpreted as transhumanistic, conveying transhumanist ideals inherent to humans throughout different epochs.

The scientific novelty of the research lies in the conceptualisation of the self-identification type "traditional other-than-human identities: mythological creatures"; the transformation of perceptions of elven identity and the features of its existence in homo sapiens in the diachrony of culture (premodern, modern, post- and metamodern) are determined; the reasons for the popularity of the elven identity in connection with humanity's transhumanistic intentions are revealed.

The patterns presented in this article can be taken into account in further studies of the broad type of "traditional other-than-human identities". Innovative types of transhumanist identities (in particular, other-than-human and non-human) require careful examination, including the dynamics of their dissemination and the cultural ideals they manifest.

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Традиційна non-human ідентичність в історико-культурній динаміці (на прикладі ельфійської ідентичності)

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Мета статті — на матеріалі ельфійської ідентичності концептуалізувати тип самовизначення «традиційні альтернативні людським ідентичності: міфологічні істоти». Методологія дослідження в рамках культурології базується на засадах постгуманістичної антропології та вивченнях non-human ідентичностей у закордонній гуманітаристиці. *Результати дослідження*. Розглянуто трансформацію уявлень про ельфів та проведено аналіз ельфійської ідентичності в homo sapiens у діахронії культури. Визначено специфіку її побутування в премоде́рні, модерні, пост- та метамодерні. Розкрито сутність та причини популярності ельфійської ідентичності. Підтверджено гіпотезу статті, згідно з якою альтернативні людським ідентичності у біологічних людей маніфестуються протягом усієї історії людства. Комплексне вирішення зазначених проблем становить наукову

новизну роботи. Висновки. Концептуалізація поняття «традиційні альтернативні людським ідентичності: міфологічні істоти» у широкому діяхронному вимірі культурної динаміки надала можливість цілісного погляду на феномен non-human ідентичності в людей. Автор висуває твердження, що non-human ідентичності часто є трансгресивними за своїм характером і належать до культурних універсалій людства. Міфологічні ідентичності представлені в традиційних уявленнях архаїки та премодерну. В епоху модерну не-людські ідентичності дещо витісняються на маргіналії культури. Пост- та метамоде́рн актуалізує премодерні уявлення. Міфологічні non-human ідентичності у людей, водночас із традиційними інтерпретаціями, набувають нових тлумачень. Зокрема, вони починають трактуватись як частини психіки індивідуума чи як результат здійснення трансгуманістичного переходу до альтернативного ідеалу транслюдини.

Ключові слова: трансгуманізм; постгуманістична антропологія; інший; азеркін; не-людина; альтернативні людським ідентичності; ельфійська ідентичність; фронтір

