

## The Origins of Chimaeras

### Mobilising the boundaries of species in a contemporary weird fiction novel: Anita Moskát's *Irha és bőrr*

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#### Abstract

Our study undertakes to interpret one of the most resonant works of contemporary Hungarian literature, Anita Moskát's *Irha és bőrr* (Hide and Skin) novel, from the perspective of character building. The novel allows for a multi-pronged approach to living complexity through a provocative and fruitful shift. An intelligent life form appears in the story: some animals have become subjects that show hitherto unknown anatomical-conscious features. The species are, therefore, unique chimaeras, representing a new class. In principle, global transformation can lead to infinite variance, increasing the bio-figurative diversity associated with the post-Tolkien vision. The anthropological issues of the novel, the dynamization of the relationship between human and animal characters, and the opening of human biological, legal, and cultural identities are analyzed in the context of science, weird fiction, and posthumanism.

**Keywords:** weird fiction; character building; chimaera; bio-poetics; Anita Moskát

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According to Darwin's famous finding, in a series of forms in which an ape-like creature unobtrusively develops the present appearance of man, it would be impossible to designate a single definite point from which the word "man" should be used. (Dawkins 2009, 214) The transformation of species is not abrupt, it is simply that only specific individuals from this process survive in the form of fossils, and if they are different, they can be classified as other species. One of Darwin's most important observations was that the difference between man and animals is not substantial but gradual. Nevertheless, the meme of human uniqueness has run a tremendous career in the history of civilisation and continues today in many areas of human culture. However, scientific works on the abilities of animals refute this exclusionary logic, yet they do not end in simple anthropogenic denial, as the theory (now: fact) of evolution does not support black-and-white distinctions.

The dichotomous system of human and animal behaviour, based on which one is determined by learning and the other by biology, has been transformed with consideration of cognition. The accumulation of knowledge, learning, and cognitive achievement is typical in many animals, but certain organisms constrict the

flow of information, acquiring special skills that they need. From this point of view, all living things must be examined in the light of this unique perspective (system of living conditions). All cognitive capacities are older and more widespread than was thought; however, the expectations transferred from one species to another are meaningless. Thus, in the light of cognitive attributes, the decisive factor is how individual living beings orientate in the complexity of their world. From this viewpoint, one of man's essential abilities can be grasped in their ability to think beyond the threshold of their perception, which is related to planning and cooperation. However, there are several variations of this ability in the world of animals.

Frans de Waal's research also confirms that the ability to project consciousness into the future (design) is not a human privilege or that empathy or language cannot be considered a simple human criterion. Most animals are non-verbal creatures that think and can even learn performances (depending on their intra-species talent) that we assumed required language to master. If these aspects are taken into account, it becomes clear that the position that measures man needs correction in the light of the uniqueness of the animals. And then even the question arises as to what the human image constructed by animals may be. We have already come across literary works that allow us to think about the issues mentioned above on some level. Our study will focus on novels in which the indicated problems are strongly concentrated and reflected.

## Weird & New Weird

We know of few authors whose peripheral genres begin to proliferate to the same extent as in the case of H. P. Lovecraft, whose texts could be described as intertexts organised by the syncretism of sci-fi, horror, and dark fantasy. Consistent with this, but with transforming textuality and genre codes into a complex system, Lovecraft's works provide continuous examples of shifting the anthropological perspective. In the words of Márió Nemes Z.: "There is no theological and anthropological correction in Lovecraft since his textual world is not arranged around the reporting instance of man. The epistemological projection of this approach is based on the recognition that man has minimal possibilities of cognition as to the true essence of the universe. This »essence« is something radically foreign and not a »human-faced« truth that is portrayed in the fragmentary narratives of the Chtulhu myth." (Nemes Z. 2014, 45–46) Rejecting the idea of the human-faced cosmos and introducing an inhuman perspective is that weird element in Lovecraft's writings that opens the horizons for rewriting the humanistic ideas of history and culture. In addition to cosmic terror, this may be the momentum that makes Lovecraft relevant to authors like China Miéville or Jeff VanderMeer, two unavoidable creators of new weird fiction.

From our perspective, this process has a significant benefit related to character building and the hybridisation of the created world. This, because the mobilisation and powerful transformation of the boundaries between different life forms can be observed in the weird literature. Szilárd Sánta rightly points out based on Miéville

that: “The authors of weird fiction, for example, break with the inclusion of vampires and werewolves in the legend, and it is not uncommon in their writings to see monsters assembled from multiple beings whose visualisation – or notation and pronunciation of their names – is often not an easy task”. (Sánta 2012, 52) An excellent example of this from *Perdido Street Station*’s character map is, for example, a Slake Moth, a hybrid of a moth and a vampire, which has a unique feature of sucking out its victim’s brain. (These are highly intelligent and communal predators who feed on the consciousness of sentient creatures, so they drink dreams.) Alternatively, as another example, the character construction of VanderMeer’s novel *Borne*, which depicts decentralised human specificity from faulty biotechs, can be highlighted here – featuring biotechnological constructs that can simulate anyone and can bridge the gap between solid electrotechnical equipment and soft tissues. Therefore, both examples are suitable for looking at the possibilities inherent in the new weird for re-situating the human factor.

On the other hand, all this can be placed in a post-humanist context in which it is a must to pay attention to the functioning of biological and cultural fields simultaneously. As József Keserű put it: „ The observations of the ethologists and the conclusions drawn from them are consistent with the utterances of post-humanist discourses that criticise the idea of human excellence and superiority. Animal studies examine the philosophical, ethical, and political implications of all this” (Keserű 2021, 245). The aforementioned weird line also makes possible the modification and leaving behind the fixed human perspective, strongly suggesting that it is not only the human world that can be described phenomenologically. This aspect has also appeared in Hungarian literature in recent years (cf. Vida 2019), for example, in works whose connection to Lovecraft is obvious (Attila Veres: *Odakint sötétebb* [Darker Outside]), or they differentiate the image of alien(ation) of science fiction by surprising creativity (Brandon Hackett: *Xeno*), and standing on the ground of fantasy and new weird fiction, they propose the transformation of the human and animal frame of reference (Anita Moskát: *Irha és bőr* [Hide and Skin]).

## Hungarian Weird

After constructing the context that defines the relevant part of scientific, trans-cultural, and speculative fiction, we analyse Anita Moskát’s work *Irha és bőr* from Hungarian literature in more detail in terms of character building. The basic idea of the novel is to create and exploit a system of relationships in which the emergence of a new intelligent way of life plays a key role. Before the beginning of the story, some of the animals pupated and became subjects that set out on the path to becoming human but were not wholly transformed, thus exhibiting animal and human characteristics at the same time. Due to this contamination, chimaeras are unique; their definition raises several questions, the most important of which is: what problems do the sudden addition of the third category to human-animal duality and the artificial mobilisation of borders generate in today’s society (ghettoisation, racism, intolerance), while this situation suggests a presumption that all animals are

potential humans.

The three main characters in *Irha és bőr* are worth mentioning for a few sentences, as in the present case, the perception of the literary response to the experience of cultural alienation can contribute far-reaching conclusions to the mapping of the function of character patterns. At the same time, it is worth bearing in mind that the cultural codes of texts activated in reading get mainly tensed with literary reading aimed at unstabilised linguistic-rhetorical elements because the recipient tends to bring the characters of the works into play as language-independent tropes. That is, in this case, it is worth talking not only about the current identities of the characters but also about the consequences of their symbolic-like being. If animals are not imperfect humans, and humans are not perfected animals, where do the chimaeras belong? We learnt that the transient creature appears to be transient only from a specific position (there are no missing links), but the chimaeras overthrow this law as well, so what can they be considered at all?

One of the key figures in the story is August, the campaign manager of the International Organization for Breeding in Budapest, a species created from a snail according to its biological identity, who looks or deceptively resembles a human (mimicry) in its bioform. His self-revealing media performance (his coming out) is one of the focal points of the plot, and on the other hand, by recalling his memories, one can get a glimpse into the first phase of creation. It recalls the period following species change (also a thing of the past, compared to the present of the narrative), the close relationship between August and his two “brothers,” and his career in human society. Some scenes also report that the love affair with his assistant, Veronica, is “unusual” in terms of sexual scaling, as one of the characteristics of snails is the partial preservation of the genitals (or the absence of nipples) that refers back to the racial origin. Although reflection on sexual roles allows for reading from a gender or queer perspective, in terms of the identities offered in the novel, it does not necessarily have to be placed in the centre to the detriment of other aspects. At the same time, gender analysis may also be able to dynamise approaches (such as components of biopolitics or mimicry as a strategy that transcribes boundaries) that form the complexity of the theoretical horizon of the work. August is a hybrid identity figure of the novel world who fights for the rights of chimaeras but defines himself more as a human being.

The other key figure is Kirill, the antlered deer chimaera who works as a blogger, and his identity and consciousness are greatly influenced by the herd spirit. As a blogger, he researches the history of chimaeras and then publishes his writings on the Internet. Thirteen mini-novellas from Kirill’s stories and a deconstructive animal tale that nuances the background world break the plot at specific points in the novel, validating the subjective point of view of the deer chimaera. These striking “tales” enter into a special relationship with the fable tradition, significantly contributing to the reader’s critical position on how stereotypes work. The novel can be a treasure trove for stereotypical reading, but the material delivered by Kirill also affects literary canonisation insofar as it treats the repertoire of animal tales parodically. (From this point of view, it is related to Noémi Szécsi’s *Finnugor vámpír* [Fino-Ugric Vampire] novel, in which the characters’ interpretation of animal tales is

also ironic. On the other hand, Kirill is a subject struggling with aggressive tendencies, whose mind is also determined by his relationship with herd members, and the literarisation of this mechanism makes the interpersonal functioning of animal consciousness conceivable to the recipient. This thread approaches the instinct – consciousness (and empathy) relation from inside; however, it may also suggest that Kirill is not only chimeric due to his physical structure, but his mind can also be seen as a neuronal parallel to this.

The third key character is Pilar, the naive badger chimaera (became a metamorphic human from skunk), representing the dependence of personality, cultural codes on the media and whose actions illustrate the construction of life made up of staged sequences of scenes. “My father is a deer chimaera; my mother is television” reiterates Pilar, referring to Kirill’s rescue and care and the culture she learned through television. The latter means, above all, the oversimplified world of soap operas, mastering and quoting the character offer of the series *Mézédés szenvedély* [Honey Passion]. Pilar thinks of herself as a star (partly due to home videos made by her first owner, Adam), and after participating in the media circus of August’s campaign and becoming a different media product than she thought she would, she commits self-mutilation, a character murder. She cuts off just the part of her body, her tail, which was her sex appeal, and as an animal remains, made her uniqueness visible. However, the mediatisation of the personality does not stop with this either; Pilar records her production on her phone. However, the identity formula points in several directions here; a rare ability appears in the system of shapes composed of media slices, namely that Pilar can create. With this, the figure becomes attractive to others precisely because she can shape interracial relationships while opening up the personality to replace external control with the question: will Pilar be able to control the process of creation on her own? Focusing on the subject composed of the divergent mosaics of self-image throughout the story maintains the readability of medial distinctions and overlaps, contributing to the complexity of the work’s character map.

The intersecting path of the three characters (August, Kirill, Pilar) fits into a network that, at several points, raises the question, “what makes a person human?” However, this question does not stand in itself (it is not squeezed into the categories of positive/negative hero, good/wrong side), it is not a matter of simple speculation, but changes with the emergence of a new species: where is the boundary between animal and chimaera, chimaera and human? Is there any human specificity at all? According to one concept, the only difference is appearance. The novel emphasises the array of bodily signs, as the uniqueness of the bodies and the animal remains can be traced back to the partiality of the transformation. It also contains the opposition of reproduction and creation, the atavistic qualities being further magnified by the latter. The external asymmetry is a truncation on the one hand and a sign of origin on the other hand; simultaneously, the mind cannot be excluded from this either; the different medium and the different bodily structure create different consciousnesses. At the same time, the novel – and this is a productive process of Anita Moskát’s enterprise that can be observed on several levels – also runs the given logic into crisis, the appearance as a stable difference is elimi-

nated with the phenomenon of mimicry. The ability to imitate learned from nature (in the case of August, for example) becomes an action-compliant element; deception also allows for the exchange and identification of chimaera and man. So we see the issue from one side, but we also see it from the other. In addition, classification based on purely external features may even prove to be a misconception for as many individuals as there are variants possible (spectrally), and taxonomy based on visuality can contradict biology. Creation in this sense also disrupts the system.

According to another concept, the age of man is over; the chimaeras represent the next stage of evolution. The use of the term evolution here, of course, is formulaic since creation has no regard for Darwinian principles. The abrupt movement of the pupated individual towards the human can also be reversed; the result is in many cases interpreted as a monster, a teratoma the way some people truly consider chimaeras to be degenerate. Nevertheless, it is also possible that chimaeras with enhanced learning abilities outperform men. The question can also be formulated in terms of what should be considered a standard. In a discussion, when the characters run into this dilemma, August reacts this way: "In Denmark, everyone has been given equal rights. For the Irish, for example, the papers are linked to a humanity test in which intellectual abilities are assessed. However, it raises ethical concerns where we draw the line ...". While this solution deviates from the standard of the human body, it preserves the exclusion of most animals as humanistic innerivation, so August also argues that since any animal can change at any time, this limit is highly malleable and the standard itself should be rejected.

## The Last Weird

Most of the chimaeras in Anita Moskát's novel do not fit into the standards developed and observed by human society. Therefore, the inclusion issues could be solved provided that all living things are granted the same rights. In addition to the practical steps, the novel also raises the question: what a snail's career is like, what cockroach ethics means, or what murdering a centipede implies. All of this can be phrased this way because, as chimaeras, all three are people escaping anthropocentric standardisation. On the other hand, it is in the context of the law as rights are shaped by consensus, and we may have rights that we can enforce that the question arises as to whether all these changes with the appearance of varieties. After all, in this unique situation, chimaeras confront man in that he does not grant rights but merely recognises them. It seems that the literary application of bio-figurative diversity, the inversion of species extinction associated with the post-Tolkien vision, faces us with dilemmas that can be efficiently interpreted from the aspects of the cognitive revolution, posthuman rearrangement, bio-poetic perspective, and the science fictionalisation of the modern literature writing heritage in recent years.

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