

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 273

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



**Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol.
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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

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Preface

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Zinaida Gippius

1869-1945

(Born Zinaida Nikolayevna Gippius; also transliterated as Hippus; also wrote under pseudonyms Anton Krainy, Roman Arensky, Lev Pushchin, and Comrade Herman) Russian poet, short story writer, essayist, playwright, novelist, critic, and memoirist.

The following entry provides an overview of Gippius's life and works. For additional information on her career, see *TCLC*, Volume 9.

INTRODUCTION

Gippius is widely regarded as an influential poet and critic of pre-revolutionary Russia, a period often referred to as the Silver Age of Russian art and literature. She is best known for her early poetry collections, including the two-volume *Sobranie stikhov* (1904-10), as well as her numerous short stories and, especially, her literary reminiscences, *Zhivye litsa* (1925), which offers portraits of important contemporary literary figures. Gippius played a fundamental role in Russia's early twentieth-century religious renaissance, and throughout her career she promoted the idea that the purpose of art is to advance the moral and spiritual development of humanity. In her poetry and prose, she addressed religious themes, such as spiritual elation, transcendence, and the search for God, and considered the social and political questions of her time, including the purpose and consequences of revolution and war. In addition to her work as a writer, she founded and actively participated in a number of religious and philosophical organizations, in both St. Petersburg and Paris, in an attempt to bring attention to neo-Christian ideals. A formal innovator, Gippius experimented with rhyme, meter, and other poetic structures, and is credited with furthering the development of modern Russian poetry. Writing in 1970, Irina Kirillova described Gippius as "one of the outstanding poets" of her time, concluding that her "profoundly individual" writing "deserves to be better known than it is."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Gippius was born November 8, 1869, in Belev (today Belyov), Russia. Her father, Nikolai Romanovich Gippius, was the super-procurator of the St. Petersburg Senate and later became the chief judge in Nezhin, in

the district of Chernigov. After her father's death in 1881, Gippius moved with her mother and siblings to Moscow, and then to Tbilisi. She was primarily educated at home, although she spent several months at the Kiev Institute for Noble Girls in 1877 and 1878 and later received some schooling, in 1882, at the Fisher private classic school in Moscow. She developed a love for poetry early in life and began composing her own verse as a child. In 1888, the author met Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, a poet and theorist, and the two were married the following year in Tbilisi, after which they moved to St. Petersburg. Gippius's first published poems appeared in the November 1888 issue of *Severnyi vestnik*. In St. Petersburg, the author became acquainted with several important literary figures, including the poets Apollon Maikov and Konstantin Balmont, as well as Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, and Maxim Gorky. Gippius continued to compose poetry during the 1890s, and her first collection, volume one of *Sobranie stikhov*, appeared in 1904. The author also published two volumes of stories during this time, titled *Novye liudi* (1896) and *Zerkala* (1898). Beginning in the 1890s, Gippius and her husband traveled extensively, visiting Greece, Italy, Germany, and Sicily. They also belonged to a group known as *Mir iskusstva* ("The World of Art"), led by Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev, who established and edited a journal of the same name. Gippius became a regular contributor to *Mir iskusstva*, as well as other leading journals, producing significant critical articles, often under various pseudonyms, such as Anton Krainy and Roman Arensky.

In St. Petersburg, Gippius and her husband became interested in questions of religious faith. They founded a new religious practice, based on the teachings of Christ, and wrote their own liturgies and prayers. In 1901, they also initiated a series of meetings known as the Religious-Philosophical Meetings in St. Petersburg, which were attended by priests, monks, and members of the Russian intelligentsia. In 1902, Gippius and Merezhkovsky founded a new journal dedicated to religious themes, titled *Novyi put'*, which began circulating the following year. In 1906, Gippius, Merezhkovsky, and their friend, Dmitrii Vladimirovich Filosofov, left for Paris to seek supporters for their religious cause. In Paris, they became acquainted with members of the Catholic clergy, as well as figures of the modernist movement. After three years, the trio returned to St. Petersburg. In 1908, writing as Anton Krainy, Gippius published her literary essays and articles under the title

Literaturnyi dnevnik, 1899-1907. While Gippius had opposed World War I on religious grounds, she welcomed the change brought by the February 1917 revolution in St. Petersburg and wrote manifestos for the Socialist Revolutionary Party. The author's hopes for a free Russia were dashed, however, with the October Revolution of 1917, and Gippius, Merezhkovsky, and Filosofov, along with Vladimir Zlobin, Gippius's private secretary, left St. Petersburg in 1919, settling first in Poland and eventually in Paris in 1920. In Paris, the author and her husband remained committed to their ideas regarding religion, philosophy, and political freedom, and they founded a new society, known as "Zelenaia Lampa," or "The Green Lamp," in 1926. During the 1920s and 1930s, Gippius traveled, gave lectures, and continued to write, publishing her memoir, *Zhivye litsa*, in 1925 and a new collection of verse, *Siianiia*, in 1938. In a letter written on the eve of World War II, Gippius expressed her alarm at the thought of war between Germany and the rest of Europe, although later she was embroiled in a controversy regarding her supposed affiliations with the Nazis. After her husband died in 1941, the author continued to write, publishing another memoir, *Dmitrii Merezhkovsky* (1951), and the philosophical poem "Poslednii krug," which first appeared in the Paris journal *Vozrozhdenie* in 1968 and later in her posthumous collection of poems, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy* (1972). Gippius died on September 9, 1945, in Paris.

MAJOR WORKS

For some scholars, Gippius's poetry is foremost among her literary contributions. Her debut collection, the first installment of *Sobranie stikhov*, introduces many of the intense religious themes that characterize her entire literary career. Comprised of poems written during the 1890s and early 1900s, the volume depicts nostalgia for the spiritual and the struggle to achieve a deep faith in God. Many of these early poems also emphasize the vulgarity of material reality and express disdain for temporal existence, as well as hatred for the self. A second volume of *Sobranie stikhov*, which appeared in 1910, revisits the religious themes and ideas introduced in Gippius's first collection but also includes poems, such as "Peterburg" and "14-oe dekabria," which reflect the author's interest in socio-political themes and the transcendent effects of love and justice. Her continued interest in the political issues of her time is further reflected in the later volume, *Poslednie stikhi, 1914-1918* (1918). From this collection, poems such as "Bez opravdania," "Segodnia na zemle," and "Adonai" express the author's opposition to war, while "Molodoe Znamia" describes war as a "necessary general madness," preordained by God, and as a sacrifice in the promotion of a new religious consciousness. Other poems in the collection, including "Tli," "Net," "Tak est',"

and "Tish'," portray the aftermath of the October Revolution. Scholars have noted a more subdued tone in the poems of her later collection, *Siianiia*, in contrast to the frank and joyous sentiments expressed in her earlier works. As with previous volumes, however, the verse collected in *Siianiia* demonstrates Gippius's considerable technical expertise. The author's experiments with rhyme, meter, and poetic imagery, conducted throughout her career, are considered a significant contribution to the development of modern Russian poetry.

Gippius also produced significant prose works during her literary career. The author's earliest short story collections, *Novye liudi* and *Zerkala*, address similar themes to those introduced in her poetry, including the rejection of the material world and the search for love, beauty, and God. Sexual ambiguity, a concept that Gippius incorporated into her religious philosophy, is another important theme that recurs in several of her prose works. These collections have been compared with the writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky, particularly in their psychological explorations of the human psyche. In another volume of stories, *Alyi mech* (1906), Gippius explores concepts related to beauty, harmony, religious divination, neo-Christianity, and ecumenism. The exploration of social ideas and the awareness of the mystery of nature are also distinctive characteristics of the volume. The stories collected in *Lunnye murav'i* (1912) emphasize the importance of the individual and stress the significance of one's spiritual perception of the world. Gippius examines a number of themes in the work, such as suicide, art, resurrection, and the devil, as well as the beauty and mysteries of nature and the love for the eternal Mother. Scholars have particularly noted the author's success with dialogue in this volume. In addition to her fiction, Gippius's literary memoir or reminiscences, *Zhivye litsa*, is considered among her most important prose works. Comprised of candid, first-hand portraits of many of the well-known St. Petersburg writers with whom she was acquainted, the work has often been praised for its realistic descriptions and memorable evocation of the atmosphere of the time. A noted sketch collected in the work, "Moy lunnyi drug," recounts the efforts that Gippius and fellow poet Alexander Blok made in their attempt to achieve spirituality through poetry.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Gippius achieved recognition early in her career with the publication of her first poems in the journal *Severnyi vestnik* and the production of her initial volumes of short stories, *Novye liudi* and *Zerkala*, which were praised for their deft handling of themes and mood, as well as their humor and psychological insight. More significantly, she gained notoriety as a thinker and cul-

tural leader with her marriage to Merezhkovsky and the couple's association with a number of influential journals and some of the most prominent writers and social critics in St. Petersburg during the first decade of the twentieth century. The author's involvement with various religious and philosophical groups, such as *Mir iskusstva*, was also a driving force in the renewed interest among Russia's intelligentsia in religion and spirituality at the time. In addition, her journal, *Novyi put'*, founded with Merezhkovsky in 1902, helped promote the work of other fledgling Russian writers. While influential, Gippius was also considered a controversial figure. Her blunt speech, shocking attire, and disdainful manner alienated some of her contemporaries, and throughout her career, her personality frequently overshadowed her literary achievements. The fascination with Gippius's personal life and her portrayal of sexuality often influenced critical opinions of her work, a trend that has persisted even in more recent criticism. The author's critical writings also elicited a mixed response. While some admired her wit and insight, others observed that in these works she was often subjective and spiteful. Following her death in 1945, Gippius's reputation waned, and her writings were banned in the Soviet Union because of their political and religious themes. During the latter half of the twentieth century, however, a few scholars attempted to rescue the author from obscurity and establish her importance within the development of modern Russian literature. While previously misrepresented as a decadent, she has been increasingly accepted as one of the first Russian symbolists and one of the most influential cultural figures of her time.

In more recent decades, critics have continued to examine the primary themes and techniques Gippius employed in her writings. While a few scholars, including Suk-Young Kim, have studied the author's dramatic works, for the most part commentators have focused on her poetry and prose. In her 1970 survey of Gippius's career, Irina Kirillova stressed the enduring nature of her poems, particularly with regard to their expression of "alienation" and "hopelessness," maintaining that such qualities "are more evocative for us now than they were for most of her contemporary readers." Other critics, including Olga Matich and Temira Pachmuss, have concentrated on Gippius's complex exploration of religious themes. While Pachmuss discussed neo-Christian themes and concepts expressed in Gippius's short fiction, Matich identified the image of the circle as an important symbol in the author's poetry, which represents both her "oneness with God" and her "submission to the devil and spiritual apathy in moments of despair and self-abnegation." In a later study, Matich continued to trace Gippius's dynamic struggle with spiritual faith, which she claimed was chronicled in her poems of "doubt, hopelessness and negation." Other commentators, such as Jenifer Presto, have considered the au-

thor's often-paradoxical representation of femininity. Writing in 2008, Presto observed a "problematic relationship with the female body" in Gippius's writing and asserted that in her attempt to subvert the feminine stereotype of the female artist, the author often "reproduced some of the negative stereotypes of femininity of the day." Although Gippius is still relatively unknown to most western readers, among her supporters she is increasingly valued as an instrumental figure, whose provocative writings influenced the direction of twentieth-century Russian literature. Pachmuss declared that Gippius's artistic career has "accorded her a permanent place in the history of Russian Modernism," concluding that in "her poetry and prose the principal constituents of Russian culture—art, religion, metaphysics, and sociopolitical philosophy—are fused in their harmonious integrity."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Novye liudi* (short stories) 1896
Zerkala (short stories) 1898
Sviataia krov' (play) 1901; published in the journal *Russkaia mysl'*
Tret'ia kniga rasskazov (short stories) 1902
Sobranie stikhov. 2 vols. (poetry) 1904-10
Alyi mech (short stories) 1906
Le Tsar et la Révolution [with Dmitrii Merezhkovsky and Dmitrii Filosofov] (essays) 1907
Literaturnyi dnevnik, 1899-1907 [as Anton Krainy] (criticism) 1908
Makov tsvet [with Dmitrii Merezhkovsky and Dmitrii Filosofov] (play) 1908
Chortova kukla (novel) 1911
Lunnye murav'i (short stories) 1912
Roman-Tsarevich (novel) 1913
Zelenoe kol'tso [*The Green Ring*] (play) 1915
Poslednie stikhi, 1914-1918 (poetry) 1918
Stikhi: Dnevnik, 1911-1921 (poetry) 1922
Zhivye litsa. 2 vols. (reminiscences) 1925
Siianiia (poetry) 1938
Dmitrii Merezhkovsky (memoir) 1951
Selected Works of Zinaida Hippius (short stories) 1972
**Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*. 2 vols. (poetry) 1972
Intellect and Ideas in Action: Selected Correspondence of Zinaida Hippius (letters) 1973
Between Paris and St. Petersburg: Selected Diaries of Zinaida Hippius (diaries) 1975

*This work includes the philosophical poem "Poslednii krug."

CRITICISM

Irina Kirillova (essay date 1970)

SOURCE: Kirillova, Irina. "Zinaida Gippius—A Russian Decadent Poet: A Short Introduction to Her Early Verse." In *Gorski Vijenac: A Garland of Essays Offered to Professor Elizabeth Mary Hill*, edited by R. Auty, L. R. Lewitter, and A. P. Vlasto, pp. 179-94. Cambridge, United Kingdom: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 1970.

[In the following essay, Kirillova studies Gippius's early verse, noting that her poetry is "profoundly individual in its expression of alienation from the world and withdrawal into a pathologically bleak personal universe," and concludes that the success of her "'poems of despondency'" make her "one of the outstanding and most contemporary twentieth-century Russian poets."]

Zinaida Gippius is one of the outstanding poets of the older or so-called Decadent' generation of Russian Symbolists. She was not a prolific poet, and her best work was written, in my opinion, during the twenty years, between 1889 and 1909, which are covered by her first two volumes of verse.

Her poetry is profoundly individual in its expression of alienation from the world and withdrawal into a pathologically bleak personal universe. It deserves to be better known than it is.

Whatever source we turn to—Gippius' own work or contemporary biographical and critical material—we become aware of a complex and elusive personality, fascinating, though not particularly attractive.

Zinaida Gippius was born in 1869 and when, at the age of twenty she married Dmitry Merezhkovsky and moved with him to St Petersburg, she plunged straight into the literary world of the capital seething with the ferment of Modernism. She was active in every sphere; her published work was to include several collections of short stories, novels, plays, some biographical work and a large number of articles on various subjects, as well as her verse. Indeed, for many of her contemporaries she was a novelist strongly influenced by Dostoyevsky and a critic with uncompromisingly expressed views on various literary, religious and political issues, rather than a poet, though some did discern the bleak, lonely individual behind the literary 'lioness'. Her most notable contribution to the cultural life of St Petersburg at the turn of the century was her part in promoting the Religious-Philosophical Meetings. After the 1917 Revolution, with which they were totally out of sympathy,

the Merezhkovskys left Russia and from 1920 lived in exile in France. Dmitry Merezhkovsky died in 1941 and Zinaida Gippius in 1945.

Many writers have left us not only critical appreciations of her work but also attempts at literary portraits. With her curious and contradictory personality she invariably exercised the imagination of whoever wrote about her. Volynsky-Flexer, for example, dismissed much of her verse and most of her prose, and yet to his unexpressed but obvious annoyance could not somehow 'be rid of her'. In the later memoirs of Adamovich, or even Terapiano, she is something of the spectre which lingers on because it cannot find rest.

Several of her contemporaries have left descriptions of her as she was in her Petersburg period, in the 1890's and early 1900's. One was Andrey Bely, at one time an *habitué* of the Merezhkovskys' salon. As a writer of memoirs he is highly emotive, partisan, given to vivid and evocative, if somewhat exaggerated caricature-grotesques:

‘З. Гиппиус, точно оса в человеческий рост, коль не остов “пленительницы” (перо—Обри Бердслея); ком вспученных красных волос (коль распушит—до пят) укрывал очень маленькое и кривое какое-то личико; . . . с лобика, точно сияющий глаз, свисал камень: на черной подвеске; с безгрудой груди тарахтел черный крест; . . . шлейф белого платья в обтяжку закинула; прелесть ее костяного, безбокого остова напоминала причастицу, ловко пленяющую сатану’.²

Another was Sergey Makovsky, the painter and man of letters. He tempers Bely's bizarre sketch but adds his own dimension to a strange portrait:

‘. . . запомнилась мне Зинаида Николаевна еще . . . в 920м году, совсем юной, незадолго перед тем вышедшей замуж за Мережковского. . . . Красива? О, несомненно. “Какой оболстительный подросток!”—думалось при первом на нее взгляде. Маленькая гордо вздернутая головка, удлиненные серо-зеленые глаза, слегка прищуренные, яркий, чувственно очерченный рот с поднятыми уголками, и вся на редкость пропорциональная фигурка делали ее похожей на андрогина с холста Содомы. Вдобавок густые . . . волосы она заплетала в длинную косу—б знак девичьей своей нетронутости . . . Подробность, стоящая многого! Только ей могло притти в голову это нескромное щегольство “чистотой” супружеской жизни . . .

. . . Сама себе Зинаида Николаевна нравилась безусловно и этого не скрывала. Ее давила мысль о своей исключительности, избранности, о праве не подчиняться навыкам простых смертных.’³

And finally, on a more serious note, Berdyayev's description of Zinaida Gippius as he remembers her in 1905:

‘Я считаю Зинаиду Николаевну очень замечательным человеком, но и очень мучительным. Меня всегда поражала ее змеиная холодность. В ней отсутствовала человеческая теплота. Явно была перемешанность женской природы с мужской и трудно было определить, что сильнее. Было подлинное страдание. З. Н. по природе несчастный человек.’⁴

Few contemporary critics thought of Zinaida Gippius specifically as a poet though today it is her poetry above all which determines her place in Russian literature. As I have said, there is not much of it: four slim volumes and numbers of poems published in literary reviews. I shall limit myself to a thematic description of her first two collections. The first includes verse written between 1889 and 1903, and the second—verse written between 1903 and 1909. They were published in 1904 and 1910 respectively.

Her verse in this period was profoundly subjective, a sustained poetic expression of a complex spiritual and psychological *malaise*. It ranged from a state of deep despondency, with its concomitant, a sense of alienation from the surrounding world, to a somewhat ambivalent sexuality and a fascination with the force of evil. At its best this verse is powerful, bleak and laconic. It alternates between an expression of pleasurable surrender to these various states of mind, which she considers as sin and temptation, and professions of desire to overcome her sinfulness with divine help. In the foreword to her first book of verse she actually spoke of poetry as prayer, and though the Russian Symbolists as a whole saw the nature of art as being essentially religious she made the concept very much her own:

‘Я считаю естественной и необходимейшей потребностью человеческой природы—молитву. Каждый человек непременно молится или стремится к молитве,—все равно, сознает он это или нет, все равно в какую форму выливается у него молитва и к какому Богу обращена. Форма зависит от способностей и наклонностей каждого. Поэзия вообще, стихосложение в частности, словесная музыка—это лишь одна из форм, которую принимает в нашей душе молитва’.⁵

Elsewhere in the same introduction she touches on another aspect of the aesthetic consciousness of the period, the sense of isolation, even of alienation, that is the lot of contemporary man—a concept which, once again, she made very much her own: ‘. . . каждое “я” теперь сделалось особенным, одиноким, оторванным от другого “я”, и потому непонятным ему и ненужным’;⁶ and she goes on to justify the intimate genre that corresponded so closely to her own particular poetic gift:

‘Нам, каждому, страстно нужна, понятна и дорога наша молитва, нужно наше стихотворение,—отражение мгновенной полноты нашего сердца.

Но другому, у которого заветное “свое”—другое, непонятна и чужда моя молитва. Сознание одиночества еще более отрывает людей друг от друга, обособляет, заставляет замыкаться душу. Мы стыдимся своих молитв и, зная, что все равно не сольемся в них ни с кем,—говорим, слагаем их уже вполголоса, про себя, намеками, ясными лишь для себя . . . Если есть где-нибудь один, кто поймет нашу молитву,—он поймет ее и сквозь печаль тумана. Но есть ли он? Есть ли чудо?’

Zinaida Gippius’ earlier poems are frequently Verlainesque in mood (the Verlaine of *Poèmes saturniens*, *Romances sans paroles*) and are still relatively free from the bleakness which will be so characteristic a little later. They include *Песня* (1893), *Осень* (1895), *Пыль* (1897), *Мгновение* (1898) and others.⁸

Окно мое высоко над землею,
Высоко над землею,
Я вижу только небо с вечернею зарею,—
С вечернею зарею.

И небо кажется пустым и бледным,
Таким пустым и бледным . . .
Оно не сжалится над сердцем бедным,
Над моим сердцем бедным . . .

(Песня)

The Verlainesque melancholy, however, was only the ‘outer circle’ of Zinaida Gippius’ spiritual hell. Very soon the obsessive awareness of her despondency had established itself as the dominating theme in her verse and contributed to the assertion of its individuality. Clearly, precisely, very lucidly she begins to evoke the various manifestations of despondency; the lassitude:

Бессилие

Не ведаю, восстать иль покориться,
Нет смелости ни умереть, ни жить . . .
Мне близок Бог—но не могу молиться,
Хочу любви—и не могу любить.

(1893)⁹

the torpor:

Однообразие

В вечерний час уединения,
Унынья и утомления,
Один на шатких ступенях,
Ищу напрасно утешенья,
Моей тревоги утоленья
В недвижных, стынувших водах.

(1895)¹⁰

the sense of resignation which is hardly distinguishable from indifference:

Как все

Не хочу, ничего не хочу,
Принимаю все так как есть.
Изменять ничего не хочу,
Я дышу, я живу, я молчу.