

# An Impossible Ideal: The Transformation of the Divine Sophia into a Russian Symbolist Mytho-poetic Concept

K. Alexandra Nevarez

Andrew Drozd, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Russian

*The Divine Sophia is a religious icon that can be traced back to the pages of the Bible as a representation of God's wisdom. The writers of the Russian Symbolist movement used her likeness in their nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels and poetry, allowing her to become a cultural symbol of wisdom, piety, and femininity. This study seeks to identify the characteristics that persist in the journey from a holy female figurehead to the role of an impossible ideal in literary works and, ultimately, secular culture.*

## Introduction

In contemporary American culture, there is a developing interest and fascination with religious traditions that have remained unnoticed until now. While Hollywood dabbles in ancient kabbalistic studies, and Buddhism rises out of textbooks and infiltrates the mainstream media, it is surprising that the concept of the Divine Sophia has remained such a well-kept secret by theologians and religious researchers. In a cultural context, she is akin to Mexico's Our Lady of Guadalupe; as a religious entity in Russia, she is the epitome of feminine divinity, rooted in Russian Orthodoxy and expounded upon by theologians and significant philosophers. She also plays a tremendous role in the Russian Symbolist literary movement. Because examining the content of one culture is often a useful tool to reflect on the workings of one's own societal, cultural, and religious components, elucidating the journey of the Divine Sophia from a biblical representation of God's Wisdom to a female archetype is a necessary contribution to both cultural and literary studies.

This study seeks to lift the veil from the shoulders of the mystical entity that is Sophia, and to discern why the Symbolists employed her

image in their works. By using depictions of her in their writing, novelists Andrei Bely and poets Aleksandr Blok and Zinaida Gippius took the Divine Sophia from the pages of ancient scriptures and placed her on the pages of their modern works. Despite the common influences of Vladimir Soloviev's and Sergius Bulgakov's philosophies concerning the Divine Sophia on all of these Symbolist authors, each one utilizes her image in a unique way. The representations of the Divine Sophia are very diverse due to the authors' personal experiences, their differing philosophies on her nature, and their ultimate goals of expression in their poems and prose.

### **The Divine Sophia in Philosophy and Theology**

The Russian philosophers Sergius Bulgakov and Vladimir Soloviev are decisively the most influential philosophers of the Symbolist movement. Their works regarding the Divine Sophia explore the concept of the Divine Feminine and her controversial association with God and the Holy Trinity. One symbolist researcher describes Soloviev as "the spiritual father of the mystic trends in Russian modernist literature" (Maslenikov 28). His *Lectures on Divine Humanity* and his collection of essays entitled *The Meaning of Love* elucidate the concept of the Divine Sophia and provide a philosophical foundation for the characterizations of her in the works of the poets and novelists. Like the Symbolist authors, Sergius Bulgakov was influenced by the writings of Soloviev, although he went one step further and developed Sophiology in order to provide a theological understanding of Sophia. Bulgakov's detailed explanation of the Divine Sophia eventually incriminated him within the Orthodox church, but his doctrine continued to serve as a reference point for authors and contemporary researchers.

Vladimir Soloviev's connection with the Divine Sophia began in his boyhood, influencing his thoughts and philosophies throughout the rest of his life. He claimed to have encountered the Divine Sophia three separate times. He had his first vision of her at the age of nine, followed by two encounters in his early twenties. The second encounter occurred at a British museum where Soloviev was doing research, and it was at that time that she "directed him to journey to the Arabian desert" (Maslenikov 58). During his stay in Arabia, Sophia appeared to him a third and final time. These visits prompted him to write the poem "Three Meetings" about these encounters and inspired him to continue expounding upon her significance.

Vladimir Soloviev had a flowering idea of her concept even in works that did not directly address the Divine Sophia. In his lectures on "The Meaning of Love" Soloviev writes: "The ideal person, or personified idea,

is only an individualization of the unity-of-the-all, which is indivisibly present in each of its individualizations. So, when we imagine the ideal form of the beloved object, then under this form is communicated to us this same unity-of-all essence” (Soloviev 90). In this explanation of the ideal, Soloviev connects humanity to Sophia through describing the human being as “the center of the universal consciousness of nature, the soul of the world, the potentiality of the absolute unity-of-the-all coming to realization, and, consequently, above him there can be only this same absolute in its perfect act of eternal being, that is God” (39). The Divine Sophia is often most simply defined as the world soul, providing the link between the divine and the human that the Symbolists sought to achieve. Soloviev writes that the “ideal unity towards which our world is aspiring, and which constitutes the end of the cosmic and historical process, cannot be only someone’s subjective understanding [but] truly it is like the external object of Divine love, like His eternal other” (Soloviev 91). This other is not only a part of God but a part of His creation as well. “For God, His other (i.e., the universe) possesses from all eternity the image of perfect femininity, but He desires that this image should exist not merely for Him, but that it should be realized and incarnated in each individual being capable of union with it” (92). Without even naming the Divine Sophia, he has defined her concept and laid the foundation for his exploration of her role in divine humanity.

In his “Lectures on Divine Humanity,” given from 1878 until 1881, Soloviev directly references the Divine Sophia and attempts to define her nature. Soloviev explains that “Every organism necessarily includes two unities: on the one hand, the unity of an active principle that reduces the multiplicity of elements to itself as one; on the other hand, that multiplicity reduced to unity, as a determinate form of this principle. There is the unity that produces and the unity that is produced, or unity as the principle (in itself) and unity in phenomena” (Soloviev 107). This concept relates directly to the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Divine Sophia. “In the Divine organism of Christ, the acting, unifying principle, the principle that expresses the unity of that which absolutely is, is obviously the Word, or Logos. The second kind of unity, the produced unity, is called Sophia in Christian theosophy[...] Sophia is God’s body, the matter of Divinity, permeated with the principle of divine unity” (107-08). Soloviev clearly states the nature of the Sophia within Christ and in her relation to the world. He stresses that her existence is not something without theological basis. “To speak of Sophia as an essential element of Divinity is not, from the Christian point of view, to introduce new gods,” writes Soloviev (108). He points out the non-canonical book of Solomon in which she appears

in the Old Testament, and also her existence as a concept even before the existence of Christianity itself. Because the Divine Sophia could be easily misunderstood in the context of the Holy Trinity, she became a controversial topic in the church. Church dogma emphasizes that there is no place for a fourth element in the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Sergius Bulgakov understood the precarious nature of his continuation of Soloviev's work. Despite the strong opposition to his research on Sophia during his lifetime, he eventually became known as the Father of Sophiology.

It is in his works "The Bride of the Lamb" and "The Comforter" that Bulgakov explores the theological implications of the Divine Sophia. Bulgakov succeeds in discerning the two forces at work in Sophia. He describes the Divine Sophia as "the eternal proto-ground of the world" and the creaturely Sophia as the divine force of the life of creation (Bulgakov 19). According to Bulgakov "God creates the world by and in Sophia; and in its sophianic foundation the world is divine, although it is at the same time extra-divine in its creaturely aseity," thereby giving creation its divine aspect (Bulgakov 200). The epitome of the two aspects of Sophia is, of course, Christ. "Divine-humanity, which in heaven is the eternal foundation of the world, was accomplished in the latter through the appearance of Christ, the God-Man, in Whom dwells the entire fullness of Divinity and of humanity" (Bulgakov 357). The problems reconciling the existence of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, and the Orthodox church arise when integrating her into the Holy Trinity.

It is essential to understand the elements of the Holy Trinity in terms of hypostases. The first is the Father, the second is the Son, and the third hypostasis is the Holy Spirit. In creation "the hypostasis of creation, the Principle or Subject of the latter, is the father, Who creates the world in the Holy Trinity, that is, inseparably from the Second and Third hypostases, by a trinitarian act in the Divine Sophia" (Bulgakov 195). Bulgakov makes it clear that he does not want Sophia to be considered as a separate hypostasis. "We are saying that God the Father creates the world by and in Sophia, who is not a hypostasis but a hypostatizedness; she is the objective principle of divine self-revelation and life" (Bulgakov 195). In *Sophia, the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, he suggests thinking of the Divine Sophia as "at the same time three-fold in one" (Bulgakov 37). She does not belong solely to the Father as the object of his Divine love but "as the self-revelation of the Godhead, belong[ing] to all three persons of the Holy Trinity, both in their tri-unity, and in their separate being, and to each one in a way peculiar to it" (Bulgakov 51). Bulgakov depicts Sophia as a powerful component in the Trinity but not as a separate entity by any means.

The Symbolists saw in Sophia the same connection of divinity to humanity that these philosophers were expounding upon. In his outline of Sophiology, Bulgakov describes spiritual beauty “as not only the outward adornment by beauty but also the illumination by beauty from within” (Bulgakov 204). For Soloviev, Sophia was the bearer of perfect beauty and harmony, the “eternal woman soul of the universe” (Maslenikov 57). These ideal qualities make her suitable to be the object of God’s love. “Sophia is the companion of God. As such she is the image of the perfect woman-soul. Because God would share his joy with every human, Sophia’s image is accessible to every living being” (Maslenikov 57). These philosophers elucidated the concept of the Divine Sophia for the Symbolist writers. Most importantly, they never gave her a concrete form. This allowed the Symbolists to exercise creative license with her literary representation. Sophia was close to God, the ideal beauty, and a symbol of eternal wisdom. It was only a matter of time before the Symbolist writers began to employ various representations of her in their works as a manifestation of their ultimate goals as writers.

### **The Symbolist Movement**

At the turn of the twentieth century a movement towards modernism redefined Russian literature. The writers involved were rebelling against a long literary tradition that favored realistic prose and touted the names of authors such as Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky. In the 1880’s a Symbolist movement had taken center stage in France, providing inspiration to the thinkers and writers of Russia to pursue their own literary rejuvenation. The pursuit of this new way of thinking by Russian writers was also prompted by their changing economy and culture. Scientific progress was a significant contributor to their cultural unrest. “Darwinism,” writes one researcher, “seemed to rob a reasoning individual of his belief in man’s divine origin and consequently the immortality of his soul” (Maslenikov 4). Science was beginning to serve as the primary source for answers that had previously been found solely in religion, creating a distance between people and their God. The evolving economic situation also contributed to this budding movement in that it became clear that “the upstart bourgeoisie (though still a minor factor in governmental policy), would dictate in matters of literary and artistic taste” in the years to come (Maslenikov 4). The Russian Symbolist poets, short story writers, and novelists committed themselves to idealism and to withstanding the influence of their declining society. Vyacheslav Ivanov observes in an essay on Symbolism that the participants of this circle considered themselves “to be the discoverers of

a new sensibility, imbued with the most subtle poisons of the spiritual and moral decay of a dying age and they felt possessed therefore of some new sort of heightened vision” (Ivanov 25). It should not come as a surprise, then, that Russian Symbolist theory was characterized by the search for the divine on earth and beyond in order to counteract science and the pettiness of the new emerging class.

As a writing style, this movement advocated the pervasive use of symbols throughout the works. Their symbolic representations were meant to surpass the effectiveness of traditional metaphors and similes by delving into the world of the mystical and divine, thereby creating multidimensional meanings. In a critical analysis of Andrei Bely’s novel *The Silver Dove*, Maria Carlson’s etymological dissection of Dmitry Mironovich Kuderyarov, the name belonging to the leader of the Doves sect, provides a fitting example of this complex literary technique: “His first name, Dmitry, ties him to the realm of the Earth Mother, Demeter, and to the pagan mysteries. The syllable *kud* associates him with sorcery, evil spirits, and demons (through *kudesnik*) and with spiders, webs, and spinners” (73). Carlson also observes that the devil often takes the shape of a spider, and the syllable *yar* is meant to have Luciferian implications as well as meaning “ravine, chasm, or abyss” in the Tartar language (74). In the same novel, the main character Petr Petrovich Daryalsky’s spiritual journey draws from “the Eleusinian and Orphic mysteries, from Gnosticism, Russian folklore, Theosophy, spiritualism, and most important, esoteric Christianity” (78). By taking elements from a variety of mystical practices, ancient myths, cultural legends, and religious (as well as non-religious) philosophies, the Symbolists were, in their opinion, better able to convey the depth of people’s spiritual dilemma.

The defining characteristics of Symbolism are perfectly suited to the inclusion of the Divine Sophia. Evelyn Bristol comments on how the Symbolists “liked to represent themselves as attuned to the ineffable—or if mystics, to the divine” (Bristol 269). This is exemplified in the personal relationships that the Symbolist writers constructed between themselves and this epitome of femininity. The male authors in this study found their inspiration in their real-life love affairs. Aleksandr Blok claimed to be able to recognize the divine aspect of his own wife—and it is clear that he believed this in the poetry examined in this study. Soloviev, a great influence on the Symbolists, claimed to have encountered the Divine Sophia on more than one occasion, thereby proving himself to be closely connected with the divine world. Soloviev observed her as a beautiful lady, a description that appears again in Blok’s poetry. Ultimately the Symbolists wanted to touch upon the worlds of philosophy, religion, mysticism, and

divinity—all of which the Divine Sophia belonged to in some regard. The novelists and poets in this study recognized her multifaceted nature and succeeded in integrating her into some of the most important Russian literary works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

### Aleksandr Blok

Aleksandr Blok, born in 1888, was one of the premier Symbolist poets and a close colleague of the novelist Andrei Bely. Blok's depictions of the Divine Sophia reflect his personal relationship with Lyubov Dmitrievna Mendeleeva, who happened to be his legitimate wife. While Andrei Bely's characters reflect his feelings towards Lyubov with more subtlety, one of Blok's first collections of published poetry was titled *The Beautiful Lady*. It was an obvious reference to the awe and admiration he felt for his wife. In the poem "I Entered the Dark Church Slowly," Blok pays homage to the Divine Sophia in the context of the church, where the idea of Sophia originated. In the more complex piece entitled "The Stranger," Blok's failing marriage with Lyubov leads to a darker depiction of his ideal feminine, and reflects the distance he feels between himself and his wife. This work also lends itself to literary analysis utilizing the Madonna/Whore complex.<sup>1</sup> Aleksandr Blok's female characters are easily read as Sophia, but their meanings strongly echo his real-life experience.

From the onset of the poem "I Entered the Dark Church Slowly," it is apparent that this work is dedicated to the Divine Sophia. "I enter the dark church slowly/ and perform a humble rite./ I wait for the Beautiful Lady/ In the glimmer of icon light" (Blok 1-4). Sophia is usually depicted as a Russian Orthodox icon (much like Our Lady of Guadalupe) despite not having a true status in doctrine. She is generally described as emerging from or surrounded by light, as is the woman in Blok's poem. He goes on to write of "the flowing gown/ of her Eternal Majesty" (9-10). This gown is also a detail he mentions in his poem "The Stranger." He makes a reference in this description to her eternal femininity, commenting on her dress and on her everlasting life. Blok ends the poem by calling her "Holy One" and "Beloved" (13-16). Her relationship to God and the Holy Trinity makes Sophia divine, and she is described as the object of God's love by the philosophers who influenced Symbolists like Blok and Bely; she is God's beloved. Although it may seem to the reader that the woman

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<sup>1</sup> The Madonna/Whore complex is a concept widely understood as society's desire to find the mutually exclusive traits of a saint and a sinner within a woman.

in this poem is Blok's eternally beloved, his poem "The Stranger" proves otherwise.

In "The Stranger," a woman appears in the midst of Blok's wine-drinking and smoke-filled night. Her appearance both inspires him and makes him doubt how genuine a woman she is. Her entrance is dream-like for Blok; however, she is seen "slowly between the drunkards weaving,/ as always unescorted" (Blok 29-30). Although she is beautiful, she is also in a place of debauchery without an escort. The Madonna/Whore complex lends itself to this representation. She is beautiful and mystical, while simultaneously mysterious and unclean. Blok writes: "And a breath of ancient legends gathers,/ about her silk dress as it swings,/ about her hat with its mourning feathers,/ and her slender hand with its rings" (33-36). Here, again, Blok writes of the history she possesses and exudes as she walks, and then he switches the reader's gaze to her earthly trappings on her hands. He prods the reader to question why this woman is loitering in a place wrought with scandal. Her ostentatious style and fine things suggest that she is not just searching for platonic company. She may be the only patron frequenting this establishment who leaves with more money than she brings with her.

The narrator's conclusion is this: "in vino veritas," which translates as "in wine, there is truth" (24); his vision of her is the result of a night of heavy drinking for him. The connection between this woman and his wife, Lyubov, is distinct. Distance had been growing between the author and his wife as a result of Lyubov engaging in extra-marital affairs, and so this woman is depicted as being untouchable for Blok. The narrator clearly indicates that his perception of the woman is skewed due to his emptied wine glasses. Therefore, it is up to the reader to decipher if the woman who enters the bar is, in fact, a true manifestation of the Divine Sophia or just a beautiful prostitute who catches the eye of a drunken patron.

Aleksandr Blok's writing reflects his personal life, as does the writing of Andrei Bely. It is no surprise that the two were close friends until Bely was revealed to be having an affair with Blok's wife, Lyubov. A blessing in disguise for future readers, the affair spurred some of the best works of their literary careers. Blok's poem "I Entered the Dark Church Slowly" concerns the Divine Sophia in the traditional Orthodox context—as an icon and as a radiant, mystical entity. His encounter is a spiritual one, and it is obvious that he is enchanted with her, just as he was with his fiancée, Lyubov, at the time. His poem "The Stranger" deals with the opposing aspects of the female persona. There is the virginal and pure side, juxtaposed with the cunning and promiscuous side. It is the Holy conflicting with the temporal. It is this conflict that Blok faced in his real-life relationship with

Lyubov Mendeleeva. His depictions of the Divine Sophia shed light onto the multifaceted nature of this symbol of the Eternal Feminine.

### Andrei Bely

Andrei Bely is one of the most influential Russian novelists of the twentieth century. He was born in Moscow on October 14, 1880 as Boris Nikolayevich Bugayev. According to researcher Oleg Maslenikov, Bely “from his earliest childhood [...] felt that everything in his surroundings stressed the dualistic nature of existence,” thereby making his future as a prominent Symbolist a predictable one (Maslenikov 33). His depictions of the Divine Sophia are unique in that they undeniably reflect his relationships both with Asya Turgeneva and with Aleksandr Blok’s wife, Lyubov Mendeleeva. Through 1905 and 1906 “an intense, but indeterminate relationship continued between [Bely and Mendeleeva], with Bely repeatedly traveling to St. Petersburg in order to set off abroad for their new life together, and Lyubov Dmitrievna repeatedly sending him back to Moscow” (Elsworth 19). Eventually Mendeleeva decided to stay with her husband, causing Bely great disappointment and ill feelings towards her. For this reason, his depiction of Angel Peri in his novel *Petersburg* is extraordinarily negative. He had thought of Lyubov as the quintessential woman, but once disillusioned with her, sought to represent her as the opposite of what the Divine Sophia should be. After the dissolution of his relationship with Mendeleeva, Bely set his sights upon another woman as a replacement for the quintessential feminine. In his novel *The Silver Dove*, “gentle Katya was inspired by Bely’s new love, Asya Turgeneva” (author of *Spirit of Symbolism*) (Malmstead, 168). Her spiritual righteousness and her tender nature are a sharp contrast to Angel Peri’s ridiculousness. Although Andrei Bely’s relationship with Lyubov Mendeleeva preceded his marriage to Asya Turgeneva, *The Silver Dove* appeared before *Petersburg*, and is therefore the first to be examined in this analysis of Bely’s depictions of Sophia.

*The Silver Dove*, published in 1909, was Andrei Bely’s first novel. The storyline revolves around Petr Daryalsky, and his interactions with a mystical occult-like sect by the name of the Doves. The Doves seek to pull Daryalsky away from a life of spiritual righteousness, in order to join them and to contribute to the Spirit of the Dove assuming a human form. Representing the path from which Daryalsky strays is Katya—his betrothed and the possessor of a good and kind nature. At one point Daryalsky refers to her as his “dear, radiant Katya” (Bely 40). This radiance he describes is typical of the Divine Sophia, who is often depicted as sur-

rounded by, or coming from, light. As Daryalsky finds himself lost in the woods, he describes his fiancée as being “the compass of his life,” (41) as she is a representation of the way of righteousness. It was not by chance that Daryalsky strayed from this path, but by the appearance of Matryona Markovna, a ghastly woman involved with the Doves. As Daryalsky was preparing to “clear his throat and assume a dignified air, in order to forget everything and start bowing in prayer to the Queen of Heaven, [...] his eye was caught by the movement of a red shawl with white dapples over a red cotton bodice” belonging to Matryona (40). It is significant that her “penetrating glare” interrupts him in the midst of his worshipping the Queen of Heaven (40). This encounter is indicative of how easily Daryalsky is swayed from holiness (Katya) to sin (Matryona). Katya’s demureness and connection to the church is a sharp contrast to the anti-Sophia depicted in Bely’s next novel, *Petersburg*.

Andrei Bely published *Petersburg* in parts over the years 1913 and 1914. In this novel, it is clear that Bely is seeking to humiliate Lyubov Mendeleeva after she abandoned their drawn-out relationship. The character Angel Peri is depicted as having a “real moustache” upon her “lips that were too large” and as being “outrageously clumsy” (Bely 70-71). She is obviously not the quintessential beauty that Andrei Bely once idolized, but is now a graceless, unattractive young woman. It is not only her physical characteristics that Bely utilizes in order to effectively show what a despicable human being she is. In the novel, Nikolai Apollonovich Ableukhov, the main character, is the son of a prominent senator, a member of a militant underground circle, and the object of Angel Peri’s unrequited attentions. Angel Peri comes to possess a letter for Ableukhov, and upon delivering it, creates a horrible situation for him. Bely cites her “terrible vengeance” as reason for her to deliver the note which “proposed that he throw this bomb at the senator” (Bely 222). Not only has she placed this piece of paper with dire consequences in his hands, but “she scarcely understood what she had done” (222). Angel Peri is senseless, unattractive, and vengeful while the Divine Sophia is full of wisdom, beautiful, and holy. In terms of literary representation, Angel Peri is the anti-Sophia.

Bely’s manifestations of the Divine Sophia come in two females of opposing natures. Katya resembles the more typical representation of divine femininity. She is the path of righteousness and a graceful human being. The second is more unique to Bely and is due to his soured relationship. Bely conjures up the character of Angel Peri to reflect upon his feelings for Lyubov Mendeleeva and their failed romance. Angel Peri gives the reader a much clearer picture of what the Divine Sophia really is, by exemplifying all those things that she is most definitely not.

## Zinaida Gippius

In dealing with an icon of eternal femininity formed by the minds of male theologians, philosophers, poets, and authors, it is not surprising that one of the most intriguing interpretations of the Divine Sophia hails from the pen of a female author. Zinaida Gippius (1867-1945) is a multidimensional figure in not only Symbolist literature, but also Russian history. The home she shared with her prominent philosopher husband, Dmitri Merezhkovskii, was a known gathering spot for intellectuals and is recognized as a place where “the Symbolist movement gathered impetus” (Maslenikov 24). While nurturing the philosophies of the individuals that she welcomed in her circle, Gippius had also developed a philosophy unlike any other. Zinaida Gippius’ personal life, despite being shrouded in mysteries even to present day, provides powerful insight into her literature. Her relationship to her husband has been likened to that of Virginia and Leonard Woolf, “based primarily on Platonic mutual affection and intellectual compatibility, rather than sexual attraction” (Schuler 279). This ambiguity in her sexuality is reflected in the ambiguous forms of her characters and her desire to find a spiritual middle ground between the male and female, among other opposites. Her expressions of the Divine Sophia focus more on the supernatural, and, while still in female form, emphasize a lack of gender and the profound personal journey in discovering divinity.

The play *Sacred Blood*, published by Zinaida Gippius in 1901, reflects her exploration of the notion of eternal life, and the literary concept of the virgin/mother/crone triad<sup>2</sup>. In true Symbolist fashion, Gippius diverges from the traditional Realist theory of Russian literature in which the supernatural is generally avoided, and uses a *rusalka*<sup>3</sup> as her title character in order to give a distinctive perspective on personal sacrifice and human-divinity. The Young Rusalka represents the virgin of the triad; she is youthful, naïve, and optimistic. The Old Rusalka, her grandmother, represents the mother in this concept, as she teaches her grandchild the difference between the immortal nature of the body of rusalki and the immortal nature of the soul of humanity. The Old Rusalka explains human salvation through Christ by stating: “Then there was born among them a Man whom

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<sup>2</sup> This concept refers to the biological or metaphoric stages of a woman’s life. The virgin represents innocence, the mother represents the feminine creative aspect, and the crone represents wisdom and death.

<sup>3</sup> A *rusalka* is best described as a sort of water nymph or mermaid. *Rusalki* are usually depicted as spirits that roam around bodies of water and are linked to the seduction of men.

they called God, and He shed His blood for them and gave them an immortal soul” (Gippius 282). The concept of Jesus as God’s son, and a divine connection between God and humanity, is lost in her interpretation, but it is enough to intrigue her granddaughter. It is the Witch Rusalka who represents the crone component of the triad and is the ultimate catalyst for the climax of the play—the death of the priest seeking to baptize the Young Rusalka. When the Young Rusalka asks why the Witch is offering up her services so freely, she responds: “I’m helping you because I get my fun that way” (Gippius 296). She instructs her to kill the priest with a blade that she furnishes for the Young Rusalka, if the sprite really does love him. It is through this act that she will beget a soul—just as Christ shed blood for mankind, so should the Young Rusalka. Of course, this plan does not work out as the Young Rusalka expects, and what she is left with is a sentence for eternal damnation that has no effect on her because she is unaware of the soul she then possesses, or continues to not possess. The Divine Sophia is simultaneously the Virgin, Mother, and Crone, and is therefore depicted in the three characters as a whole, and not just as a single person. Not only does Gippius convey her message through the spiritual journey of a soulless feminine creature, but she also manages to fuse mystical, divine, and temporal themes in a remarkable departure from the realistic, traditional Russian writing style.

The main character of Gippius’ short story “Rest, Heart” is a fairly obvious representation of the Divine Sophia. The narrator of the story describes Marya Markovna as a “beautiful, old woman” who wears a veil “over her carefully arranged, silver-white curls” (Gippius 283, 285). He notices her “somehow unconsciously” (285). He perceives her in an indirect way, as if she speaks to his soul and not just to his eyes. Markovna draws the narrator to her by way of the “radiant tranquility of her face” (287). Markovna’s face glows, and is an indicator of light, which is reminiscent of the light that always surrounds the Divine Sophia. In their encounters she is always surrounded by “century-old books,” symbolizing her wisdom and a direct connection to God’s Wisdom, as well. The curiousness of her character comes from her situation regarding her son. He has gone off to war, and instead of hoping for his return, she mourns him as if he has already died. This description of Marya provides insight into her unusual nature:

Mary Markovna did not worship the past. She did not regret it, did not sing its praises, did not prefer it to the present, as do all old people[...] In the astonishing tranquility which flowed from this woman there was something

akin to my reverie at the time. I was able to sit for hours, motionless, almost without thoughts, in some kind of profound, boundless repose. (Gippius 289)

It is this philosophy of not dwelling in the past, nor the future, that paints Mary Markovna as having achieved a spiritual balance. She explains to the narrator her logic: “Whatever takes place today, whatever will happen tomorrow—it doesn’t matter. Everything has already happened, as far as I am concerned” (291). God is the past, the present, and the future all in one, and Marya Markovna is in touch with this notion. Her understanding of the way the world works gives insight into her wisdom and her well-developed spiritual enlightenment. Ultimately, Marya Markovna is one of the most-well defined human representations of the Divine Sophia.

Unlike her Symbolist counterparts, Zinaida Gippius’ depictions of the divine feminine do not reflect her own personal relationships. Gippius focuses on her own spiritual journey, by projecting her search onto the adventurous Rusalka and projecting her goals onto the fulfilled Marya Markovna. She recognizes the nature of the Divine Sophia as containing wisdom, love, divinity, and all aspects of humanity, and doles out these characteristics to the persons in her works accordingly.

### Conclusion

Since the Symbolists realized the multitude of meanings behind the Divine Sophia, she has continued to be a part of Russian culture as a subject of philosophical writings, a controversial topic in the Orthodox church, an icon shrouded by mystery, and now as a literary figure. At first it may seem that the Divine Sophia appeared in the context of the Symbolist movement because she represented the weakening connection between the divine and humanity caused by scientific progress, and as a symbol of the wisdom Russia was lacking in the midst of a societal power shift. However, in investigating the lives and personal philosophies of Andrei Bely, Aleksandr Blok, and Zinaida Gippius, it seems that these may not be the only reasons behind her inclusion in their novels, short stories, plays, and poetry.

Andrei Bely’s relationships played an integral role in his choices of representation. Although his relationship with Lyubov Mendeleeva had ended three years prior to 1909, the year of *The Silver Dove’s* publication, his reverent attitude toward her and his new love, Asya Turgeneva, is still embodied in the character of Katya. This representation is one that speaks to ultimate femininity, beauty, and the path towards righteousness.

However, because of the unpleasant terms on which their romance ended, Andrei Bely did not hide the fact that Mendeleeva was also the basis for the detestable Angel Peri in the classic *Petersburg*. This character provided insight to what the Divine Sophia was not—unattractive, flighty, and vengeful. Mendeleeva inspired not only Bely, but also her own husband to contribute to the literary significance of the Divine Sophia.

The poems by Aleksandr Blok included in this study feature the Divine Sophia almost exclusively. In the poem “I Entered the Dark Church Slowly,” he references the icon directly. By doing so, he is making known his enchantment with Lyubov Mendeleeva, who would eventually be his wife. Not only does the poem express his admiration for his earthly object of affection, he also addresses his own expectations of spiritual awakening. He represents his own hero on a spiritual journey. In the work “The Stranger,” Blok addresses the Madonna/Whore literary dyad. The woman in the poem, also based on his wife, could either be a common prostitute in a bar that he is drawn to as the result of having imbibed a few glasses of wine, or the epitome of femininity, hence the embodiment of the Divine Sophia, that he seeks. It is up to the reader to decide which she is meant to be, but it is widely held that he wrote this poem to reflect his attitude towards the distance he felt between himself and his wife due to her infidelities. She was still the woman he had adored, and yet her actions had revealed qualities she possessed that drove him away. The works of Blok and Bely were illustrations of the Divine Sophia through the eyes of men overcome with love and seeking the divine on earth—which differ greatly from the perspective of one of the most prominent female Symbolist writers.

Zinaida Gippius’ play *Sacred Blood* and her short story “Rest, Heart” include depictions of the Divine Sophia not based on real-life women, but indicative of the author’s genuine struggle to re-establish the connection between humanity and divinity. In “Sacred Blood,” Gippius uses the virgin/mother/crone triad to illustrate the dimensions of femininity. She explores the concept of eternal life and love as the ultimate redeemer through the eyes of a naïve water nymph, whose good intentions are ultimately soured by erroneous interpretations and malevolent guidance. In the story “Rest, Heart,” although published after the peak activity of the Symbolists, she provides a distinct representation of Sophia as Wisdom embodied in the character of Marya Markovna. Marya is a mother, still beautiful, always surrounded by books to indicate her developed intellect and wealth of knowledge. It is her unique outlook on her son’s life that captures the divinity of Sophia. By accepting that her son may already be dead, and by erecting a memorial in his honor, she is simultaneously accepting the past,

the present, and her future. Of the three writers in this study, Gippius is the one to stay closest to the Symbolist ideology of exploring themes of mysticism, divinity, and spiritual awakening, while still managing to integrate solid representations of the Divine Sophia.

The literary archetype of the Divine Sophia began as a representation of God's Wisdom, mentioned briefly in the Old Testament. Thousands of years later, she is immortalized, not by the church but by a literary movement that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Divine Sophia as a literary figure was, in some part, a result of Russia's societal, cultural, and ideological limbo. Her manifestations in prose, poetry, and plays were conjured by individuals seeking to restore the connections between the divine and humanity through relationships and spiritual exploration. The results are vastly different images, painted with words by Bely, Blok, and Gippius, with the idea of the Divine Sophia as a point of reference back to the nature of femininity, wisdom, and God. In developing these characters and scenarios, each author developed his or her own relationship with the Divine Sophia, and in turn re-established their personal connection with divinity.

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## Appendix:

### The Divine Sophia: A Historical Perspective

3 B.C. Approximate date of completion for the Book of Proverbs, a writing of the Old Testament in which the Divine Sophia appears in the form of God's Wisdom.

1853 Vladimir Solovyov is born in Moscow, Russia.

1862 Vladimir Solovyov encounters the Divine Sophia as a nine-year-old-boy.

1865 Vladimir Solovyov encounters the Divine Sophia twice in this year—once in Britain while doing research, and again in Egypt.

1869 Zinaida Gippius is born in the Tulov Province of Russia.

1871 Sergius Nikolaevich Bulgakov is born in the province of Oryol in Central Russia.

1880 Aleksandr Blok is born in St. Petersburg, Russia; Andrei Bely (Boris Nikolaevich Bugaev) is born in Moscow, Russia.

1894 Symbolism finally emerges as a solidified literary movement in Russian circles.

1900 Solovyov dies.

1901 Zinaida Gippius publishes the play *Sacred Blood*.

1902 Aleksandr Blok's *I Enter the Dark Church Slowly* is published.

1906 Aleksandr Blok's *The Stranger* is published

1909 Andrei Bely publishes *The Silver Dove*.

1910 Acmeism and Futurism, among other modernist schools of thought, begin to gain notoriety, while the Symbolist movement begins to decline in popularity.

1914 The entirety of Bely's *Petersburg* is published.

1921 Aleksandr Blok dies.

1932 Zinaida Gippius publishes the short story *Rest, Heart*.

1934 Andrei Bely dies.

1937 Sergius Bulgakov publishes *Sophia, the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*.

1944 Bulgakov dies in Paris.

1945 Zinaida Gippius dies.