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## The source of tragedy: love problems and the concept of eros in the story of L.D. Zinovieva-Annibal's "Thirty-Three Freaks"

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**Abstract.** The theme of love is reflected in a variety of ways in all the works of L.D. Zinovieva-Annibal. As one of the most representative works of the writer, the story “The Thirty-Three Freaks” is an important and particularly revealing link in proving the process of change in the creative method and worldview of the author. The aim of the study is to show the complex relationship between love and eros, not only in the story “The Thirty-Three Freaks”, but also in the real married life of Vyacheslav Ivanov and L.D. Zinovieva-Annibal. The writer's artistic embodiment of the ideas of her husband, the symbolist poet V. Ivanov, on the creation of a new religion, where Eros is “entrenched” and becomes a bearer of “solidarity”, is traced. V. Ivanov's utopian ideal project of organizing a new social form, although it ultimately failed, originally meant the intention to overcome individualism among the initiates, among the participants of the love action, which proves the influence of V. Solovyov's philosophy on the symbolists and, in particular, on the circle of visitors of “The Tower”. The study uses biographical, intertextual, and comparative-historical methods. The conclusion is made that in the ideal form of society, in which there is no place for individualism and egoism, the concept of inseparability of spirit and body should have prevailed. However, analysis of the novel “The Thirty-Three Freaks” shows that the heroine had not overcome individualism, that the path to comprehending of eros was theoretically declared, but was not realized in practice. Hence the tragic sound of the work and its disastrous finale.

**Keywords:** symbolism, worldview, love, tragedy, individualism, catholicity, new church

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## Источник трагедии: любовная проблематика и концепция эроса в повести Л.Д. Зиновьевой-Аннибал «Тридцать три уroda»

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**Аннотация.** Тема любви находит многообразное отражение во всех произведениях Л.Д. Зиновьевой-Аннибал. Будучи одним из самых репрезентативных произведений писательницы, повесть «Тридцать три уroda» является важным и особенно показательным звеном при доказательстве процесса изменений в творческом методе и мировоззрении автора. Цель исследования – показать сложные взаимосвязи между любовью и эросом не только в повести «Тридцать три уroda», но и в реальной супружеской жизни Вяч. Иванова и Л.Д. Зиновьевой-Аннибал. Прослеживается художественное воплощение писательницей идей ее мужа, поэта-символиста Вяч. Иванова по созданию новой церкви, где Эрос «оплотняется», становится носителем «соборности». Утопический идеальный проект Вяч. Иванова по организации новой общественной формы, хотя в конечном итоге и потерпел крах, первоначально означал намерение преодолеть индивидуализм в среде посвященных, среди участников любовного действия, что доказывает влияние философии В.С. Соловьева на символистов и, в частности, на круг посетителей «Башни». В исследовании используются биографический, интертекстуальный и сравнительно-исторический методы. Делается вывод о том, что в чаемой идеальной форме общества, в котором нет места индивидуализму и эгоизму, должна была возобладать концепция нераздельности духа и тела. Однако текстуальный анализ повести «Тридцать три уroda» доказывает, что преодоления индивидуализма героиней не произошло, что путь к постижению эроса теоретически декларирован, но практически оказался не осуществлен. Отсюда трагическое звучание произведения и катастрофический его финал.

**Ключевые слова:** символизм, мировоззрение, любовь, трагедия, индивидуализм, соборность, новая церковь

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### Introduction

The love vs. eros issue has always been an important concept in Eastern and Western philosophy. The philosophical speculations about love and desire had a profound and lasting impact on the development of culture and art, from Plato's Love of Truth, St. Augustine's Divine Love, and Boccaccio's Human Eros

to Descartes' Love of Reason and the tabooed sexuality of neo-Confucianism<sup>1</sup>. The Russian philosophy of the late 19th – early 20th centuries developed three main views on eros and love. Nikolai Fedorov advocated past-oriented ancestor worship. Vladimir Solovyov declared the absolute love projected into the future. Vasily Rozanov preached parental love aimed at the present of humanity (Brylina, 2014, p. 65). In his article on *The Meaning of Love*, Solovyov refuted the ascetic tradition in Christianity. His idea of the unity of all things gave the love vs. eros issue a philosophical dimension, both psychological and social. Solovyov's contemporaries praised *The Meaning of Love* as *the most remarkable of all his works: this word on love and eros alone secured him a place in the history of Christian philosophy* (Berdyayev, 1971, p. 178). The entire generation of Young Symbolists were under the influence of Solovyov's ideas, to one degree or another, and Vyacheslav Ivanov was no exception. Solovyov's concept of love gave him an idea of *a new human community to become the beginning of a new church, where Eros transubstantiated into flesh and blood* (Sabashnikova, 1993, p. 161)

Vyacheslav Ivanov emphasized *the importance of the erotic for many spheres of spiritual life and human creative activity* and longed to *derive Eros back to its original, Platonic meaning, and nobilitate the eternal Eros of the Impossible* (Tsimborska-Leboda, 1997, p. 54). Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal was her husband's muse and a Dionysian comrade-in-arms. She obediently followed his instructions, but in the end, she created something of her own by bringing together *the sober Swedish rationality, the Russian maximalism, the Serbian do-or-die attitude, and even a drop of Ethiopian unrestraint* (Aleshina, 1999, p. 8). As the mistress of Ivanov's Tower salon, she received the name of Diotima, won the *fatal duel* with her husband, absorbed his *conciliarity ideas*, and turned into a *Russian Maenad*. His short novel *Thirty-Three Abominations* reflected the complexity of the transformation she had undergone. This controversial work tells the story of a tragic love of a talented actress to a young girl who keeps a diary where she meticulously records all the vicissitudes of their romance. The subtext of these relationships was so obvious that the story was banned by the court. *Thirty-Three Abominations* received a lot of negative reviews because it was *the first in Russian literature to touch upon the topic of lesbian love* (Sukovataya, 1999), which was *a taboo for Russian classical literature and unacceptable for conservative readers* (Aleshina, 1999, p. 119). Subsequently, the ban was lifted, and *Thirty-Three Abominations* was published twice.

However, the obscene plot actually contained a deep philosophical meaning. Vyacheslav Ivanov himself saw it as a variation on the theme of Plato's *Symposium*. He described *Thirty-Three Abominations* as *externally realistic, internally symbolic, and spiritually Platonic* (Ivanov, 1999, p. 439). Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal's life story and her writing career prove that, though it might look like *a heap of erotic allusions, Thirty-Three Abominations is not about eroticism at all* (Sukovataya, 1999). Similarly, one cannot understand the context of Zinovieva-Annibal and Ivanov's artistic and spiritual life without reading *Thirty-Three*

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<sup>1</sup> Song-Ming Li Xue (宋明理学): Western name for a syncretic Chinese philosophy (11th–16th centuries, from the Song Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty) which united the main intellectual traditions in China at that time.

*Abominations*. According to F. Defarges, its *main motif addresses the theme of beauty and eros as the pathway to a higher reality, a theme dear to the symbolists* (Defarge, 2018, p. 35).

## Discussion

### ***Eros and its derivatives***

*Thirty-Three Abominations* imitates diary entries of an anonymous girl who falls in love with an actress, leaves her bridegroom, and runs away with her lover on the eve of the wedding. Vera, the actress, is struck by the beauty of the girl, but she is obsessed with the idea that her beloved's body, like all things material and human, will age, change, and, finally, die. Therefore, Vera seeks to preserve the beauty of her beloved for posterity – in a portrait. She also believes that in love you need to give away, sacrifice, and share your happiness to keep your soul noble. The highest degree of generosity is to offer the one you love to others.

She hires thirty-three artists (the number is symbolic) to paint her lover's portrait. Unfortunately, the result is disappointing: none of them managed to catch the spirit of the sitter. Vera's altruistic gesture comes out absurd: Vera shares her beloved with the whole world, thus overcoming her own egoistic craving for appropriation and power, but fails to preserve her unique beauty. Disillusioned with the cruel laws of the universe, Vera prefers suicide to life in a world without love and beauty. However, behind Vera's seemingly romantic, unconditional, and sublime love, there is a strong desire to dominate. She is prone to authoritarianism and is driven by willpower, jealousy, and wounded pride. Vera *throws her beloved to the artists*, as if stepping over herself. The author of the diary, on the other hand, is gentle and submissive, her writing is *simple, sober, and intelligent, sometimes femininely prosaic, sometimes imbued with feminine charm, grace, and poetry* (Ivanov, 1999, p. 442). Vera is *real, passionate, and suffering in her reckless love* (Kozlova, 2017, p. 52). She *is able to love what is larger than her but demands the same and more from others*<sup>2</sup> (Mikhaylova, 1999, p. 13). The relations based on inequality, tyranny, and submission were doomed from the very beginning.

*Thirty-Three Abominations* can indeed be interpreted as a variation on the theme of Plato's *Symposium*. According to V. Ivanov, *Plato's Eros is inherent in the noblest souls and ensures their spiritual growth; it is directed first to beautiful bodies, then to beautiful souls, and, finally, to the eternal Prototypes, or Ideas of fathomable entities* (Ivanov, 1999, p. 443). On this *beauty ladder*, love ascends from the bodily love to the spiritual love, from the individual love to the universal love, and, finally, from the love to an avatar to the love to the eternal truth.

Vera seems to be on the bottom step of this ladder. Vyacheslav Ivanov also pointed out that *the story took place on the first step of this ascent* (Ivanov, 1999, p. 443). Vera tells her lover that she loves her body because it is beautiful: *But I know nothing about your soul. I don't know if there is such a thing as soul. And I don't need it because your body is beautiful* (Zinovieva-Annibal, 1999, p. 40).

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<sup>2</sup> These words can be considered Zinovieva-Annibal's credo: she used them as an epigraph to her story *Bear Cubs*.

Consequently, Vera's love is incomplete because *love must be integral not only in terms of intensity, but also in terms of the object of its aspiration: love should be aimed at the beloved's whole personality* (Ivanov, 1999, p. 442).

In Vladimir Solovyov's philosophy, "you" and "me" are different in real life because each person is presented as "me" while being someone else's "you". Only by annihilating this difference in life and perception, one can become complete and acquire absolute meaning. According to Solovyov, *a person in general and any individual person in particular is only This One and never the Other; they can become Anyone and Anything only by removing that inner border that separates them from the Other, both in their mind and life. This One can become Everything only together with Others, and only together with Others can This One realize the unconditional importance of becoming an inseparable and irreplaceable part of the all-unity whole, an independent living and unique organ of absolute life* (Soloviev, 1991, p. 34). Egoism, on the contrary, denies the Other; an egoist cannot see a personality in the Other. By denying others and affirming themselves, egoists deprive themselves of real life and turn their own personality into a hollow vessel that is incapable of self-consciousness and self-fulfillment. This phenomenon is called self-denial and self-destruction because *the meaning of human love is to justify and save one's individuality by sacrificing one's egoism* (Soloviev, 1991, p. 32).

Vladimir Solovyov singled out the concepts of eternal love and absolute meaning, associated with the myth of Eros, which he called *the meaning of love*. Vera's authoritarian behavior is a manifestation of her own desires: she neither respects the personality of her beloved nor recognizes her it. She acts as if she knows exactly what and how to do. *You must leave them. You do not belong to them. I will teach you yourself. I will make you beautiful*, says Vera to her beloved (Zinovieva-Annibal, 1999, p. 27). Indeed, the girl realizes that she is changing: *Vera is making me. I think I become beautiful because she sees me. It makes me so calm, so confident and light all at once* (Zinovieva-Annibal, 1999, p. 33). These changes are external and visible.

Very soon, the reader understands that Vera fails in her attempt to *raise* an ideal love and *nurture* the individuality of the Other. Vera also sees that she cannot get rid of her possessive instincts and desire to dominate, i.e., of the egoistic nature of her Self. This contradiction makes her struggle with herself and becomes a source of inescapable torment. Her mind tells her that she must *share her beloved with people*. She says to herself: *Generosity! Generosity! This is what makes a beast human* (Zinovieva-Annibal, 1999, p. 29). She is unable to overcome herself, yet she comes to a decision that will be the ruin of her: *I can't stop giving you to people. They are looking at you. They can see beauty* (Zinovieva-Annibal, 1999, p. 29). Vera is ready to share the beauty of her beloved, but this is also impossible: the beauty painted turns into abomination. The hard decision did not give the result she longed for.

Vera can save neither herself nor her love. Vyacheslav Ivanov argued that *the real love positions the other not as an object, but as another subject; it is an act of faith and will, an act of life, an act of salvation* (Ivanov, 1979, p. 304). That is why he always drew a line between Zinovieva-Annibal's understanding of

*will* and Schopenhauer's pessimistic interpretation of *will*. Vera fails to treat the girl as another subject, not as an object; she does not take into account her desires and never engages her into a real dialogue. When the famous artist Saburov offered to portray them both, Vera refuses without hesitation, and her beloved finds out about it from someone else. She has neither the right to choose nor the right to know because Vera controls her entire life.

According to Solovyov, *the subject of true love is dual. On the one hand, we love an ideal being, and it is ideal not because it is abstract, but because it belongs to another sphere of life, and we must invite this ideal being into our own ideal world. On the other hand, it is a natural human being that gives this ideal manifestation its living, personal material* (Soloviev, 1991, p. 63). He saw *only one heavenly object of our love: the Eternal Feminine of the divine. However, the task of true love is not only to worship this higher being, but to realize and embody it in the Other, i.e., in another inferior female being* (Soloviev, 1991, p. 64). Unfortunately, Vera seeks not the Eternal Feminine, but the eternal beauty, which is why she dreads the physical aging of her beloved. She says as she weeps: *Everything is unreliable on earth. Beauty, too. You will grow old*. The girl feels it and writes in her diary: *She seems to dread two things: habit and betrayal* (Zinovieva-Annibal, 1999, p. 47). Vera obviously confuses the ideal being with the human being. She does not realize that she must see the heavenly in the mundane. Aging is an inherent characteristic of all mundane beings. However, if the Eternal Feminine manifests itself in it, there is no sense in fearing these changes. Vera blindly pursues the wrong object of true love, which causes the tragic outcome of her love story.

When Vera decides to *release her beloved into the world* by allowing thirty-three artists to paint her portrait, the woman depicted in all the portraits is not the Queen that Vera sees when she looks at her beloved. According to Solovyov, *love inevitably causes an idealization of the beloved, and the lover sees the beloved in a completely different light than all others do* (Soloviev, 1991, p. 62). Instead, Vera faces thirty-three abominations, *thirty-three mistresses, thirty-three queens* (Zinovieva-Annibal, 1999, p. 44). The personality crushes and falls into fragments, which is the most tragic outcome possible.

### **The Maenad Mask**

Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal portrayed Vera in such a way that the reader sees her as far from perfect, especially when the irrational blind passion overwhelms her. However, Vera is definitely her author's alter ego. Vera is a literary embodiment of both Lydia's inner world and her experience as the hostess of the famous Wednesday parties at The Tower. The writer entrusted her creation with *a lot of her own autobiography* (Aleshina, 1999, p. 121). In her cycle *The Tragic Menagerie*, Zinovieva-Annibal again named her heroine Vera to make this other Vera a herald of her own childhood memories and impressions. The Vera of *Thirty-Three Abominations* copies her author in many details. For instance, she buys her beloved a chiton – an ancient Greek gown which was reinvented and popularized by Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal (Aleshina, 1999, p. 121). Vera's room is also very similar to her author's room in The Tower.

Zinovieva-Annibal was writing *Thirty-Three Abominations* at the very time when her husband and she were practicing Dionysian experiments at The Tower in an attempt to create a “tripartite alliance” as a new organic community. Vyacheslav Ivanov explained his experiments in the following way: *If lovers have miraculously found each other, then they do not belong only to each other* (Ivanov, 1971, p. 96). He believed that if his wife and he really loved each other, they would be able to *feel like one being*, and, consequently, could *fall in love with someone else, a third party* (Aleshina, 1999, p. 95). However harmonious, this dream crashed into reality. The couple chose poet Sergey Gorodetsky as the first candidate for their experiments in trialism. He was a poet and *a young faun, fresh from the Scythian thick forests* (Voloshin, 1988, p. 464). Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal’s *passion for her husband, jealousy, hatred, and pride merged in a diabolical tangle of contradictions* (Aleshina, 1999, p. 98). As a result, she had to put on a mask and accept the role of Vera by persuading herself to be generous. After the first failure, the couple attempted a second experiment. Ivanov and Zinovieva-Annibal preached that one should *abandon love as a captivity for two and turn to One Love to All and for All* (Kozlova, 2017, p. 54). Their second “third party” was, Margarita Sabashnikova, an artist and the wife of the famous poet Maximilian Voloshin. That experiment was as uneasy as the first one. Neither Gorodetsky nor Sabashnikova could roleplay what Ivanov prepared for them. Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal was obviously hurt by the presence of a third person in their marriage, which she reflected in *Thirty-Three Abominations*. Probably, she tried on the role of a Dionysian victim because she needed it for her book.

Although Vera’s end is tragic, the end of the book is far from pessimistic. Vera’s death marked the rebirth of her author in the real world. After the experiment with Gorodetsky failed, she finished writing *Thirty-Three Abominations*, and during the second Dionysian experiment with Sabashnikova, she was ready for the role of Maenad. Sabashnikova, rather prosaically, fell in love with her Teacher and told Lydia that she wanted to leave their “tripartite alliance”. Lydia, on behalf of Maenad, gave her the following answer: *You entered our lives and belong to us. If you leave, there will always be something dead between us. Now we both can no longer live without you* (Sabashnikova, 1993, p. 161). That is, once involved in a Dionysian orgy, its participants are not free to leave the game.

The reader finds it hard to sympathize with Vera, who looks for nothing but *eternal beauty* in her beloved, idealizes her, and commits suicide after her alleged *betrayal* and disillusionment. Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal used Vera’s story as a role mask that allowed her to say the words she could not and did not want to say to her husband (Mikhaylova, 2000). Indeed, the fact that the story is dedicated to *Vyacheslav Ivanov* is very important. Apparently, *Ivanov understood the main idea of the story and highly appreciated it, but preferred to turn a blind eye to the personal message he could read between the lines* (Mikhaylova, 2000).

Critics are inclined to believe that this *vapid story had some kind of prophetic power* (Bogomolov, 1991), and Zinovieva-Annibal predicted her own death. She died of fulminant scarlet fever on October 17, 1907. Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal’s life ended as tragically as that of her alter-ego Vera.

## Conclusion

The love vs. eros issue has always been in the focus of art. *Thirty-Three Abominations* differs from M. Kuzmin's *Wings* and M. P. Artsybashev's *Sanin*, which promoted a hedonistic and self-sufficiently flat attitude to life. It was equally far away from A. Bely's *The Cup of Blizzards*, which reduced physical love down to diabolical eroticism. *Thirty-Three Abominations* is an attempt to find answers to the relationship between Love and eros in the contradictions, struggles, sacrifices, and disagreements of real life. Vladimir Solovyov warned symbolists against idealizing the appearance of the beloved: the spirit and the body are inseparable. Undoubtedly, Vyacheslav Ivanov and Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal, as *the first and second subjects* of the act of love, tried to overcome individualism and egoism in an attempt to create an ideal social order. However, the utopian project failed, and *Thirty-Three Abominations* had foretold its failure.

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