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## THE POETICS OF LOCAL COLOR IN HELEN HUNT JACKSON'S NOVEL "RAMONA"

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**Abstract.** The paper explores the specificity of literary regionalism of Southern California during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on the local color poetics in Helen Hunt Jackson's novel *Ramona* (1884). Jackson's creative work holds an important place in both American and world literature. However, there are relatively few studies on Jackson's work in the Russian-language scholarly literature. The aim of this article is to reveal the specific features of local color poetics in its American interpretation on the basis of the text of Jackson's *Ramona* and to characterize the style and language of the writer. The research methodology draws on the studies that view literary text as a product of culture, history, and social life. The paper combines the traditions of the comparative-historical literary studies with the culturological approach to the analysis of the means of expression of the local color. As a result of their study, the authors outline the specific features of literary development of the US regions during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, describe the essence of the local color literature phenomenon. While analyzing the language and style of the novel, the paper identifies a set of techniques facilitating the creation of a truthful vivid image of the region in the spirit of the literature of the local color. The study concludes that Jackson varies the narrative pace, shifting from meditative, measured descriptions to fast, dynamic scenes in order to enhance the emotional impact upon the reader. Emotionality and sentimentality emerge as the key parameters of local color in Jackson's interpretation. The paper argues that the space of Southern California plays the leading role in the ideological-thematic content of the novel. The results of the analysis can be applied in literary studies to gain a deeper understanding of the writer's creative activity, analysis of literary movements, or exploration of the cultural-historical context of the work of fiction.

**Key words:** Helen Hunt Jackson; "Ramona"; local color literature; American literature; USA; indigenous population; sentimental novel

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## ПОЭТИКА «МЕСТНОГО КОЛОРИТА» В РОМАНЕ ХЕЛЕН ХАНТ ДЖЕКСОН «РАМОНА»

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**Аннотация.** Проблема исследования. Статья посвящена выявлению своеобразия литературного регионализма Южной Калифорнии второй половины XIX века с опорой на исследование поэтики «местного колорита» в романе Хелен Хант Джексон «Рамона» (1884). Творчество писательницы занимает важное место в американской и мировой литературе. Тем не менее в российском литературоведении имеется не так много работ, посвященных Х. Х. Джексон. Цель статьи – определить особенности поэтики «местного колорита» в его американской интерпретации на материале романа Х. Х. Джексон «Рамона», охарактеризовать своеобразие языка и стиля писательницы. Методологическую основу исследования составляют работы, посвященные рассмотрению литературного текста как продукта культуры, истории и общественной жизни. Статья выполнена в русле сравнительно-исторического литературоведения с привлечением культурологического подхода к анализу представленных в литературном тексте средств выражения «местного колорита». Результаты работы. Обозначено своеобразие литературного развития регионов США в XIX в.; раскрыта сущность феномена литературы «местного колорита». При анализе языка и стиля романа выявлена совокупность приемов, способствующих созданию более объемного, жизнеподобного образа региона в духе литературы местного колорита. Сделан вывод о том, что Х. Х. Джексон варьирует темп повествования, переходя от медитативных, размеренных описаний к быстрым, динамичным сценам для усиления эмоционального воздействия на читателя. Эмоциональность и сентиментальность являются ключевыми параметрами *couleur locale* в интерпретации Х. Х. Джексон. Доказано, что пространство Южной Калифорнии играет ведущую роль в идейно-тематическом содержании произведения. Область применения результатов. Результаты анализа могут быть использованы в литературоведческих изысканиях для более глубокого понимания творчества автора, анализа литературных течений или при изучении культурно-исторического контекста произведения.

**Ключевые слова:** Хелен Хант Джексон; «Рамона»; литература «местного колорита»; американская литература; США; коренное население; сентиментальный роман

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## Introduction

Helen Hunt Jackson's legacy holds a considerable place in both American and world literature. *Ramona* is one of her most famous works and one of the few novels that depict the history and culture of Southern California in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The novel illustrates the cultural diversity of new American state through vivid portrayals of Native American tribes, Spanish missions, and Mexican-American communities. The region is depicted in full details with all its historical and geographical specificity, which determined the unique features of the author's approach to regional themes, allowing for the introduction of a certain set of authorial ideas and concepts into the artistic world of the work. Immediately upon its initial publication *Ramona* achieved bestselling status and has never been out of print since then. Translated into different languages, it inspired four cinematic adaptations, while also serving as the basis for several stage plays – including the long-standing annual open-air performance known as *Ramona Outdoor Play* (held in Hemet, California, since 1923) [Ramirez 2006: 7]. The fact that the book has been published in print four times over recent years – in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 – suggests the novel's continued popularity and its importance in the study of American local color literature.

However, there is a limited amount of research in the Russian-language scientific community dedicated to the legacy of H. H. Jackson. Typically, Russian scholars tend to focus on the works of more widely known American authors, such as Mark Twain, Harriet Elisabeth Beecher Stowe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, and others. In this context, it seems highly relevant to examine the distinctive poetic techniques used by H. H. Jackson in this novel to convey the unique "local colors".

The purpose of this article is to identify and analyze the features of local color poetics in its American interpretation, based on the text of *Ramona*, a work of fiction by H. H. Jackson. In this study, poetics is understood in a broad sense – as a set of artistic devices used to convey the author's intent and create stylistic harmony across all levels of language: textual (genre, structure, and composition), intertextual (relationships with other texts and works of art), syntactic, lexico-semantic, grammatical, and phonostylistic<sup>1</sup>.

## Research Methodology and Techniques. Current State of Knowledge in the Subject Area

The methodological foundation of this research is based on works that examine a literary text as a product of culture, history, and civic life in specific cultural and

historical contexts. Studies of the work under review can, for the purposes of this discussion, be categorized into several groups: (1) The historical and cultural approach, which critiques colonial exploitation and racial oppression of indigenous groups, analyzes social structures, daily practices, and professional routines, and engages with the study of historical events; (2) The linguistic approach, which focuses on analyzing H. H. Jackson's writing style, including the frequency of specific words, syntactic structures, textual formations, word semantics, discourse analysis, pragmatics, and other related aspect; (3) The literary approach, represented by scholars who examine the genre characteristics of the novel, explores the merging of genres and styles – such as romanticism, realism, and social drama – and analyzes the literary toolkit, including poetics, tropes, and symbolism. Additionally, literary critics often engage in intertextual analysis, studying the relationships between *Ramona* and other literary works, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Elizabeth Beecher Stowe, as well as historical documents related to the lives of Native Americans.

Issues related to "couleur locale" in American and world literature have been addressed by A. B. Anisimov [2018], A. A. Burtsev [2015], F. W. Schelling [2021], E. A. Pavlenko [1994], A. B. Tanaseychuk [2000], C. Simpson [1960], and H. Garland [1982]. Among those who have specifically studied H. H. Jackson's *Ramona* are K. E. Ramirez [2006], C. Fernández Rodríguez [2020], K. Philips [2003], J. R. Byers [1975], and C. Olin [2006]. Additionally, it is worth noting the existence of several interdisciplinary studies, both international and Russian, that combine various approaches. The multidisciplinary approach is reflected in the works of T. V. Voronchenko [2022], K. Starr [1985], and others.

This article combines the traditions of a comparative-historical literary studies with the cultural approach. Through an examination of the novel, the distinctiveness of poetics is revealed as expressed in "couleur locale" literature, considering both H. H. Jackson's writing style and the historical context of her time.

## Results and Discussions

**Characteristics of 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Literature.** A key characteristic of literary development in the United States during this historical period was the considerable regional diversity among literary schools. As A. B. Tanaseychuk notes, each region of the North American continent was developing its own cultural space, shaped not only by its historical, geographical, and economic features but also by its distinct literary tradition [Tanaseychuk 2000: 73].

The literary development of regions in the United States was closely tied to the "couleur locale" literary phenomenon [Tanaseychuk 2000: 74]. As A. B. Anisimov suggests, "couleur locale" (from French) can be defined as a collection of techniques used to incorpo-

<sup>1</sup> A similar definition is provided in the dictionary entry "Poetics" in the *Big Russian Encyclopedia*: Poetics // Big Russian Encyclopedia. 2017. URL: <https://old.bigenc.ru/literature/text/3164527> (mode of access: 20.08.2024).

rate elements that characterize local routines, manners, lifestyles, habits, and traditions into the text of a work of fiction. It also represents a stylistic school in literature, with its core focus on describing these aspects. Originally, the “couleur locale” category referred to the depiction of exotic realities from other countries and historical periods, a concept first introduced by French Romantic writers in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century [Anisimov 2018: 71].

F. W. Schelling states: “The pioneers of literary ‘couleur locale’ were the German, British, and French Romanticists of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, who recognized the need to recreate specific, individual, accurate, and mundane details”. “Couleur locale” in literature is closely related to the visual arts: “couleur locale” literature is often referred to as “picturesque” owing to its abundance of fine, small details and its focus on accurately depicting the material world. It was once believed that literary artists should primarily represent the immaterial world – spirituality, morality, emotions, and mentality – yet by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, writers increasingly focused on the realistic portrayal of reality, praising the beauty of the mundane and accentuating individual characteristics of authenticity [translated by the authors of the article, see Schelling 2021: 137].

American authors made several contributions to the European Romantic movement, particularly in their interpretation of the “couleur locale” concept. As E. A. Pavlenko notes, in the U.S., “couleur locale” became distinctly focused on the geographical and socio-domestic aspects [Pavlenko 1994: 53–54], with American depictions of “couleur locale” taking on a more specific, “street-level” meaning. In American literature, the “couleur locale” school was fully developed by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A. A. Burtsev writes that the defining feature of American “flair” was not the depiction of exotic lands or past epochs, but rather a focus on contemporary events and social realities [Burtsev 2015: 95].

American scholar C. Simpson proposes interpreting “couleur locale” literature as the “psychological need of authors to portray local character, geography, fauna and flora, idioms, and the unique features of local lore” [Simpson 1960: 6]. On the other hand, H. Garland argued that the purpose of “couleur locale” literature was to establish a “truly American spirit”, offering an authentic depiction of American life [Garland 1982: 187].

**The Role of H. H. Jackson’s Novel *Ramona* in American Literature.** Helen Hunt Jackson was one of the most renowned and prolific American writers of the 1870s and 1880s. She garnered widespread acclaim for her poetry, essays, travel journals, and novels. Contemporary scholars believe that Jackson’s legacy is most valuable in its exploration of issues related to American Indians. In this regard, her novel *Ramona* (1884) is considered the most important. The novel critiques the Anglo-American policies toward the indigenous population. Jackson arrived in Southern California in 1881 as a journalist. Over time, it became evident that the South-West had a healing effect on the author, who had long struggled with neurosis,

depression, and anxiety [Starr 1985: 56]. These and other life circumstances directly influenced H. H. Jackson’s writing style and her approach to creating “couleur locale” literary texts: meditative, descriptive, and vivid, encouraging the reader to envision every intricate detail.

The novel became a bestseller upon its initial release. It was later republished and translated into numerous languages, and has been adapted for both cinema and stage performances. Furthermore, to this day, the United States offers guided tours of the “*Ramona* sites” [Ramirez 2006: 5]. *Ramona*, the novel’s main female character, is often referred to as one of the most influential figures in the history of Southern California, despite being fictional. As C. Fernández Rodríguez observes, the legacy of *Ramona* in the region’s social memory is “imperishable to this day”. This is evident when studying the local map: *Ramona Valley*, *Ramona Valley Inn*, *Ramona Valley Grill*, *Ramona elementary schools*, *Ramona libraries*, and *Ramona stores* [Fernández Rodríguez 2020: 194].

H. H. Jackson’s *Ramona* portrays the life journey of an Indian-loving couple and their life on a ranch in Southern California. The novel paints a picture of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, set against the dramatic changes brought about by the annexation of Southern California by the United States and the subsequent decline of local Native American and Mexican communities.

As mentioned earlier, *Ramona* is the central female character of the novel. She is a mixed-race orphan, the daughter of an Indian mother and a Scottish father. Raised by Señora Moreno, a wealthy widow of a Mexican landowner, *Ramona* faces disdain from her guardian owing to her Indian heritage. *Ramona* falls in love with Alessandro Assis, a laborer on the Moreno ranch, a young man of the Luiseño tribe. Tragically, their happiness is shattered when Alessandro, driven to madness by persistent persecution and deprivation, ultimately dies at the hands of a “white man”. *Ramona* is left alone with her daughter and finds solace in caring for her child, eventually remarrying.

**The Language and Style of H. H. Jackson’s Novel *Ramona*.** H. H. Jackson’s novel is rich in metaphors, symbolism, and allegory. The author’s style is characterized by a high degree of linguistic flexibility, incorporating archaisms, rare words, and complex syntactic structures. This gives her works a literary depth and creates a meditative reading experience. To establish this reflective tempo, the author frequently uses extended passages featuring synonymous or semantically similar words: *the routine of its days, with the simple pleasures, light tasks, and easy diligence of all; flitting back and forth, from veranda to veranda, garden to garden, room to room, equally at home and equally welcome everywhere; there went perpetually, running, frisking, laughing, rejoicing, the little child that had so strangely drifted into this happy shelter, – the little Ramona* [Jackson 1988: 358].

Depending on the plot’s progression, H. H. Jackson adjusts the pacing of her narration, shifting from meditative, measured descriptions to fast-paced, dynamic scenes. This technique creates a rhythmic polyphony, where slow-paced episodes contrast with the faster ones, thereby enhancing the emotional impact.

Emotionality and sentimentality are key aspects of *couleur locale* in H. H. Jackson's work. Descriptions of nature, interiors, landscapes, buildings, and characters' appearances are vivid and lyrical. Emotions are conveyed both explicitly and implicitly, through allusions and associations. In selecting her vocabulary for descriptions, the author deliberately chooses words that evoke positive associations and imagery. H. H. Jackson's prose often reflects her desire to recreate a tangible, sensory experience for the reader, frequently describing odors, colors, and tactile sensations. In the novel, the lexicon often conveys subtle color nuances: *The almonds had bloomed and the blossoms fallen; the apricots also, and the peaches and pears; on all the orchards of these fruits had come a filmy tint of green, so light it was hardly more than a shadow on the gray; the willows were vivid light green, and the orange groves dark and glossy like laurel <...> on the green of the grass, as feathers in fine plumage overlap each other and blend into a changeful color* [Jackson 1988: 36].

To accurately depict the lifestyles of various tribes and peoples, "couleur locale" writers often reproduce in great detail their traditions, rituals, cuisine, work processes, household practices, and economic activities [Burtsev 2015: 100]. In *Ramona*, H. H. Jackson incorporates numerous technical terms related to fields such as agriculture, architecture, geography, and ethnography: *ranch/rancho, hacienda, adobe, viga, veranda, cañon, mesa, chaparral, presidio, vaquero, alcalde, etc.* [Jackson 1988].

Furthermore, to convey "couleur locale", the author uses phonostylistic techniques – she mimics the local dialect and incorporates phonetic features into her writing: "I allow *yer hev hed* easy times afore, then", retorted Aunt Ri, good-naturedly satirical, "*ef yeow* air plum tired *doin' thet*" [Jackson 1988: 353]. The inclusion of Spanish lexical items and phrases is another way of expressing "couleur locale": *Ah! San Pasquale! The head man there has the old pueblo paper* [Jackson 1988: 237].

#### **Southern California as a Character in the Novel.**

Affection and attention to the locality, as noted earlier, are central features of "couleur locale". The author paints an "idyllic picture of a flourishing California, a pastoral Arcadia filled with memories of the long-past golden days when everyone lived in peace and harmony with one another and with nature" [Voronchenko 2022: 68]. Certain locations in *Ramona* take on a symbolic role, reflecting the inner emotions of the characters and the plot's developments. For instance, the chapel at the San Luis Rey Mission is portrayed as a place of tranquility, a sanctuary, and a symbol of the region's spiritual and cultural heritage.

According to several Russian and foreign literary scholars, Southern California can be considered one of *Ramona's* characters in its own right. The land shapes the lives of its inhabitants, influences their relationships, and defines the specifics of their ethnic and social identities. The natural environment is depicted as a source of life, beauty, and spiritual peace, while simultaneously bearing witness to the destructive forces in humanity.

The "wild" territories symbolize the power of the natural world, which lies beyond the control of human

civilization. Ramona and Alessandro often find themselves immersed in this natural world, where the author highlights their love of freedom and their refusal to conform to conventional, artificial societal structures. The contrast between the cultivated fields and the "wild" lands underscores the conflict between civilization and nature, a theme that runs throughout the entire novel.

#### **The Symbolic and Poetic Importance of the Ranch in Descriptions of the American Southwest.**

The ranch is one of the central and most recurring images in the novel. It evokes nostalgia and sentimental feelings, symbolizing home, comfort, and tranquility. A ranch is depicted as a symbol of the Californio<sup>1</sup> traditionalism, conventional order in its positive meaning. In the novel, Moreno's ranch is portrayed as an example of a well-established, religious, and patriarchal community. It serves as a model of the Californio society, combining technical, sanitary, public, and private spaces. A ranch is a foundation of the life of Mexican-Americans, it is at a ranch that representatives of various generations, masters and servants, laborers and gentry come together [Ramirez 2006: 20–21].

K. E. Ramirez notes that Moreno's ranch complicates the then-famous image of the American Southwest as a 'primitive, empty and wild', a symbol of 'masculinized reassertion of the nation through violence' [Ramirez 2006: 23]. California is depicted as a flourishing, fertile land that became so through the efforts of the indigenous peoples. Emphasis is placed on the fact that it is not a wild land, as it was portrayed on the eastern coast of the United States, but a land with a rich history being actively destroyed by those who have invaded the territory. Jackson creates the image of an inhabited paradise garden and questions the Americans' right to these occupied lands, allowing the author to debunk the idea of progressive Anglo-American expansion to the West.

The ranch becomes a symbol of mythic Californian past; 'Ramona's ideal Southland gave expression to a yearning that Southern California be a land of beauty and memory and sunny afternoons' [Starr 1985: 62]. H. H. Jackson depicts Southern California as a flourishing, fertile, and cultivated land – home to vibrant, resilient people with their own history, now being erased by the incoming Americans: *stretched away other orchards, – peach, apricot, pear, apple pomegranate; and beyond these, vineyards. Nothing was to be seen but verdure or bloom or fruit, at whatever time of year you sat on the Senora's south veranda* [Jackson 1988: 16].

The author often reveals a character's social and financial status, as well as their ancestry, through detailed descriptions of their ranch. For example: *Such a good ranch Alessandro had; the best wheat in the valley* [Jackson 1988: 329]; *He has the biggest wheat-ranch in Cañon; we've harvested miles and miles of wheat for him* [Jackson 1988: 177]. The ranch was a place where societal divisions were evident, distinguishing between employees and employers, newcomers and natives, the oppressed and the oppressors.

<sup>1</sup> Californios – the Spanish-speaking residents of Alta California during the Spanish and Mexican era (1769–1848). More commonly the term referred to the property-holding elite.

**Manmade vs. Natural.** Despite the numerous negative connotations associated with the arrival and presence of white Americans in the South, H. H. Jackson often presents a sentimental, pastoral, and nostalgic depiction of the scenery. The buildings she describes blend harmoniously with the natural landscape, with the architecture “fitting into” the surroundings without disrupting them. This symbiosis between man and nature is a recurring theme in the novel. While the author contrasts manmade structures with natural elements, this contrast ultimately highlights the union between the natural and the artificial. This approach prevents classifying this artistic device as a contrast (contraposition) in the traditional sense. Consider the following example of such opposition: *Ysidro's home was in the centre of the **village**, on a slightly rising ground; it was a picturesque group of four **small houses**, three of **tule reeds** and one of **adobe**, – the latter a comfortable little **house** of two **rooms**, with a **floor** and a **shingled roof**, both luxuries in San Pasquale. The great **fig-tree**, whose luxuriance and size were noted far and near throughout the country, stood half-way down the **slope**; but its boughs shaded all three of the **tule houses**. On one of its **lower branches** was fastened a **dove-cote**, ingeniously **made of willow wands**, **plastered with adobe**, and containing so many rooms that the whole tree seemed sometimes a-flutter with **doves and dovelings*** [Jackson 1988: 246].

In these examples, we observe a blending of natural elements (*tule reeds, adobe, fig tree, slope, branches, willow, doveling*) with manmade objects (*house, rooms, roof, floor, dove-cote*), which effectively creates a sense of entwinement between the two “worlds”. Additionally, the text incorporates an “intermediate” component – lexical terms and phrases that highlight the transformation of the natural world through human effort, such as *plastered, tuled, shingled, ingeniously made of willow wands, fastened*. As our analysis reveals, this technique is one of the most frequently used in the novel, and it plays an important role in portraying the details of reality in the “couleur locale” style.

At times, the author portrays the interaction between man and nature as a symbiotic relationship, a process that results in the creation of something valuable. However, in several instances, human interference in the natural order evokes a sense of discomfort in the reader: *The valley thrust itself, in inlets and coves, into the very rocks of its southern wall; lovely sheltered nooks these were, where he hated to **wound the soft, flower-filled sword with his plough*** [Jackson 1988: 310]. Undoubtedly, the author intends to draw a parallel with socio-political processes: just as the white man comes to new lands and destroys nature, he also devastates the local

community, enslaves it, and exploits it for his own gain. In this context, the status of the indigenous population is described using the same lexical terms applied to the nature that is subjugated by the Americans: *disturbed, wounded, broken, etc.*

## Conclusion

The performed research allows us to present the following findings:

1. The literary evolution of the regions in the United States during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was closely tied to the “couleur locale” literary phenomenon. In the US, “couleur locale” evolved to emphasize geographic and socio-domestic aspects more prominently.

2. H. H. Jackson's novel *Ramona* incorporates metaphors, symbolism, and allegories. The author's style is primarily characterized by linguistic flexibility, the use of archaisms, rare words, and complex syntactic structures.

3. H. H. Jackson adjusts her narrative pace, shifting from meditative, measured descriptions to fast-paced, dynamic scenes. This technique creates a rhythmic polyphony effect.

4. Emotionality and sentimentality are central elements of H. H. Jackson's style. Her prose is distinguished by a deliberate effort to recreate a tangible, sensory experience for the reader engaging with her texts.

5. To accurately depict the lifestyles of various tribes and peoples, “couleur locale” writers often focus on reproducing their traditions, rites, cuisines, work processes, and household customs.

6. Southern California can be viewed as a character in its own right in *Ramona*. The land shapes the lives of its inhabitants, influences their actions, and defines their relationships, as well as the specifics of their ethnic and social identities. The natural environment is portrayed as both a source of life, beauty, and spiritual calm, while also bearing witness to the destructive forces of humanity.

7. A ranch is one of the central and most frequently used images in the work of the author. It serves as a source of sentimental value, symbolizing calm and comfort. However, the ranch is also depicted as a representation of American traditionalism and conventional order, in a more negative light.

8. The author contrasts manmade artifacts with natural elements of the environment; however, this juxtaposition highlights the underlying unity between the natural and the artificial.

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