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Marta Koval

SENSESCAPES OF LIGHT AND COLOR IN MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S NOVELS ABOUT GILEAD

Introduction

Although Marilynne Robinson is listed among the most outstanding contemporary American writers and has been a receiver of numerous literary awards¹, her fiction does not enjoy much attention of literary scholars. While her first novel *Housekeeping* (1980) is often viewed as in context of untraditional feminist sensitivity (O'Donnell, 2010; Wagner-Martin, 2015), both American and European scholars seem to avoid her Gilead cycle. Apart from *Understanding Marilynne Robinson* by Alex Engebredson (2017), an impressive volume *Balm in Gilead: A Theological Dialogue with Marilynne Robinson* (2018) and disjointed short articles, there seems to be no comprehensive research of Robinson's fiction. Her Gilead novels hardly fit political and cultural schemata of the late 20th – early 21st centuries and resist politically correct critical manipulations. Robinson's fiction is difficult to categorize. Her critique of “reductionist views of human nature” as well as her “grounding of human worth in God's love” (Larsen & Johnson, 2019: 14) open broad interpretive perspectives but also avoid trivial moralizing and require a multidimensional approach.

¹ Robinson's numerous awards include the Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction (2016), the Dayton Literary Peace Prize Richard C. Holbrooke Distinguished Achievement Award (2016), the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (2005) the Orange Prize for Fiction (2009), the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction (2005, 2014), the PEN/Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay (1999), and the Louisville Gravelmeyer Award in Religion (2006). She was the recipient of a 2012 National Humanities Medal, awarded by President Barack Obama, for «her grace and intelligence in writing» (Chicago Tribune Literary Award, 2017).

Research Method and Methodology

This article aims to analyze two novels of the Gilead cycle—*Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008) – from two perspectives: the concept of atmosphere of a place (Diaconu, 2011) and Wittgenstein's phenomenology of color (Wittgenstein, 1978). Both approaches not only enable the interpretation of existential dilemmas that the characters of the novels encounter by means of sensory categories. Wittgenstein's philosophy of mind and language matches theological and philosophical complexity of Robinson's fiction and facilitates reading its diverse meanings. On the other hand, textual analysis of fictional sensescales created by the writer in *Gilead* and *Home* allows for mapping and describing sensory experience of the place and demonstrates how abstract notions can be presented by linguistic means.

Discussion and Results

At present, Robinson's Gilead cycle comprises three novels (in addition to the above-mentioned, it also includes *Lila* (2014). The fourth novel *Jack* will be published at the end of September, 2020) that can be read both as parts of a single whole (but not a sequel) and as individual novels. They are united by the setting—the town of Gilead in Iowa, and the characters but at the same time are different in the atmosphere they create. Through the prism of family life of two pastors – John Ames and Robert Boughton – Robinson brings into play crucial existential issues and leaves the reader with an open-ended story and moral and social dilemmas that are hard to resolve.

In *Remarks on Color*, Wittgenstein notices that everything in color seems to be an exception because it is an ever-changing phenomenon. Therefore, ascribing a specific meaning to color is an attempt to give it an identity (Wittgenstein, 1978: III, §326). For Robinson's characters, colors are closely linked to their personal experience of the past. For old Ames, the sunlight and the moonlight that fill the surrounding world with joy and beauty are a reminder of the approaching end of his life, while for Lila, colors are the markers of her new happy and quiet life. Jack and Glory reconstruct the past via the memory of colors from their childhood. For Jack Boughton, the prodigal son, color acquires an additional racial meaning: his civil wife Della is black. Jack's white Protestant family

would not accept her in their home. Color becomes an obstacle he will not be able to overcome because his father's home will not open to other colors. However, for all those different meanings, the function of color in Robinson's novels has one aspect in common: it serves to enhance the experience and adds additional meanings to it.

Gilead is a confessional novel written as a diary of the seventy-six-year-old Congregationalist pastor that he addresses to his little son Robby. He is aware that he will not be able to be with his family for too long and is trying to teach his son about life as much as he can. In Ames's story, light and brightness are of paramount importance in his perception of the world. Bright colors perform a trivial function – they are the indicators of happiness the old man feels and simple joys of earthly life. The awareness of the approaching end make colors of everyday life even more attractive.

Light in *Gilead* is linked to the idea of joy and happiness. For Ames, it is charged with a profound theological sense: "The moon looks wonderful in this warm evening light, just as a candle flame looks beautiful in the light of morning. Light within light. It seems like a metaphor for something. ... It seems to me to be a metaphor for the human soul, the singular light within the great general light of existence. Or it seems like poetry within language. Perhaps wisdom within experience. Or marriage within friendship and love" (Robinson, 2004: 119). There is a number of explicit references to Calvinist ideas both in *Gilead* and *Home*. Characters' attitudes and the way of thinking often reflect the Calvinist perspective. The splendor of nature is also a "divine invention" and the ability to appreciate it is seen as an expression of God's grace because "there is not one blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice" (Calvin's Sermon Number 10 on I Corinthians, 698 qtd. in Bouwsma, 1989:134–135). Light fills the outside world with divine beauty that does not depend on individual feelings or specific situations. This perspective supports Wittgenstein's idea that concepts reflect our life and are "in the middle of it" (Wittgenstein, 1978: III, §302). Ames often observes how light plays on the water, tree leaves, in drops of rain or dew, how it changes the sky and, most importantly, how it beautifies the mundane reality as it fills it with radiance, but also almost inevitably

invokes thoughts about the approaching end of his earthly life: “There’s a shimmer on a child’s hair, in the sunlight. There are rainbow colors in it, tiny, soft beams of just the same colors you can see in the dew sometimes. They’re in the petals of flowers, and they’re on a child’s skin. Your hair is straight and dark, and your skin is very fair. I suppose you’re not prettier than most children. ... All that is fine, but it’s your existence I love you for, mainly. Existence seems to me now the most remarkable thing that could ever be imagined. I’m about to put on imperishability. In an instant, in the twinkling of an eye” (Robinson, 2004: 52–53). Thus, light is integrated into the idea of life: it underlines the beauty of all its expressions, makes them more attractive, and fills every minute with happiness. As the narrator says, light that turns the world radiant at once, also affirms profoundly the word “good” in his soul. It allows him to witness the wonderful moments “when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy” (Robinson, 2004: 246). The view of light in different places makes Ames reconsider the sense of mortality and see the beauty in mundane reality as a special gift.

For Wittgenstein, light takes a very specific place in the philosophy of colors because it does not affect the basic impression of other colors but can make them more glowing. The concept of light poses a complex philosophical problem since unlike other colors it cannot be described as a property of a point in space (Wittgenstein, 1978: III §107). Even though light is colorless, as Wittgenstein often emphasizes (Wittgenstein, 1978: I, §35), it endows the surrounding world with radiance that is the synonym of life and vitality, able to invoke a spectrum of emotions. Wittgenstein points out that observation of colors and their changes is an ability different from simply seeing them (Wittgenstein, 1978: III, §318). These observations make Ames admire the splendor of everyday life even in his poor health condition: “I was struck by the way the light felt that afternoon. I have paid a good deal of attention to light, but no one could begin to do it justice. There was the feeling of a weight of light – pressing the damp out of the grass and pressing the smell of sour old sap out of the boards on the porch floor and burdening even the trees a little as a late snow would do. It was the kind of light that rests on your shoulders

the way a cat lies on your lap. So familiar” (Robinson, 2004: 51). Light in the novel lives a life of its own and resembles a physical entity. That Ames notices and praises the play of light is important not only as the ability to register minor expressions of beauty that often escape our attention under the pressure of everyday routine. It also expresses his continuing admiration of the Creation that his age and approaching death make even more emotional. Sunlight and moonlight are not only physical phenomena – they beautify the mundane, add a divine dimension to reality and give hope. Thus, light as a physical phenomenon is integrated into the metaphysical: “The light in the room was beautiful this morning, as it often is. It’s a plain old church and it could use a coat of paint. But in the dark times I used to walk over before sunrise just to sit there and watch the light come into that room. I don’t know how beautiful it might seem to anyone else. I felt much at peace those mornings, praying over very dreadful thing sometimes – the Depression, the wars. That was a lot of misery for people around here, decades of it. But prayer brings peace...” (Robinson, 2004: 70).

The description of light in *Gilead* shifts on the borderline between logic and the empirical. Wittgenstein believed that those shifts back and forth demonstrate a possibility of change of a specific statement describing color (like any other statement) from the expression of norms to the expression of experience (Wittgenstein, 1978: III, §19)². While the word “norm” is not much applicable to the narrative situations in Robinson’s novel, we can consider the use of light in *Gilead* and other colors in *Home* as a play on the borderline between conventions that function as norms and the experience. The perception of light and colors is highly subjective: “It is only *to be expected* that we will find adjectives (as, for example, iridescent”), which are color characteristics of an extended area or of a small expanse in a particular surrounding (“shimmering,” “glittering,” “gleaming,” “luminous”)” (Wittgenstein, 1978: III, §66). It is Ames’s

² “For it is not the ‘thought’ (an accompanying mental phenomenon) but its use (something that surrounds it), that distinguishes the logical proposition from the empirical one” (Wittgenstein, 1978: III, §19).

experience and the theological background of his thinking that endow the perception of light with a particular meaning.

The experiential component of color perception is even more explicit in Robinson's *Home*. Home is one of the narrative centers of the triptych (as well as the future thematic "quartet"). It is a house where your family lives and it is also perceived in a broader geographical sense as the place where you spent your childhood. Home can be a metaphorical shelter, a place of exile, a place of reconciliation, and even a prison (Ślawek, 2013). Robinson's home is three-dimensional: it is characterized by smells, sounds, and colors. The colors of garden plants, furniture, and the play of sunlight create the atmosphere of domesticity as a complex amalgamation of the physical (family house) and the metaphysical (the feeling of home). Colors and light (and also smells and sounds that will not be analyzed in detail in this article) not only enrich a description of the domestic space and generate the idea domesticity. They also function as qualifiers of atmosphere of the place and create a sensescape that can otherwise be identified as a crucial constituent of atmosphere of a place.

Even though atmosphere of a place is a metaphysical concept of "fundamental ambiguity," Mădălina Diaconu suggested a definition that outlines its major characteristics. Based on theories of Gernot Böhme, Michael Hauskeller, Peter Zumthor, Werner Bischoff and others, the scholar identifies atmosphere as the "air in a particular place and, by extension, the pervading mood of a place or situation, its aura or flair. ... [T]he total impression of the ... reality which people share with one another" (Diaconu, 2011: 228). Diaconu whose research focuses primarily on olfactory spaces, argues that sensory memory of sounds and odors described by linguistic means helps to "visualize smells and thus translate sensory data from one register into another" (Diaconu, 2011: 227). Even though the concept of atmosphere encompasses and validates the elements that are typically considered fluid and abstract, the scholar identifies the sensory qualifiers of atmosphere, thus making its description an important mnemonic and sensory instrument and archive. Diaconu underscores the "fundamental ambiguity" of atmospheres as emotional qualities of spaces and argues that the experience of atmosphere is not

abstract knowledge. Even though atmosphere of a place can only be described vaguely, it may still be experienced in an intersubjective way (Diaconu, 2011: 229), therefore it is not an entirely abstract motion. For all their subjectivity, detailed descriptions of home, garden and the town of Gilead in *Home* express specific interaction between the subject(s), i.e. Jack, his sister and their parents, and the objects in their family home and its immediate surroundings.

A sense of home possesses ubiquitous centrality in Jack, Glory and old Boughton's experience. Diaconu underscores that the experience of a place is not abstract knowledge that can be transmitted to others. It requires a "very corporeal presence *in situ*, as the necessary condition for feeling it: you have to be there and move through the space in order to feel the atmosphere" (Böhme qtd. in Diaconu, 2011: 229). From this perspective, it is interesting to observe how Robinson creates a *sense of color* as a qualifier of a place by describing it indirectly by means of associations with objects that for the readers with common experience of color are inevitably associated with its specific expression. A description of the old garden near the Boughtons' house creates a visually colorful picture without a direct verbal reference to colors: "The oak tree flourished still, and of course there had been and there were the apple and cherry and apricot trees, the lilacs and trumpet vines and the day lilies. A few of her mother's irises managed to bloom. At Easter she and her sisters still bring in armfuls of flowers, and their father's eyes would glitter with tears and he would say, "Ah yes, yes," as if they brought some memento, these flowers only a pleasant reminder of flowers" (Robinson 2008: 4). Even though home is an emotional totality, Robinson objectifies, visualizes, orders, and in that way stabilizes its atmosphere assigning odors and colors to specific physical objects. As a result, colors, smells, and sounds acquire volume, intensity and impact. In that way the writer creates a *sensescape* (Diaconu's term), which can now be mapped and described.

As in *Gilead*, the writer constructs what Wittgenstein identifies as the concept of color/light that exists on the borderline of logic and the empirical. One may argue that lilacs and irises have different shades and the above description may generate diverse visual impressions in readers

depending on their knowledge and experience. However, in any case that impression will be rich in color. In Wittgenstein's theory, color concepts that we use sometimes relate to substances or surfaces (Wittgenstein, 1978: III, §255) and what is even more important, "the color concepts are to be treated like the concepts of sensations" (Wittgenstein, 1978: III, §72). This is exactly what Robinson manages to achieve in her novel. A reference to colors in the description of the Boughtons' house and its surroundings is scarce but it is emotionally charged and linked to the experience of the characters. Thus, colors create sensations (logical plane), while sensations visualize colors by means of their reference to specific objects (empirical plane): "The dining room was immutable, like the rest of the house. But it was oppressive in ways that could easily have changed. If she could have taken down the plum-colored drapes that hung over the lace curtains that covered the window shades, she'd have done it in a minute. If she could have taken up the plum-colored carpet with lavender fins or fans or fronds in a border around it. She'd have cleared the sideboard of the clutter of knickknacks, gifts displayed as a courtesy to their givers, most of whom by now would have gone to their reward. Porcelain cats and dogs and birds, milk-glass compote dishes. But in this place of solemn perpetual evening, every family joy had been given its occasion, and here they would celebrate Jack's homecoming" (Robinson, 2008: 40). The description is an excellent example of how Robinson objectifies and visualizes odors, colors, and sounds and thus unveils the character's suppressed thoughts and reconstructs for the reader atmosphere of Boughton's home. It is no longer abstract but becomes tangible and emotionally meaningful. A sensescape represents a specific experiential report that reveals the subtlest emotions and hidden thoughts.

While in *Gilead* light and colors enhance the idea of divine grace and beauty that we are expected to praise with our lives, in *Home* colors invoke a nostalgic atmosphere of the old days. The image of home – so dear but so obsolete and dysfunctional – acquires the meaning of the past we tend to idealize but that collapses at the encounter with the present reality. On his brief visit home after the twenty-year absence, Jacks tends to the garden with a particular care, adding the flowers they used to have

there in the past and rescuing those that could be rescued. Again, the writer does not mention the colors of these plants but the description is so emotionally saturated that the reader can easily visualize them and reconstruct the mood of the old days.

Wittgenstein speaks about the connection between our color concepts and the colors of places in our visual field, which are independent of any spatial and physical interpretation (Wittgenstein, 1978: I, §61). The philosopher argues that the perception of colors is more significant than their accurate identification: “The fact that I can say this place in my visual field in grey-green does not mean that I know what should be called an exact reproduction of this shade of color” (Wittgenstein, 1978: I, §62). The fact that the narration in the novel often only implies a color and the reader may have a different imagination of its specific shade is less significant than the emotions any vision of this color entangles. They are described in a very precise way and related to the circumstances of the characters’ life in the past, but it is a colorful image that calls them back to life.

Colors in *Home*, as well as smells and sounds, shape the characters’ sense of nostalgia. Glory, the youngest of the Boughtons and the one who experiences the destitution of home and its changing role, observes the changing and (changed) colors and sounds of the house and Gilead. She charges them with meaning and turns colors into sensations – all of them marked with sadness and the awareness of lost opportunities. Colors add a bitter poignancy to her perception of home that is no longer a place of comfort and a shelter but resembles more a location of crashed hopes or hopelessness one is forced to accept in order to survive emotionally: “A hot white sky and a soft wind, a murmur among the trees, the treble raps of a few cicadas. There were acorns in the road, some of them broken by passing cars. Chrysanthemums were coming into bloom. Yellowing squash vines swamped the vegetable gardens and tomato plants hung from their stakes, depleted with bearing. Another summer in Gilead. Gilead, dreaming out its curse of sameness, somnolence. How could anyone want to live here? That was the question they asked one another... Why would anyone stay here?” (Robinson, 2008: 281). Thus, a rich sensescape full

of exquisitely described colors, sounds, and smells focalizes Glory's existential pain and makes her sadness visual and almost physical.

Robinson's mastery of the language makes scarcely mentioned colors give rise to sensations in their extreme expression. Individual colors in the verbal picture of Gilead make more sense when they are integrated into the overall emotional picture³ together with sounds and smells as other indispensable attributes of domesticity. Glory in her dreams of her own home pictures it as the complete opposite of the old home in Gilead: it would be spacious, airy, modern, sunlit, and with white furniture. Thus, the Boughtons' house in Gilead, being a place, the children liked visiting, became a living past they could neither abandon emotionally nor transform into a part of their present-day life.

The concept of color in *Home* acquires a racial dimension that considering the time of the action in the novel, the year 1956, becomes a political indicator. This particular motif seems to be tackled only on the margins, however, it is a deceptive marginality. Home that is the locus of the characters' happy past and the central meaning-construction element of the novel becomes a touchstone for their future: a racially homogeneous home where all the Boughton offspring are always welcome is unlikely to accept Jack's black-skinned wife and his colored son. The political aspect of color is crucial for Jack and it reconfigures the vision of home for him. He will always be an alien there and the reconstruction of the past with Mama's irises, "dusty lavender droning with bees" (Robinson, 2008: 90), and the smell of chicken and dumplings and cinnamon rolls will not make the old place in Gilead feel like home for him. A touching and emotional sensescape of Boughton's home highlights the irreconcilability of Jack's life with moral and social values of his family and the fact that domesticity can be color-restrictive.

³ "I think that it is worthless or no use whatsoever for the understanding of painting to speak of the characteristics of the individual colors. When we do it, we are really only thinking of special uses. That green as the color of a tablecloth has this, red that effect, does not allow us to draw any conclusions as to their effect in a picture" (Wittgenstein, 1978: III, §213).

Conclusions

As the above brief analysis has shown, narrative representation of colors and light in Robinson's novels about Gilead significantly merges logical and empirical (experiential) elements. The writer creates color concepts that function as concepts of sensations (Wittgenstein, 1978: III, §71) and are emotional generators just as well. They are also integrated into sensescapes that the Gilead novels devise and together with other sensory elements (smells and sounds), create atmosphere of the place that foregrounds moral and social dilemmas the characters encounter. Therefore, the analysis of sensescapes and their constituents is a means of mapping characters' experience and articulating suppressed emotions and hidden thoughts.

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Анотація

М.Р. Коваль. Колір і світло у «пейзажах відчуттів» у романах Мерилін Робінсон про Галаад

У статті проаналізовано особливості використання кольорів і світла в романах Мерилін Робінсон «Галаад» (2004) та «Дім» (2008) з точки зору теорії кольору Вітгенштайна та феноменології відчуттів як чинника атмосфери місця. Для персонажів Робінсон кольори й світло – це складові «пейзажу відчуттів», що формують концепцію дому та визначають підходи до моральних і соціальних дилем. Барви дерев, квітів і трав, кольори домашніх предметів, а також переливи сонячного й місячного світла творять атмосферу родинного життя та дають відчуття домашнього затишку, що має ключове значення для героїв романів. Вітгенштайн у «Нотатках про колір» стверджує, що в кольорі усе є унікальним, оскільки він презентує змінне явище, завдяки чому набуває ідентичності. В теорії атмосфери місця «пейзаж відчуттів» опредметнюється й візуалізується через описування кольорів, запахів та звуків і їх пов'язування з конкретними об'єктами. Для персонажів роману «Дім» кольори, як і інші елементи «пейзажу відчуттів», стають складовою досвіду і пам'яті. Переживання минулого відбувається за допомогою спогадів про сенсорні відчуття, пов'язані з батьківським домом, кольорами, звуками та запахами дитинства. Натомість у романі «Галаад» сонячне й місячне світло, що наповнює навколишній світ красою і божественною радістю, стає для старого Еймеса нагадуванням про наближення смерті. У «Домі» поняття кольору набуває політичного звучання: громадянська дружина Джека – темношкіра і його біла протестантська родина не прийме її у свій дім. Колір стає перешкодою, яку Джекові не подолати, оскільки батьківський дім закритий для інших кольорів. Таким чином, у романах Робінсон кольори і світло як складові «пейзажу відчуттів» стають засобами відображення досвіду персонажів та вираження затаєних емоцій і невисловлених думок.

Key words: пейзаж відчуттів, колір, світло, атмосфера місця, домашність.

Аннотация

М.Р. Коваль. Цвет и свет в «сенсорных пейзажах» в романах Мэрилин Робинсон о Галаад

В статье проанализированы особенности использования цветов и света в романах Мэрилин Робинсон «Галаад» (2004) и «Дом» (2008) с точки зрения теории цвета Витгенштейна и феноменологии ощущений как фактора создания атмосферы места. Для персонажей Робинсон цвета и свет – это составляющие «сенсорного пейзажа», формирующие концепцию дома и определяющие подходы к моральным и социальным дилеммам. Цвет деревьев и трав, цвет домашних предметов, а также переливы солнечного и лунного света создают атмосферу домашнего уюта, имеющую ключевое значение для героев романов. Витгенштейн в «Заметках о цвете» утверждает, что в цвете все является уникальным, поскольку он представляет собою переменное явление, благодаря чему приобретает идентичность. В теории атмосферы места «сенсорный пейзаж» объективируется и визуализируется путем описания цветов, запахов и звуков и соотношения их с конкретными объектами. Персонажи романа «Дом» переживают прошлое, благодаря реконструкции «сенсорного пейзажа» родительского дома, цветов, звуков и запахов детства. В то же время в романе «Галаад» солнечный и лунный свет, наполняющие окружающий мир красотой и божественной радостью, напоминают старому Эймесу о приближающейся смерти. В «Доме» понятие цвета приобретает также политическое звучание: гражданская жена Джека – темнокожая и его белая протестантская семья не примет ее в свой дом. Цвет становится препятствием, которое Джек не может преодолеть, поскольку родительский дом закрыт для других цветов. Таким образом, в романах Робинсон цвета и свет как составляющие «сенсорного пейзажа» становятся средствами отображения опыта персонажей и передачи затаенных чувств и невысказанных мыслей.

Ключевые слова: «сенсорный пейзаж», цвет, свет, атмосфера места, домашний уют.

Abstract

M.R. Koval. Sensescapes of Light and Color in Marilynne Robinson's Novels about Gilead

The article analyzes the use of colors and light in Marilynne Robinson's novels *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008) from the perspective of Wittgenstein's theory of color and the phenomenology of senses that create atmosphere of a

place. For the characters of the novels, colors and light as constitutive elements of sensescape shape the idea of home and foreground moral and social dilemmas they encounter. Colors of garden plants, furniture, and the play of sunlight and moonlight create the atmosphere of domesticity and shape a sense of home and belonging that has ubiquitous centrality for the characters of the novels. In *Remarks on Color*, Wittgenstein argues that everything in color seems to be an exception, because it is an ever-changing phenomenon, thus ascribing identity to colors. In the theory of atmosphere of a place, sensescales are objectified and visualized by describing colors, odors, and sounds and assigning them to specific objects. For the characters of *Home*, colors, as well as other elements of sensescape, are part of lived experience. Emotional revival of the past takes place via a reconstruction of a sensescape of home filled with colors, sounds, and smells from their childhood, while for old Ames from *Gilead* the sunlight and the moonlight that fill the surrounding world with beauty and divine joy are only a reminder of an approaching death. In *Home*, color becomes a racialized concept and acquires a political meaning: Jack's civil wife is black and his white Protestant family will not accept her in their home. This is an obstacle Jack will not be able to overcome because his family home will not open its doors to other colors. Thus, in Robinson's novels sensescales are a means of mapping characters' experience and articulating suppressed emotions and thoughts.

Key words: sensescape, color, light, atmosphere of a place, domesticity.

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Інформація про автора

Коваль Марта Романівна – доктор габілітований, професор Інституту англістики та американістики Гданського університету (Польща): вул. Віта Ствоша, 51. Гданськ, 80-316, Польща; e-mail: marta.koval@ug.edu.pl; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0935-4679>