

# The motif of orphanhood in the narrative of trauma and healing: Volodymyr Rafeyenko's fiction about Russia's war against Ukraine

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## The motif of orphanhood in the narrative of trauma and healing: Volodymyr Rafeyenko's fiction about Russia's war against Ukraine

Fiction about Russia's war against Ukraine. Volodymyr Rafeyenko. War trauma. Traumatic writing. Motif of orphanhood.

This article examines the narrative of trauma and healing in wartime fiction by the Ukrainian writer Volodymyr Rafeyenko, namely, in the works *Dovhi chasy (miska balada)* (2017; Eng. trans. *The Length of Days: An Urban Ballad*, 2023), *Mondegreen: Pisni pro smert' i lyubov* (2019; Eng. trans. *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love*, 2022), and others. The focus of the study is the discovery of the protagonist's identity in the context of remediation and premediation processes as components of cultural memory. The narratives are interpreted through the prism of the motif of orphanhood, considered in two ways: as a political metaphor and as one of the real manifestations of the war trauma. The methodological tools of this article include Astrid Erll's interpretation of the role of remediation and premediation in the dynamics of cultural memory, and Tamara Hundorova's interpretation of the maternal and paternal images in the Ukrainian post-Soviet novel.

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The life path of Volodymyr Rafeyenko, originally a Russian-speaking writer from Donetsk who moved to Kyiv after the Russian invasion of Donbas in 2014, mastered the Ukrainian language and started writing works of fiction in Ukrainian, is a living example of how actual encounters with genocidal practices make a person re-evaluate their life, linking together inherited traumatic experiences and their own vision of the future in the context of undergoing changes to their individual and collective identity.

The works of Rafeyenko represent all stages of Russia's war against Ukraine until the present time. The novel *Dovhi chasy (miska balada)* (2017; Eng. trans. *The Length of Days: An Urban Ballad*, 2023a) shows the coexistence of the local population and occupants in the half-fantastical chronotope of the city of Z (easily recognized as Donetsk) immediately after the beginning of the Russian aggression in 2014. The novel *Mondegreen: Pisni pro smert' i lyubov* (2019; Eng. trans. *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love*, 2022), whose protagonist is Haba Habinsky, an intellectual from Donetsk who is traumatized by the war, describes his life in Kyiv and his path to rediscovering his familial and national identities that were suppressed during the Soviet (and later Russian) attempts to colonize the region. The play *Mobilni khvyli buttia* (Mobile waves of being, 2023b) represents tragic events in the life of several families from Kyiv, who were caught by the Russian occupation at their village cottages, and therefore were condemned to die. Rafeyenko's most recent novel *Petrychor – zapakh zemli pislia doshchu* (Petrichor, the smell of ground after the rain, 2023c) portrays the protagonist's escape from the full-scale war – as a traumatized person of unsound mind, he refuses to accept the reality of his wife's death but somehow finds the strength to do so. Taking a holistic approach to Rafeyenko's fiction as a single text, we can trace the protagonists' path toward their own existential, national, and familial identity and the author's gradual alienation from the influence of Russian language and culture.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the narrative of trauma and healing of Rafeyenko's protagonist and the discovery of his own identity in the context of remediation and premediation processes as components of cultural memory. The key to the interpretation of the narrative is the motif of orphanhood, interpreted by Rafeyenko in two ways: as a political metaphor and as one of the real manifestations of the war trauma. The methodological approach of this analysis includes Astrid Erll's (2009) interpretation of the role of remediation and premediation in the dynamics of cultural memory, and Tamara Hundorova's (2024) interpretation of maternal and paternal images in the Ukrainian post-Soviet novel.

## WORKS OF FICTION IN THE SYSTEM OF CULTURAL MEMORY: REMIEDIATION AND PREMIEDIATION

When analyzing Rafeyenko's works of the war period, it is worth remembering that like the works of many other writers, they function as a means of mass communication, exerting influence on the audience.<sup>1</sup> As a rule, the tangibility of this influence directly correlates with the writer's "popularity" or fame in the widest possible circles. And here it should be noted that, given the publicly resonant, media-covered

transition of Rafeyenko to the Ukrainian language, attention to his works is now quite high. Moreover, the artistic value of the writer's works guarantees lasting interest from readers.

Therefore, given the high level of influence of Rafeyenko's works, special attention can be paid to their remediation and premediation significance, in particular within Astrid Erll's framework of dynamics of cultural memory, which interprets remediation as a form of cultural memory existence, "the repeated mediation of memory matter, across time and space" (2019, 242). This includes rewriting, translation, adaptation, commentary, performances, canonization, institutionalization, editing, and "other possible forms of 'mediating again'" (242–245). In fact, cultural memory does not exist without various forms of remediation. If the vector of remediation is directed to the past, then the essence of premediation is to provide the audience with "schemata for new experience and its representation" by the media that circulate in a given society (2009, 111). Erll notes that the reactivation of past experiences (i.e., remediation) can also serve as premediation, such as medial representations of World War I, which were at hand as a model for understanding World War II. In other words, by assimilating mediatised past experience, society forms niches within the framework of premediation which will be filled by subsequent events. According to Erll, mediation is not the prerogative of the mass media alone: "Media that belong to more distant cultural spheres, such as art, mythology, religion or law, can exert great power as mediators, too" (111). That is, the consideration of fiction in the system of remediation-premediation diachrony is quite legitimate. Given the fact that many phenomena of Ukraine's past, previously silenced for political reasons, have recently entered the sphere of cultural memory, we must admit that the remediation of traumatic experiences of the past and the premediation of current military events have been concentrated in Ukrainian life in a very short period of time. The representation of Ukraine's past genocidal experiences in fiction adds to the arsenal of premediation tools that help Ukrainians better understand the nature of the current Russian aggression and find the strength to confront the enemy. As Oksana Pukhonska comments on the continuity of historical memory reproduced in contemporary literature, "the war in eastern Ukraine is a metaphor for the confrontation between the past and the future, that is, between what and how we should remember, and how it should/could shape our national identity"<sup>2</sup> (2019, 247). This article considers Rafeyenko's works written in the period of the Russian-Ukrainian war (i.e., since 2014) as the media through which he exercises remedial and premedial influence on the audience.

Rafeyenko clearly records the lack of proper remediation, the silencing of past historical traumas of Ukrainians in Soviet times, and the removal of this taboo with the onset of the era of Independence. In particular, he recalls the moment after the collapse of the USSR when "[his] mother's mother, [his] own grandmother, sat [him] down and told [him] about her life, how it was going", in particular, that giving up her native language was her release from peer bullying at school and a pass to her prestigious job in the space industry (Rafeyenko 2020, 317). Rafeyenko's reminiscences published by Oleksandr Mykhed about what he personally saw from

the Donetsk bell tower, where he was ringing the bells at the moment that thousands of armed militants entered the city, can be considered a remediation for events that were closer in time. His realization that people wearing masks and running into the cathedral carrying bats is a sign that “hope for the best is over”, that changes are coming, and the struggle against this force will not be short or easy, is already a pre-meditation (319).

In Rafeyenko’s wartime prose, remediation is observed on two levels: 1) the protagonist’s awareness of the traumas and genocidal experiences of the 20th century, and 2) the comprehension of the outbreak of the war in 2014 in all its causality and teleology. On the basis of this understanding of the previous colonial-totalitarian past, the writer – consciously or unconsciously – uses his writing to examine the prospects for Ukraine and to leave at least a grain of hope at the end of even the gloomiest narrative. In particular, the novels *The Length of Days* and *Mondegreen* can be considered as premediation of the next full-scale aggression and the spiritual preparation of Ukrainians who are already aware of their own past for a difficult confrontation, which the artist associates with the mythical motif of the metaphysical battle between good and evil. As Iryna Tarku writes about this feature of Rafeyenko’s writing, embodied in *Mondegreen*: “Even though the war is fundamentally destructive, it reveals remarkable creative potential and encourages the interest of Ukrainians in their own history and cultural memory” (2023, 210).

### THE MOTIF OF ORPHANHOOD IN THE ARTISTIC WORLD OF RAFEYENKO’S WORKS

Rafeyenko’s fiction written during the Russian-Ukrainian war is undoubtedly an example of traumatic writing. Focusing on the question of which traumas underlie these works and how they are represented, we can notice a certain dynamic, starting from his depiction of the horrors of war in *The Length of Days*, which is ironic (in the inserted stories) or grotesque (in the main text). In *Mondegreen*, the author moves towards explicitly disclosing the trauma of the protagonist’s forced relocation as the background for the conditional and veiled representation (due to his mental instability) of the trauma of the loss of his beloved, and his killing of those responsible for this crime. In fact, in the fictional world of this work, there is always uncertainty as to whether the tragic events described really happened in the novel’s diegesis or whether they are Haba’s delusions. Rafeyenko continues this series of traumatic texts with an openly tragic portrayal of the entire set of war traumas in their most acute manifestations in the play *Mobile Waves of Being* and the novel *Petrichor*. The main traumatic factors in these works are the loss of loved ones and, in *Petrichor*, the murder of enemies by a highly moral protagonist in self-defense. The motif of the characters’ mental instability is also present in this novel, but here, this instability is presented as their attempt to hide themselves from the terrible reality. By the end of the work, both of its protagonists, Viktor and Maria, find the strength to admit that the tragedies of losing their loved ones really happened, and that even having admitted this, they will still somehow survive. Viktor, who at the beginning of the work “hears” from every cat and dog the painful question that

he is actually asking himself: “Why did you kill them? First two, and then two more?” (Rafeyenko 2023c, 11), finally finds strength to tell others why he did it, which was to take revenge on the aggressors for the brutal rape of his wife.

It is important that in Rafeyenko’s works written after the beginning of the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, the style of narration about the horrors of war changes. Analyzing the scenes of violence in *The Length of Days*, Uilleam Blacker resorts to the term “parapoleemics” coined by Kate McLoughlin, meaning the focus on the periphery of conflict, to avoid direct representation of violence and death (Blacker 2022, 17). For this work, Blacker’s observation seems legitimate, but Rafeyenko’s subsequent texts, *Mobile Waves of Being* and *Petrichor*, contain not only parapoleemics, but also direct descriptions of violence that shock the reader. Eventually after reading these scenes, it becomes clear why the protagonists have acquired irreversible mental damage.

The characteristic feature of Rafeyenko’s works is that, despite the diversity of characters, chronotopes, and stylistic dominants,<sup>3</sup> they have many cross-cutting, unifying motifs and images, through which the remediative and premeditative functions of the author’s writing are carried out. Some of these motifs, from work to work, testify to certain changes, including those of identity, experienced by the characters as well as, probably, by the author and the reader at each of the specific stages of the war. When analyzing the writer’s narrative of trauma and healing, we focus on the motif of orphanhood, which is extremely representative and important for understanding of the processes of remediation and premediation in the semiosphere of Rafeyenko’s fiction.

Despite the fact that the background absence of one or both of the characters’ parents (a sort of incompleteness) is a factor of the perception of their minds as potentially vulnerable, and the event of losing parents is marked as a psychological trauma, in Rafeyenko’s works we can distinguish two different interpretations of this phenomenon: orphanhood as a political metaphor, which to some extent explains the specifics of Donbas identity, and orphanhood as a trauma that causes irreparable damage to the psyche of the traumatized person, and in some cases is the realization of the mythologeme of sacrifice. The first, metaphorical, interpretation of orphanhood is embodied in *The Length of Days*. Undoubtedly, the narrative of orphanhood in this work evokes the reader’s empathy, but the story of the absence or loss of parents is not overly psychologized here, because the external, political connotations seem more important. In addition, in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the motif of orphanhood becomes one of the many manifestations of the aggressor’s extreme violence, such as the motif of mortality among children in the occupied territories, which Olha Voznyuk draws attention to in her research (2023, 108).

In *The Length of Days*, orphanhood serves as a metaphor for the rupture of trans-generational memory transmission, a sign of an identity crisis due to the lack of proper remediation of the past traumas in pre-war Donbas (for more details, see Grebeniuk 2024). Kolya Veresaiev, one of the three main protagonists of the novel (along with Sokrat Gredis and Lisa-Eleonora), metaphorically formulates the orphan’s deep resentment towards the Ukrainian government, the living father of Donbas (personified in the image of the President) who does not care when the mother is in trouble:

Why shouldn't, given all this, you know, why shouldn't our Supreme Leader go out to the podium [...] to shout out for the whole world to hear: how are you doing there, folks? How are you doing in your fucking Z? [...] Hang in there, people, we haven't forgotten about you [...]. Children, women, old men and old women, hang in there!<sup>4</sup> (Rafeyenko 2023a, 41–42)

In addition, Rafeyenko associates the state of orphanhood with the status of a refugee, putting an intertextually charged complaint into Kolya's mouth: "*It's hard, so hard to live/Like a motherless child*. So you and I, Sokrat Ivanovich, are Z-orphans! Migrants!" (2023a, 270).

Tamara Hundorova, in her article "Transgenerational Trauma and Maternal Criticism in a Decolonial Perspective", notes that in the post-Soviet Ukrainian novel, the conflict between parents and children reflects both dissatisfaction with the authority of the father, associated with the former colonial power, and disappointment in maternal support, associated with the nation (Motherland) which had become the object of colonization. Among the examples Hundorova (2024) discusses is the protagonist's criticism and rejection of her own mother in Oksana Zabuzhko's *Poliiovi Doslidzhennia z Ukrajin's'koho Seksu* (1996; Eng. trans. *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, 2011). It can be said that Rafeyenko's wartime works embody the next stage of this post-colonial syndrome, which is particularly represented in texts where the mother is completely absent, and most often has died. This fact metaphorically reflects the violent loss of the Motherland as a result of Russian expansion.

In *The Length of Days*, the motifs of orphanhood and the loss of a mother (the Motherland, the nation) are very significant. Lisa, a mentally ill orphan girl Lisa, is adopted by Sokrat's daughter Anna before her own death, leaving Lisa doubly orphaned (which, however, turns out not to be a real death, but a transition to a real, spiritual Ukraine). Another orphan is Sashka, a character in the inserted story "Someone Else's Apartment", who tries to comprehend the essence of events, but having no parents, he lacks the basic system of values, which people usually receive in the family. Therefore, he does not find his place and meaning in a world that is deformed by the war – we are informed that he has had "a second heart attack" (2023a, 224).

In the novel *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love*, the motif of orphanhood as a factor of the intergenerational gap is realized primarily in the retrospectively narrated murder of the parents of Haba's grandfather, Olexii Yehorovych, by the Soviet authorities. Little Olexii, along with his brother and sisters, were forced to remain silent about this murder, which they witnessed (undoubtedly remaining a lifelong trauma for them), so as not to be branded as "children of enemies of the people" and to have the opportunity to arrange their fates under the totalitarian regime. It was this fact that put into effect the "canon of ignorance" that had been formed in Haba since his childhood and that was, in fact, a manifestation of the conspiracy of silence, which always extended to all stories about trauma, especially in the context of the country's Communist past. The self-preservation instinct of Haba's ancestors and their generation was the main reason for this "silence", meaning the lack of remediation of the past, as cherishing ancient traditions and remembering traumas was dangerous during times of repression.

Interestingly, Haba Habinskyj learns about these family facts, hidden for decades, in a metaphysical way<sup>5</sup> – through a connection to otherworldly knowledge, which is personified in his imagination by a fairytale character, the Mare’s Head.<sup>6</sup> The trigger for the appearance of the Mare’s Head is the beginning of Haba’s study of Ukrainian – the forgotten and repressed language of his ancestors, in which his grandmother had told him bedtime stories. Although the protagonist’s immersion in the language, which is for him not only a means of communication, but also the center of his ancestral identity, harms his mental health (see Andryczyk, 2022), it helps him to find his true self and embark on the path of remediation. Iryna Tarku characterizes the integrative impact of the awareness of family traumas on the protagonist’s psyche: “The main character accepts the horrible past of his grandfather, and in this way he ‘wakes up.’ This awakening liberates Haba from any craving for revenge, and it gives him a feeling of lightness and wholeness” (2023, 217).

We can summarize that an adequate “rereading” of the past, awareness of the reasons for the russification and mental enslavement of Habinskyj’s parents, acts as a practice of remediation of cultural traumas for the reader of Rafeyenko’s work and carries within itself the schemata of the future unfolding of events, that is, it has a premeditative nature.

In Rafeyenko’s subsequent works – the play *Mobile Waves of Being* and the novel *Petrichor, the Smell of Ground after the Rain* – the motif of orphanhood gradually changes its character. This can be attributed to the fact that the writer, gradually defining himself with his national identity and eventually adhering to the need for a “rigid” opposition of Russian and Ukrainian identities, catalyzed by the war, endows his characters with knowledge of their family (ancestral) roots. Metaphorical orphanhood as the initial state of the inhabitants of Donbas is transformed in his works into orphanhood as a literal loss of one’s closest relatives in the tragedy and trauma of war.

The play *Mobile Waves of Being* is based on the concept of a strong interpersonal connection, mostly through family: the residents of the village of dachas (summer cottages) “Blyzhni Sady” (The nearby gardens), trapped there by the Russian offensive, constantly try to contact their loved ones by phone. The characters here are not orphans in the metaphorical sense, that is, separated from the identity of their ancestors and nation. The protagonist Vasia Tsvit, on the contrary, communicates in a metaphysical way with his pro-Russian parents who remained in Donetsk, and also finds the ancestral identity lost by his family in Soviet times: since the beginning of the war, his deceased grandfather Danylo Andriyovych, an intellectual who suffered from the Soviet regime all his life as a result of not renouncing his Ukrainian identity, has been communicating with him.

In the play, connection with the family is a force that prevents the characters from falling into despair. But as the action develops, the recipient observes the gradual destruction of families, whose members – both the village residents themselves and their relatives – die as a result of Russian aggression. For example, on the first day of the full-scale invasion, in Kyiv, Mariana’s parents are killed by a rocket attack. The Kyiv resident Artem dies at the hands of the Russians while trying to take his

wife Eleonora (who could not have children for a long time and finally got pregnant after a trip to Jerusalem) from the dacha. The story of this family is a contemporary version of the biblical story of Christ's conception. However, Eleonora sees the Virgin Mary crying in the sky above her, because her child is doomed to be born an orphan (if Eleonora herself manages to survive under the occupation). It should also be noted that even an unborn child is endowed with a clear identity in the text: "Somewhere inside me now lives a little Ukrainian man or maybe a Ukrainian woman", Eleonora tells her husband in their last telephone conversation (Rafeyenko 2023b, 35).

The motif of orphanhood becomes even more tragic and less of a political metaphor in *Petrichor, the Smell of Ground after the Rain*. The protagonists Viktor, Maria, and her son Petro, who are immigrants from Donbas, are aware of their origin, identity, and political affiliation.<sup>7</sup> Patriotic but traumatized by the war, they move away from it, sometimes accepting the prejudiced attitude of residents of western Ukrainian regions towards them as a given. The central character of the work is Petro (or Petrichor, as he calls himself), whose father Oleksandr (Sashko) was a dancer from western Ukraine, who died in the war. Here, as in *Mobile Waves of Being*, we again see the updating of the conception, birth, and in this case, childhood of the son of God. Roxana Kharchuk sees the trio of protagonists as "a kind of reincarnation of the holy family in the coordinates of love, death, and immortality" (2023, n.p.). It is difficult to disagree with this, because the allusions to the birth of God are numerous here: the name Maria, Petro's birth from a "godlike" father (it is not for nothing that in Maria's psychonarration Sashko is constantly likened to the image of the dancing Vishnu), as well as his extremely early adulthood, exceptional wisdom, and prophetic gift. Especially since here, as in the Gospel cycle, there are connotations of a redemptive sacrifice that must be made for the sake of a better future.

The future is essentially blocked for Viktor and Maria, because their mental state makes it impossible for them to adequately perceive reality. Both experience the same trauma: the loss of a loved one in the war and the fact that as a result of circumstances they themselves become murderers. They both refuse to believe in the death of their beloved, and Maria also "confuses the dead with the living": she considers her son Petro dead, and her beloved Sashko alive. The boy takes responsibility for saving his mother and returning her to the world of reality and feels that her future fate is connected with Viktor, so Petro sets out together with his accomplices, the toys Hedgehog, Pink Monkey and Hare, to save both adults.

Petro's healing of traumatized adults in the structure of the novel plot involves two components: 1) recognition and narrativization of the trauma by the traumatized; 2) Petro's sacrifice (his suicidal leap out of the window) to refute his mother's picture of the world and prove that, while he was alive, Sashko was still dead, and the mother must come to terms with the death of her husband and live on. Finally, such inverted logic of sacrifice (after all, in times of war, adults mostly die so that children can survive) completely resonates with the Christological myth and aims to bring at least a particle of hope and optimism into the vision of the future of the characters and readers: "War is a time when children die so that their parents can live. We will definitely meet again someday. But now, Maria, I will lift you up" (Rafeyenko 2023c,

220). Petrichor, as the incarnation of an orphaned child of God, performs a ritual of atonement for the sake of saving his loved ones and – on a symbolic level – a world drowning in violence.

## CONCLUSION

The representation of trauma and its healing in Volodymyr Rafeyenko's wartime works has a certain logic, presumably due to the author's own worldview changes. In his novel from the beginning of the war (*The Length of Days*), the writer primarily reflects on the trauma of his forced relocation, resorting to the motif of orphanhood as a metaphor for Ukraine's rejection of Donbas. Rafeyenko demonstrates the lack of proper remediation of past traumas of Ukrainians in the cultural memory of the region, and the rupture of the connection between generations as a result of the policies of the Soviet and local post-Soviet regimes.

In the writer's subsequent works (*Mondegreen: Songs of Death and Love*, *Mobile Waves of Being*, and *Petrichor, the Smell of the Earth after the Rain*), we observe the gradual restoration of the lost connection and the launch of the remediation process, under the conditions of which cultural memory begins to function properly, to become a guarantee of the resilience of Ukrainians in the ongoing war. However, Rafeyenko's writing in this period acquires a more pronounced traumatic style. In his wartime prose, Rafeyenko, like most other Ukrainian writers, conveys much more sharply connection of the past and future as explication of remediations and premediations. At the same time the writer records the material of memory extracted from a mysterious hiding place and looks into the future, marked by this memory. It is natural that as a result of the traumas experienced (his own and those of his ancestors) and the foreseeable events, the writer's protagonists constantly balance on a fine line between normality and madness. Precisely because of this, however, they resolve fundamentally unsolvable problems, thus giving the reader hope.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan considers fiction as a component of the media system, defining the latter as 1) a channel or system of information, communication, or entertainment; and 2) the material or technical means of artistic expression (2004, 16).
- <sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Ukrainian and Russian language are by present author.
- <sup>3</sup> If the novel *The Length of Days* still has a palpable postmodernist playful element, akin to the style of the writer's previous Russian-language works (such as *Demon Dekarta* [Descartes' Demon, 2014], *Moskovkij divertisment* [Moscow Divertimento, 2011]), then the artist's subsequent Ukrainian-language works are distinctly metamodernist – both in worldview and style. See Grebeniuk 2023, 49–53.
- <sup>4</sup> As Yaroslav Polishchuk aptly observed regarding these characters, “[a]ll three are exponents of mixed identities: Gredis is a “Lithuanian who has never been to Lithuania”, spent his entire life in Z and was completely assimilated, Veresaiev is a Russian, but with an atypical pedigree, Liza is a Jewish woman by origin, raised in a foster family in Moscow” (2018, 9). That is, in the novel *The Length of Days*, Rafeyenko is still trying to undermine the idea of “rigid identities.”
- <sup>5</sup> It is not for nothing that researchers of the novel *Mondegreen* pay special attention to the name of the protagonist, because the biblical angel Gabriel has the function of connecting the profane world and

the afterlife (this significance of Haba's name is pointed out, in particular, by Andryczyk 2022; Tarku 2023, and others works).

- <sup>6</sup> Olena Romanenko considers this image to be rooted in totemistic ideas, that is, symbolic for the protagonist as the personification of his lineage (2022, 181).
- <sup>7</sup> Yaroslav Polishchuk draws attention to the fact that the older protagonists of the work represent the “last Soviet generation” (2024, 117), which needs a radical change in identity and affirmation in it.

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