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Emergence and development of the self-help genre in American literature

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Abstract: This article will thoroughly explore the main reasons behind the emergence of self-help literature in American literary world. It mainly focuses on the historical, cultural, social and economic causes for the origin of this genre. It is widely believed that this genre will be developed by the Puritan ethics, American dream, capitalism, psychological views and the development of publishing industry. The research presents that the reasons for the spreading of self-help literature are highly connected with each other and till now it has maintained its influence on a global scale.

Key words: self-help literature, American literature, individualism, American dream, Puritan ethics, psychology, publishing industry, capitalism.

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Introduction

The term self-help owned long term history rather than it was expected. According to the Oxford Dictionary, this word was initially used in the 1830s as a notion related to law and considered as self-assistance which refer to solve problems rather than waiting for someone else's aid, especially in court. Afterwards, this term became widespread and used to express different new meanings, such as expressing the notion of self-sufficiency in economics which matches state's movement or self-care in psychology. It is clear from the examples that, this term has been understood and used differently in various contexts. Indeed, different variations exist to refer to works of self-help such as: "self-improvement", "self-care", and "self-development". Although self-help books can be referred to as self-care books or self-development books, all these synonyms have their own meaning.[1] However, self-help is mainly known as a literary genre and has been crucial way of maintaining people's inner stability and accelerating their motivation. Even though some intellectuals consider this as an instrument of neoliberal governance and a tool to discipline citizens and manage populations, self-help has served another in the history, namely

[1] Coline Cales. The self-help culture withing society and the publishing industry. University of Limoges. 2020-2021. P18.

it has had curatorial function and genre's main idea had been already practical in the case of Samuel Smiles's 1859 Self-Help, the founder of the modern self-help genre and considered the bestseller of the Victorian period as well as the reason for the origin of self-help culture in America and England.

Self-help literature, or self-development literature has become an inseparable part of the American culture and literature as well as it has become the most favorite reading of Americans. This genre presents the ways of personal development, self-assessment, clarifying lifelong goals and the ways of how to achieve them to the readers. Nowadays, self-help books constitute the major part of the American book industry and are exported to the overwhelming majority of countries in the world. Among the worldwide literary scientists have been conducting research on the evolution of this genre, particularly American professor Beth Blum has been investigating self-help discourse and noted her views on her recent book The Self Compulsion. According to her, self-help's seemingly indissoluble association with American nationalism is largely due to the influence of Benjamin Franklin, widely viewed as the grandfather of the field. Indeed, it will come as a surprise to precisely no one that Franklin created one of the earliest prototypes of the Western self-help manual. [2]

Methods

This research conducts a qualitative and historical analysis. It investigates the major reasons that laid the foundation for the emergence of this genre in American literary world. The main sources consist of American self-help texts, notable works by authors such as Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Smiles. In addition to this, scholarly articles, historical studies and worldwide investigations on this topic were thoroughly reviewed. The analysis mainly concentrates on finding out and clarifying the causes of the genre's origin, development and popularity.

Results

The emergence of self-help literature in America depends on several factors. First and foremost, historical factors, such as religious reform movement called puritanism which happened in the 16th and 17th centuries profoundly shaped American literature, with writers using literary works as a device for religious and moral instruction rather than just entertainment. The reason for this is all literary works were written for the honor of the God and the church. Thus, writers began to take the personal values into consideration as well as wrote books for fostering self-reliance and moral development. At that period the ethos of Puritans was "God helps those who help themselves" and initial puritan writings, such as sermons instructed readers on how to lead a life in a moral way like contemporary self-help books guide to ethical behavior and personal growth. Hard work and discipline were considered as an integral part in Puritans' life. Therefore, they paid more attention to the moral conduct, thus the main topic of their literary works was about working on personal behavior, self-development and focuses on reading Bible to obtain moral features.

The puritan influence and its inner psychology pave the way for individualism that was the movement which turned into official cultural notion in XIX century. Alexis de Tocqueville made use of the official cultural notion of individualism as the main feature of America. As he said, Americans always relied on their power and this was the new social event. The development of individualism directly leaded to the birth of self-help literature. The ideology that success is the result of personal initiative or reaching success through hard work has its roots in Puritan values. These concepts were first widely propagated by Samuel Smiles by his "Self-help" and this book popularized the individualistic outlook and Puritan ethics. Moreover, the rise of individualism made a room for the emergence of another influential cultural ideology – the American dream. Being closely connected to the ethos of individualism, American dream strengthened the idea that

[2] Beth Blum. The Self-help Compulsion. Searching for advice in modern literature. Columbia University Press, New York 2020. P 24.

personal effort leads to enormous success. It proposes freedom and equality for everyone who work hard and have the desire to succeed. The term was first coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931, that was defined as a social order where all can reach their full potential regardless of their birth or social position.

In the development of self-help literature, not only cultural or religious, but also economic factors, particularly Capitalistic economical system played an important role. In XIX century, in the Western countries and America as capitalism have accelerated people had to rely on personal initiative for their social and economic achievements. In capitalistic society, the solid rivalry fueled the whole nation to find the ways of gaining prosperity and to maximize their skills and opportunities. This demand matched the main topics of self-help: financial success, career development, effective time management. Thus, capitalistic ideology supported the notions like self-made man, namely person will earn big fortune with the help of hard work and reach economic freedom and social status.

Psychology was shaped as an independent field of study in the late 19th century. At that period the psychologists, such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Alfred Adler tried to interpret human psychology, motivation, customs and behavior. Their theories attracted the whole public and directly influenced the emergence of self-help. Then the scientific basics of the possibility of spiritual shift appeared and personal development conception owned scientific terms, such as self-improvement, self-actualization. The belief that humans can moderate and improve their lifestyles had become widespread. As people's interest grew towards human psychology, the demand for self-help books also increased.

Publishing industry also played significant role in the origin and development of this genre by both nurturing its initial growth and by later enabling its huge boom through digital self-publishing platforms. In the Victorian era the industrial revolution and the growth of liberalism paved the way for the market for guides on personal improvement. Besides that, cheaper books began to be published from the 19th century and printing books also became quite cheaper. Additionally, the journals and newspapers which were suitable for the whole public appeared. As a result, these factors turned the self-help into public production. Publishing houses started to consider the self-help books as a best-selling genre and promoted the trade of this kind of books. Furthermore, publishing companies spread the psychological trainings and views around the world by wrapping them suitable for public, easy to grab the meaning and filled with practical guidance. That is why, psychology supported proved the self-help from scientific point of view, publishing industry popularized this genre economically and culturally.

Urbanization is also one of the main factors lead to the emergence of self-help genre in American society. The massive urban growth can create greater poverty, with local authorities unable to support with communal services for the whole public. Besides that, due to the industrialization migrants needed motivation to overcome life challenges and to relieve the stress in the hustle and bustle of the city.

Discussion

The findings of this work shows that the origin of the self-help genre in American literature was not the result of solitary factor or event but rather the outcome of an interconnected sequence of historical, cultural, economic and intellectual forces. The research provide that Puritanism, individualism and American dream paved the ideological way which self-help genre was built. These values fostered self-assistance, moral responsibility and the self-belief which remained its importance and central principles of self-help discourse today.

The discussion also emphasizes the consistency between early religious books and modern self-help manuals. While sermons in Puritanism aimed at moral obligations, contemporary self-help books highlight psychological health and personal growth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, throughout the centuries self-help genre has evolved and still maintaining its aim and significance to help readers to realize their true self. From the Bible to best-seller books, the meaning and purpose have always remained the same. Its emergence and rapid development in American literature are the results of complicated connection between cultural, economic, psychological and intellectual forces. The rise of psychology as an independent field of study supported this literature with methodological and theoretical foundation. They shaped people's everyday life habits, fostered goal-setting, emotional health and personal growth. Initial impacts of Puritanism and American dream emphasized self-assistance and was the reason for the introduction of this genre into the American literary world. Equally significant was the role of publishing industry, which popularized the commercial potential of self-help literature in American literary market. Technological advances in publishing, the expansion of mass media and decreasing of book prices enabled publishers to turn the self-help books into trading tools. Overall, the origins of this genre in American literature showed how deeply social changes, economic triggers shaped the nation's belief in self-help literature. Absolutely, self-help genre will be going to continue as it shapes the continuous commitment to personal development, realizing true self of American people.

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