

INTERPRETACJE

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A Historical Examination of the Self-Help Book Genre: From Ancient Wisdom to Modern Movements

Historyczne spojrzenie na gatunek poradnika. Od starożytności do współczesności

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Abstract

The self-help book genre, encompassing works that offer practical guidance for personal growth and improvement, boasts a surprisingly long and rich history. While the term itself emerged in the 19th century, the underlying concept of sharing knowledge for self-betterment stretches back millennia. The present article delves into the evolution of the self-help genre, exploring its ancient roots, transformations through the ages, and its enduring popularity in the modern world.

Though excluded from traditional literary canons and lacking aspirations for such inclusion, self-help literature merits scholarly attention due to its undeniable cultural impact as well as its remarkable expansion as a socioeconomic phenomenon. The present paper attempts at establishing the birth of the genre and its growth throughout centuries to the form of a popular culture phenomenon which can be observed today. Due to the limitation of the paper, the text will constitute a historical overview of the forms, topics and social and political phenomena connected to the genre.

The history of the genre and the roots of its popularity are closely attached to the elements of didactic literature whose origins might be sought in the tradition of orally passed-on advice which existed within the smallest elements that shape community, such as the transmission of folk and practical wisdom across generations. As for the written form of providing advice, the origins of the genre can be traced back to ancient civilizations, where philosophical texts and religious scriptures often contained guidance on how to live a fulfilling life. In Mesopotamia, clay tablets dating back to 1800 BCE offer instructions on ethical conduct and good governance. The oldest written progenitors of today's self-help genre could be *Sebayts* – a genre of Egyptian pharaonic literature aimed at teaching and giving instructions. Ptahhotep is believed to be the author of the most famous sebayt, *The Maxims of Ptahotep* also known as the *Maxims of Good Discourse* (circa 2800 BC), is written in the form of a letter offering paternal advice on morality and self-control¹. In Europe, ancient stoics shared their ethical advice on achieving *eudaimonia* which is a state of well-being, welfare, happiness or flourishing (Boardman 1991). In Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* (*Art of love*), in the form of an instructional elegy, he taught men how to seduce and keep a lover, and women how to seduce men; in *Remedia Amoris* (*The cure for love*), in the form of a poem, he bequeathed the advice on how to avoid being hurt or how to fall out of love. Another didactic poem by Ovid, *Medicamina Faciei Femineae* defended the use of cosmetics by women and provided instructions for some facial treatments. Ancient Roman prose stylist, Marcus Tullius Cicero, created, among other treatises *De Officiis* which presents his philosophy on living ethically and responsibly. Another example of didactic literature is the Bible, as it provides lessons on morality in the form of letters, narratives, parables, instructions (commandments), cautionary stories or prophecies. McGee states that some social observers perceive the Bible as the oldest existing self-improvement book (McGee 2005: 5). These early examples highlight a core principle of the self-help genre: the transmission of wisdom from elders to younger generations.

In the Middle Ages some works were produced on the subject of human conduct which can be considered precursors of self-help books. The purpose of such a volume was to guide the individual towards proper behaviour and educate particular elite groups on social norms. The work entitled *De arte honeste amandi* also known as *De amore* (*About love* or *The Art of Courtly Love*) by Andreas

¹ Along with another example of sebayts, *Instructions of Kagemni* written by Kagemni, the works were translated into English by Battiscombe G. Gunn at the beginning of the 20th century and are still in print or available online (The instruction of Ptah-Hotep: online).

Capellanus in the late 12th century was a source of thoughts on love, marriage and relationships and it seems to exhibit a strong dependence on the structure and themes explored in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* (Ousby 1995: 214). Until the peak of Western Renaissance literature, the textbooks belonging to *Mirrors of princes* or *Mirrors for princes* (in Latin: *specula principum* genre) were popular didactic political writings. They instructed kings and inexperienced rulers on behaviour and maintaining and controlling power. The European Renaissance witnessed a renewed emphasis on self-fashioning, fueled in part by the invention of the printing press after 1455. This new era of knowledge dissemination allowed learned individuals to readily share their expertise with society, leading to a surge in educational and self-help materials. Manuals on etiquette, courtesy and social graces flourished (e.g. *The Book of the Courtier* written by Baldassare Castiglione from 1528), reflecting a growing interest in personal refinement. Puritan minister Cotton Mather's 1710 work, *Bonifacius: Essays to Do Good*, arguably represents an early version of the self-help genre (Starker 1989: 14).

The tendency of religious leaders to publish works aimed at teaching moral guidance to the faithful may have been a prototype to secular self-help books: 'Benjamin Franklin, born to a Puritan father and raised as an Episcopalian, attended a Presbyterian church for a period of time, then rejected Protestant Christianity altogether in favor of Deism (Lindenburger 2013: 26). Benjamin Franklin's *The Way to Wealth*, published in 1757, is often credited as the first secular self-help book. The work advocates for individual wealth accumulation, but it is worth noting that America functioned primarily as an agricultural society during this period. A further contribution to the nascent self-help genre is Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*, published from the 1730s onwards. This work, enjoying remarkable commercial success for decades, disseminated Franklin's aphorisms on thrift, farming, industry, time and money management, but also on personal conduct e.g. friendship, honesty or building local communities, as he believed it was supposed to not only produce economic benefits but also social well-being. Aphorisms such as "Would you live with ease, do what you ought, and not what you please" and "Early to bed, and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise" transcended the almanac's format, becoming widely repeated and influencing generations to come. The fact that the phrases have become commonly used proverbs or sayings until today shows their significant social influence. The American Declaration of Independence (1776) ushered in an era of immense potential. Free from the stifling traditions and oppression of Europe, the colonists were compelled to work together to create the groundwork for their new nation. It no longer mattered where or to whom a person was born. What mattered was hard

work and persistence which made freedom, success and justice available to everyone in the society. The Americans began their quest for paradise, and this quest was closely connected to the idea of the American Dream² which is deeply rooted in the Declaration of Independence which fundamentally states that ‘all people are created equal’ with the inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. However, the idea of the Dream itself depends on its definition and this has been changing throughout the decades.

The contemporary form and style of self-help literature is believed to have started in 1791, straight after the publishing of Franklin’s *Autobiography*, which was evidence for the Enlightenment movement (Butler-Bowdon 2003: 145). The endeavor for self-enhancement combines the Enlightenment notion of human potential for improvement with the Puritan practice of examining one’s own moral conduct. As VanSpanckeren (2007: 16) put it, in his works ‘Franklin tried to help other ordinary people become successful by sharing his insights and initiating a characteristically American genre – the self-help book’. Effing (2011) provided the classification of goal orientation shifts in the history of self-help. The first phase lasted from the early 18th to the late 19th century. Its main goal was to propagate Protestant ethics oriented around hard work and persistence. At that time, success was equated with the respect earned by the middle class. Authors writing during this period include the aforementioned Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Smiles who was a Scottish reformer and had a tremendous impact on the Victorian ethos. At a time when many people were moving from rural areas to cities in search of work, Smiles emphasized that personal qualities and efforts were crucial for achieving prosperity and social mobility. His ideas became the foundation for many social and economic movements that promoted self-help, education, and individual achievements as a means to improve living conditions.

² According to the Etymology Dictionary (*Online etymology dictionary*: online), the term was first coined by James Truslow Adams (1878–1949), an American writer and historian, who in his book *The Epic of America* (1931) defined it as follows: ‘The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position’ (Adams 2001: 214–215). However, the idea of the American Dream can be traced back to the late 16th century or the 17th century when saw a surge in English promotion aimed at convincing people to move to the colonies. These efforts, as historian George Samuel Scouten argues, laid the foundation for three enduring and interconnected myths about America: a land overflowing with resources, a place brimming with opportunity, and a nation destined for greatness (Scouten, 2002).

Smiles' book, *Self Help; with Illustrations of Character and Conduct* (1859), credited with coining the name of the self-help genre, achieved such popularity that critics called it "the bible of mid-Victorian liberalism" (Cohen, Major 2004: 611). In his book, Smiles promoted the idea of thrift and the importance of self-education which can move one 'from poverty to social eminence' (Smiles 1956: 70–71) and that might have been the reason for giving this specific name to the non-fiction self-improvement genre. By 1904, the book sold over a quarter of a million copies (Sinnema 2002: vii) and fitted the process of industrialization outside Britain very well, especially in the US where people sought for opportunities in harmony with their Protestant belief in self-reliance. In his other writings, Benjamin Franklin emphasized Puritan ideals like hard work, self-examination, frugality, and virtue. These qualities, according to Franklin, held more weight than previously valued factors like education, wealth, or noble lineage. This focus on character suggests that Franklin believed an individual's potential and success hinged on their inner strength, ultimately contributing to societal development.

A new model of success emerged in the middle of the 19th century due to the process of industrialization which required people to work hard in mines or factories, thus it was difficult for them to develop. Therefore, the new idea of success could be achieved only by those who had strong willpower, were confident and ready to take risks. Success in society increasingly hinged on qualities of personality that were seen as necessary to acquire riches, rather than traditional moral virtues (Cawelti 1965: 184).

The second strand lasted approximately from the late 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. Its focus is reflected in the works of transcendentalists³ and creators of the New Thought movement. One of the most prominent representatives of the trend was Ralph Waldo Emerson. The publication of his essay, *Self-Reliance* in 1841, along with his philosophical ideas, laid the groundwork for the movements known as New Thought and Positive Thinking. The essay is considered to be one of the 'key pieces of writing that helped carve the ethic of American individualism, and forms part of the intellectual bedrock of today's self-help writers' (Butler-Bowdon 2003: 127). Bearing in mind the fact that America was a vast and diverse country at the time, we can assume that depending on the region certain ideas were more or less observable. In terms of Emerson's philosophical

³ In the mid-19th century (particularly the 1830s and 40s), New England birthed a new wave of literary ideas known as Transcendentalism. This movement arose as a critique of the existing cultural and social norms. Leading figures included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, alongside many others like Elizabeth Peabody and James Freeman Clarke (*Transcendentalism. American movement*: online).

thought, the expressed conviction is that anyone can do anything and achieve anything with mental focus. Indeed, it is a feature of personal inner magnetism that may enable us to convince, influence or in some cases dominate others. The notion of success is equated with financial wealth. The main representatives of this particular strand are Dale Carnegie and Napoleon Hill (Effing 2015: 29).

The early 1940s was the time of Dale Carnegie's phenomenal success with *How to Win Friends and Influence People* in 1936 and, during the following year, Napoleon Hill published *Think and Grow Rich*. The former book, later updated in 1981, has been translated into 58 languages and constitutes one of the first best-selling self-help books in history⁴. Carnegie shares his strategies for effective communication along with hints of how to bringing people around to one's way of thinking. In spite of the fact that this self-help manual was written almost a century ago, it still remains hugely popular today among people working in the field of business. In the book, Carnegie downgrades higher education giving room for a more egoistic culture by placing the reader in the center and insisting that they focus on themselves. Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* is one of the most influential financial self-help books worldwide. It has been expanded into a best-selling series. He formulated a list of 13 principles for achieving goals such as increased economic status and career development. Some other authors of self-help books concentrated on positive thinking, personal magnetism, where success was equivalent to gaining wealth (Effing 2015).

The third phase began approximately in the 1950s and lasted till the mid 20th century. Self-help books increasingly incorporated elements of popular psychology. There was a rapidly rising trend of learning and using techniques in order to acquire Positive Mental Attitude (PMA)⁵. Each person is believed to be responsible for their success which is in this strand equated with self-fulfillment. Among best-selling authors here was Norman Vincent Peale with *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952), which, like Carnegie's successful book, is packed with stories and anecdotes about people who achieved a lot and their message could be simplified into one slogan 'believe in yourself'. McGee (2005) also notices the difference in

⁴ It sold over 30 million copies still holding the title of a bestseller at amazon.com and in 2020 it held the 8th position on the list of "The Top Checkouts of all Time" at The New York Public Library (DaleCarnegie: online).

⁵ The term in psychology is placed under the umbrella term of positive psychology. The idea itself was introduced by Napoleon Hill in his book *Think and Grow Rich*, however the author never used the term itself in the book. PMA is about internal power having a real influence on the external factors, it comprises positive characteristics such as optimism, courage, hope, integrity, faith among others (*Positive attitude*: online).

the overall focus – in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century success was measured with different sets of features than in the late twentieth century. First, there was the pursuit of success in terms of well-being: wealth, social status and power. The late twentieth century began the pursuit of self-fulfillment, itself being such an elusive term that ‘individuals can continuously pursue shifting and subjective criteria for success’ (McGee 2005: 19).

The late 20th century was the beginning of Effing’s fourth strand in which the focus changed from positive thinking and self-fulfillment to finding one’s inner peace and moving aside from the materialistic world. This was the trend which followed the practices of the East. In the 1960s the need for Zen practices and meditation popularized by the pop culture was mirrored in the self-help titles. It was a time when common forms of bad behavior were relabeled (for example, alcoholism was labeled as a disease) and the 12-step programs to overcome such afflictions bloomed. The 1960s was the time of ‘the tremendous growth in self-help publishing and in self-improvement culture’ (McGee 2005: 12), and its roots are to be found in postmodernism itself as well as in the fact that it paralleled the destabilization of the labor market and disrupted the functioning of the average family. The rise of the ideas behind so called *New Thought* came from an attempt to answer the citizens’ anxiety brought on by all the social and economic changes connected with rapid industrial development which affected all Americans’ lives. At that time, due to the social situation, Americans needed a therapeutical literature which aimed at belief reinforcement and metaphysical healing. Among the emerging bestsellers were: *The Road Less Traveled* by Morgan Scott Peck (1978) which conveys a very important message to delay gratification and understand that life is difficult; *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey (1989) which promotes fairness, respect and integrity as well as self-discipline. The 20th century saw self-help literature diversify beyond its Puritan roots. While books like *The Road Less Traveled* echoed traditional values of hard work and discipline, a new wave emerged offering quick fixes and techniques for personal problems. This shift reflects a broader societal move away from character-building ethics towards achieving success. Experts like Covey and Merrill highlight a clear distinction between pre-industrial self-help focused on virtues and the more results-oriented approach of the 20th century (Covey, Merrill 2003: 181).

It might be assumed that the phenomenon of self-help books is predominantly an American one with rather rare accents from abroad. While most of the books were written by Americans, there is a significant group of authors of a different origin. Australian authors include: Nick Vujicic (*Life Without Limits, Unstoppable: The Incredible Power of Faith in Action*), Gerald Glaskin (*Windows*

of *The Mind: The Christos Experience*), Rhonda Byrne (*Secret, The Magic, The Power*), Rob Gerrand (*Rewrite Your life, Rewrite Your Relationship!*), Miranda Kerr (*Treasure Yourself: Power Thoughts for My Generation*), Walter Mikac (*The Circle of Life: Unlock Your Courage*), Allan Pease (*Signals: How To Use Body Language for Power, Success and Love*), Patric Wanis (*Get What You Want*); Canadian writer Brian Tracy (*Eat That Frog, Kiss That Frog, Change Your Thinking, Change Your Life*). There are also other authors who have their origins in non-English speaking countries but write self-help books in English like, for instance, Eckhart Tolle (*The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment, A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*), a German author with British education, or the Mexican writer Don Miguel Ruiz. The common ground for the most popular books is the English language which enabled the transfer of ideas from Europe to America. Among the most popular American authors are: Dale Carnegie (*How To Win Friends And Influence People, How To Stop Worrying And Start Living*), Stephen Covey (*The 7 Habits Of Highly Effective People, The 7 Habits Of Highly Effective Families, Great Work Great Career*), Napoleon Hill (*Think And Grow Rich, The Law Of Success In Sixteen Lessons*), Malcolm Gladwell (*Talking To Strangers: What We Should Know About The People We Don't Know*), Louise Hay (*You can heal your life*), Deepak Chopra (*Quantum Healing*), Timothy Ferris (*The 4-hour Workweek*), Norman Vincent Peale (*The Power Of Positive Thinking*), Morgan Scott Peck (*The Road Less Travelled*), David D. Burns (*Feeling Great, When Panic Attacks*), Og Mandino (*The Greatest Salesman In The World*), Sean Covey (*The 7 Habits Of Highly Effective Teens*) among others.

Self-help literature, though often excluded from traditional literary canons, has demonstrably earned its place in scholarly discourse. The article attempted at establishing its historical roots which trace back to ancient wisdom passed down through generations, with the emergence of written guidance appearing in various civilizations. From the didactic works of Mesopotamia and philosophical texts of stoics to the aphorisms of Benjamin Franklin and the self-improvement manuals of the Renaissance, self-help has consistently served as a conduit for transmitting knowledge and fostering personal growth. The genre's evolution reflects the changing societal landscape. Early versions emphasized moral conduct, hard work, and religious values. The rise of the American Dream fueled a focus on individual achievement and social mobility. The 20th century witnessed a shift towards self-fulfillment, positive thinking, and personal well-being, with influences from psychology and Eastern practices. Today, self-help remains a flourishing industry, encompassing a vast array of topics and catering to diverse needs. Its undeniable impact can be measured by its commercial success and the millions it

reaches through books, seminars, and motivational programs. While critical voices may exist, the genre's enduring popularity speaks to its ability to resonate with a fundamental human desire for self-improvement and a better life.

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