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TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

**“Trust Thyself” and Self-help Literature: Emersonian “Self-Reliance” in J. Peterson’s *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*.**

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## ABSTRACT

Self-help literature is currently experiencing a flourishing in popularity, especially in the United States. Nevertheless, this genre suffers from a bad reputation in academic circles. This is why there are not many studies approaching it from a literary perspective. This thesis aims to establish a comparative relationship between the emblematic essay “Self-Reliance” by Ralph Waldo Emerson and the controversial self-help book *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* by Jordan B. Peterson. The main purpose is to explore whether one of the most canonical and well-studied pieces of American literature influenced self-help literature through Peterson’s bestseller. This will help to understand the phenomenon that represents the increasing popularity of the genre in the United States. With this objective in mind, the indirect influence of Nietzsche as an intermediate figure will also be taken into consideration.

**Keywords: Self-help, Emerson, Peterson, Self-reliance, Rules, Comparative, United States, Nietzsche.**

## RESUMEN

La literatura de autoayuda atraviesa un periodo de gran esplendor, especialmente en los Estados Unidos. Sin embargo, este género ha gozado de escasa reputación en el plano académico, por lo que no son muchos los estudios que lo abordan desde una perspectiva literaria. Este trabajo busca establecer una relación comparativa entre el emblemático ensayo “La Confianza en Uno Mismo” de Ralph Waldo Emerson y el polémico libro de autoayuda *12 Reglas Para Vivir: Un Antídoto al Caos* de Jordan B. Peterson. El objetivo es esclarecer si una de las obras más canónicas y estudiadas de la literatura estadounidense ha logrado influir en la literatura de autoayuda a través del superventas de Peterson. Esto contribuirá a entender el fenómeno que supone la gran popularidad del género en los Estados Unidos. Para ello también se tendrá en cuenta la influencia indirecta a través de la figura intermediaria que supone Nietzsche.

**Palabras clave: Autoayuda, Emerson, Peterson, confianza en uno mismo, reglas, comparativa, Estados Unidos, Nietzsche.**

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# 1- INTRODUCTION

It can be challenging to find a modern library that does not dedicate entire sections to what is known as “self-help” literature. Similarly, the genre seems to have achieved great success in online selling platforms, such as Amazon Books. Some reasons behind this phenomenon are social media and the increasing conversation around mental health (John, 2023). A global market report establishes that the margin of benefit for the self-help industry will reach over \$68.42 billion by 2029 (The Business Research Company, 2025). The same report states that North America can be found at the head of this growing industry (The Business Research Company, 2025). These numbers showcase how North American culture has embraced self-help literature.

A well-known figure in the genre is the Canadian therapist and writer Dr. Jordan B. Peterson. An opinion piece from the *New York Times* attributed to him the title of “the most influential public intellectual in the Western world right now” (Cowen in Brooks, 2018). More academic sources describe him as the best-known psychologist among the general public (Murphy in Wong, 2019: 83). Even though Dr. Peterson’s figure is not free from critique because of his political and social ideals, it is impossible to deny that his book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, constituted an international bestseller (Wong, 2019: 83).

Nevertheless, even if the popularity of both the self-help genre and Dr. Jordan B. Peterson seems to be a recent phenomenon, their origin may not be so. Previous works have carried out extensive research seeking the origins of self-help literature in the United States as far back in time as to the figure of Benjamin Franklin (Mur Effing, 2009: 127). Another pioneer example in the genre could be Ralph Waldo Emerson with his emblematic essay “Self-Reliance”, in which he invites the reader to “trust thyself”. This text constitutes for many the quintessential self-help manual.

Taking all of this into account, this junior thesis explores the relationship between Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay, “Self-Reliance”, and Dr. Jordan B. Peterson’s volume, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. Furthermore, it seeks to demonstrate how Emerson and his essay, almost two hundred years after its publication, continue to influence North American literature through the self-help genre. Nevertheless, it is necessary to clarify

that this essay does not aim to prove a direct influence of Emerson's work over Peterson's, but rather search for a resonance based on Julia Kristeva's notion of "intertextuality". Kristeva theorizes that texts always absorb and rewrite previous works, which results in every text being a mosaic of quotations from earlier texts. This is not due to a direct influence of a written work over the other, but due to the intrinsic relationship that exists between texts that leads to the reframing, echoing, and rewriting of previously formulated metaphors, tropes, or structures. There are these echoes what allow us to speak of literary resonance between works that do not belong to the same time period, cultural background, or ideology, like is the case of Emerson's "Self-reliance" and Peterson's *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. Even if Peterson's text does not directly quote Emerson's work, it can be read as a constant dialogue with Emerson's ideas, themes, and tropes (Elmo Raj, 2015: 77-80).

Establishing this relationship between both authors and connecting Emerson with the self-help genre might contribute to comprehending two recent phenomena in American culture. On the one hand, tracing one of the genre's possible origins could help to gain a better understanding of the popularity it has reached in recent times. On the other hand, it can contribute to making sense of how both authors and their corresponding works have influenced the society and culture of their times by making use of similar prompts.

In the past, there have been studies related to the theme that this thesis centers on. Mur Effing's work focused on the origins of Self-help in the United States. At the same time, it related the genre to the well-known idea of the "American Dream". Nevertheless, even if this work constitutes an essential piece of this thesis's bibliography, this dissertation focuses on a comparison of two specific authors and their corresponding works. Furthermore, one of these texts is posterior to the Mur Effing's publication. In addition, it is necessary to mention Wong's book review. In this work, the author mainly focuses on the psychological and social impact of Dr. Jordan Peterson's book. However, even if it results in great help for the elaboration of this thesis's theoretical framework, it does not directly address any comparative literature aspects.

The methodology used in this dissertation consists of both an analysis and a comparison. In order to carry out these, it is essential to precisely read both works: Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and Dr. Jordan B. Peterson's *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, as well as the academic literature used to elaborate the theoretical

framework and the contextualization of both authors. The bibliography will be analyzed in search of all the relevant information for the research question. This will be followed by a literary comparison of both works regarding the topics, the objectives, and the style, as well as the role of Nietzsche as a possible link between Emerson and Peterson.

Finally, regarding the structure, this junior thesis opens with a chapter providing a theoretical framework regarding the characteristics, origins, and role of Self-help literature in America. After this, the next chapter centers on the main ideas, aims, and style of both works, followed by a comparative analysis. Last but not least, the conclusion to the thesis provides the results found after carrying out this comparison.

## **2- SELF-HELP LITERATURE**

### **Defining the genre.**

It is impossible to define the genre without understanding the concept of “self-help”. Cambridge dictionary defines “self-help” as “the activity of you yourself providing what you need to help you solve a problem”. Nevertheless, if self-help is something that an individual does for himself, doubts about the exact role of self-help literature on this personal process may arise. In the short term, the main aim of self-help books is to create the necessary willingness for the reader to solve the problem they may be dealing with, change their habits or behaviors, and/or gain control over their own life (Koivunen, 2022: 468). This means that the reader has full autonomy and responsibility when it comes to the ‘improvement’ of his life, but resorts to self-help as a form of ‘authoritative assistance’ (Rimke, 2010: 62).

It can therefore be stated that the self-help genre serves as the authoritative figure readers are looking for. Nevertheless, some of the authors working behind it do not necessarily have any level of expertise in the main field of study that concerns behavior, which is Psychology. However, they seem to benefit from the reliability that the field has, unconsciously associating “self-help” with it. This association benefits the popularity of the genre, since the view of Psychology as the main source of happiness has extended over the years. As a response, it is not uncommon for people to believe they can access this happiness on their own by exercising inner work and taking responsibility over their lives, following the claims offered by the “self-help” genre (Rimke, 2010: 62-63).

It is therefore safe to claim that the average reader feels attracted by the genre with the ultimate pursuit of happiness in mind, and not necessarily because he is struggling with any mental health condition. Apart from their main goal, other data allows us to understand what tends to characterize readers of the genre. A survey demonstrated that more women than men engage with the self-help literature. Additional characteristics associated with these readers are a higher psychological awareness and a rooted desire for self-improvement (Wilson and Cash in Bergsma, 2007: 347). Culture and nationality also seem to play a part, since the popularity of the ideas related to improving oneself seems to be significantly higher in countries ruled by liberal democracies; i.e., the United

States of America, and which, coincidentally, tend to defend values like individualism and freedom (Rimke, 2010: 62).

Nevertheless, even if it can be useful to understand the average profile of the readers to comprehend the allure of the genre, it is necessary to state that self-help's thematic variety leads to a wide spectrum of readers approaching it. Actually, one of the most attractive attributes of the genre is how it can offer guidance for any possible issue that may be affecting the reader (Bergsma, 2007: 342). There are, for instance, self-help books related to love and romantic relationships, like the best seller *Women Who Love Too Much* by Robin Norwood. Some volumes focus on economic success, like *Rich Dad Poor Dad* by Robert Kiyosaki. Furthermore, several self-help books center their content around esoterism and spirituality, as with the infamous *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne.

In addition to the promises of happiness and improvement, and the thematic variety, there are further reasons for people to approach the genre. One of these is affordability, not of the books themselves, but in comparison to the cost of paying for psychotherapeutic treatment. In similar terms, people who indulge in reading self-help find it easier to integrate this habit into their everyday life instead of fitting a therapy session into their already busy schedules. It is also necessary to mention that, as there still exist stigmas around mental health conditions, and people sometimes feel ashamed about dealing with them, some readers consider that self-help literature provides them with a sense of privacy that a doctor's or therapist's consultation would not. Another, perhaps less obvious, 'supposed benefit' that attracts readers to the genre is the sense of 'excitement' it provides them with. They feel like they belong to a group of people who are willing to change their lives while they are updated with the latest bestseller everybody is talking about (Starker in Bergsma, 2007: 342).

Finally, the decision to provide such a broad genre description is not arbitrary. The heterogeneity of themes makes it challenging to define the genre according to subject matter, and its characteristics have been mostly ignored as a professional genre by the literary and discourse community (Sarig, 2005: 8). However, there seems to be a common denominator when it comes to self-help structural features that deserve to be mentioned. Self-help books tend to forthrightly describe their main points so that the content is both intelligible and suitable for the average reader (Sarig, 2005: 3). Furthermore, a complete thesis by Koay Dong Liang has raised the possibility of there being common structures,

as well as lexical and grammatical features, in the genre. Nevertheless, further research needs to be done.

### **Origins of the genre.**

Self-help literature is famous worldwide but seems to have reached special acclaim in the United States. Authors have associated the genre's popularity within American culture with the idea of the American Dream, a society marked by individualism, and the United States' history. Related to this last point, it is often pointed out how Jefferson had already claimed the right to 'pursue happiness' in the Declaration of Independence. This is something that continues to resonate with the American population more than two hundred years later (Starker in Bergsma, 2007: 347).

Some authors claim that the origin of the self-help genre is, itself, American. They point to the figure of Benjamin Franklin and his *Autobiography* as the first self-help work, as it deals with helping people achieve success (Spanckeren in Effing, 2009: 128). Continuing with the conception of the self-help genre as intrinsically American, it has also been associated with the classical American values of democracy and liberty, implying that you have the right to improve yourself and your life. It has been related to some religious ideas as well. Specifically, to puritanism and the idea that hard work leads to great results (Effing, 2009: 130).

### **Self-help during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.**

With the social and cultural transformation that the United States underwent after World War II, the self-help genre experienced a reorganization as well. Puritan ideas that defended hard work as essential for self-gratification began to share their space within the genre with the consequences of rising consumerism (Effing, 2009: 131). The new ideal American lifestyle, also known as the American Dream, associated self-improvement with economic wealth. Becoming richer became the ultimate goal of hard work, and the main indicative of life success (Lears in Effing, 2009: 130).

After the 1950s, some people started to feel dissatisfied with the discourse that claimed hard work led to high economic success. The new middle-class population found themselves working long schedules without achieving the position and wealth they were

promised (Harrington in Effing, 2009: 131). Furthermore, historically marginalized people were completely disregarded for prospering in a society that was still filled with many prejudices (Hochschild in Effing, 2009: 131). With this context in mind and understanding that people were beginning to disengage from the genre because of all the unfulfilled promises of wealth, self-help literature changed its focus. The genre started to promulgate that you could achieve success by permanently or temporarily changing your personality traits to manipulate people and situations in your favor. This was later proven to be completely counterproductive when trying to achieve happiness (Covey in Effing, 2009: 132).

After the 1980s, self-help books that addressed the connection between mind and body spiked in popularity. The discourse of these new books was no longer focused on hard work or how to obtain a higher position or social relevance, but on “wellness” as the real indicator of success and the main key to happiness. Stress was seen as the enemy of balanced health, and pseudoscientific and scientific terminology were used in these books to back such claims (Effing, 2009: 133).

The 1990s were characterized by the growth of the Internet, which at the same time caused the economic growth of several companies that were either behind the Internet or using it to promote their products or services. This new reality considerably affected the ‘self-help’ industry. In a period of fast digitalization and transformation of the market, everybody wanted the key to success and wealth, and self-help books were there to offer it (Sarig, 2005: 18).

Finally, digitalization and the reach of the internet have continued and continue to grow during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This led to the appearance of social media platforms, which became not only a way of worldwide communication and connection but also the perfect context for the origin of what is known as social media marketing (SMM). SMM allows brands to connect with users to sell and advertise their products or services (Dahikar et Futane, 2020). Self-help books also took advantage of this new way of promoting themselves, especially when the desire for ‘self-improvement’ has become a considerably popular topic in social media networks (The Business Research Company, 2025). It must be noted that the 2020 global pandemic and the consequent economic recession also contributed to the growth in sales of self-help books (Curcic, 2022).

## **Criticism.**

The self-help genre, even if popular, has not escaped criticism. It has been accused of being excessively broad. Unlike therapy, which focuses on specific approaches to individual problems, self-help books tend to offer general solutions that are unlikely to apply to people's unique circumstances (Rosen in Bergsma, 2007: 349).

Some of the most common pieces of advice that can be found in "self-help" literature can result in not-so-positive outcomes. For instance, the popular idea of "visualizing goals" that many authors defend can result in people losing awareness of the process and hardships that must be endured to obtain them. Something that can be argued to be unrealistic and counterproductive (Paul in Bergsma, 2007: 349).

Another frequent premise among self-help literature is the "optimistic" approach suggested by positive psychology. This branch of psychology argues that keeping a positive mindset is essential to coping with any possible life struggle. Nevertheless, experts critic that this general statement can have a negative impact on patients who are struggling with anxiety disorders (Norem and Chang in Bergsma, 2007: 350).

Therefore, it can be stated that most of the criticism that the genre has received from experts is regarding its overly general ideas on something as complex and nuanced as mental health. Nevertheless, there have been voices negatively pointing out self-help books from a social, cultural, and political perspective. As previously stated, the genre of self-help is rooted in individualism and autonomy. It claims that individuals can change their reality by themselves. This removes any responsibility from the Government and places it all in the citizens who must, individually, behave accordingly to the norms and expectations if they want to improve their life. This is where criticism comes from, questioning whether everything is a matter of the self. Critics argue that some institutions and injustices are definitely not under the control of individuals and can negatively impact someone's journey to a 'better life' (Rimke, 2010: 62).

### **3- COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

#### **3.1. Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance".**

##### **Main ideas in Emerson's "Self-Reliance".**

One of the first ideas defended in this essay deals with giving yourself credibility. Emerson reflects in his work on how we all should trust in what we believe. We should give more credibility to the truth that resonates within us. This sometimes seems like a hard task, because we constantly elevate the works of those we consider wiser than us, and we tend to think our thoughts are not as valuable. Nevertheless, usually those people we admire for their wisdom are those who decide to speak their truth, and if we fail to do the same, someone else will come and firmly state what once crossed our mind: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius" (Emerson, 1841: 1). Emerson also claims that many people live their lives seeking forgiveness while they are afraid to walk straight and proudly, as well as of defending their personal ideas. Instead, they limit themselves by deciding to follow what others have stated as the truth. By approaching life in this way, mankind does not live in the present but in the past and future. They live based on the words they have heard and expect to hear from others, ignoring that God directly speaks to them through the truth they find within: "Man is timid and apologetic [...] postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present [...] When we have new perception, we shall gladly disburden the memory of its hoarded treasures as old rubbish" (Emerson, 1841: 11). According to Emerson's perspective, being able to give yourself credibility is not only an essential characteristic of 'genius' minds, but also necessary for living an authentic life. This is why he decides to reflect further on the importance of living following your own unique nature, and not follow the paths that have been predisposed by others, as they may limit you. A man must understand that there are limitless possibilities that will be revealed to him if he acts according to his unique nature. He is capable of doing unimaginable things with the experiences he is unaware he has collected, and everything he needs will be revealed when necessary. But for this revelation, he must have enough courage to act authentically. Furthermore, if he does not act according to this, a man shall not obtain peace within his life: "The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he

knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried” (Emerson, 1841: 2).

For Emerson, people who are not authentic to themselves are easy to predict, as they adopt the same old and ‘dead’ beliefs that have been repeated numerous times before. They hide their true self under all those statements, and even if they end up being predictable, it is hard to understand who they truly are as they have let others establish that for them: “[...] under all these screens I have difficulty to detect the precise man that you are. And, of course, so much force is withdrawn from your proper life” (Emerson, 1841: 5). After stating that people tend to fear acting authentically Emerson follows by praising courageous behavior. He insists on the importance of facing the reality that God has put you in, which includes the social and cultural circumstances you are destined to live in. This is something that admirable people from previous generations and from all around the globe have done, something that, without a doubt, takes courage and trust in oneself. Emerson claims that this is mandatory for every grown man to advance towards their fate, following God’s commands. This includes facing the darkest side of life, chaos: “And we are now men [...], obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark” (Emerson, 1841: 2). Emerson continues to address why people fear their authenticity, alluding that growing up is another of the reasons behind it. For him, there is something admirable that we should all learn from young people. He sees them as radically honest and free from conformity. They are able to express themselves in the most authentic and free manner. This is something that Emerson laments people losing as they grow older. It is like some way of self-consciousness corrupts our wild spirits and obligates us to conform to what other people expect of us: “The nonchalance of boys [...] is the healthy attitude of human nature. [...] But the man is, as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness” (Emerson, 1841: 3).

Taking into consideration the struggles men face when it comes to embracing their authentic selves, Emerson invites the readers to adopt a non-conforming attitude. Emerson believes conformity is the consequence of life in society, which allows humans to unite for a common good, but at the expense of our individuality and capacity to trust ourselves. It is important not to assume everything that society has told us is true through traditions and norms, but to have some capacity for inner reflection on those issues. Those things that have traditionally been accepted as truth should not be accepted by you if they contradict what your true self believes in. You have the right not to conform: “No law

can be sacred to me but that of my nature” (Emerson, 1841: 4). Emerson seems to be conscious of the necessity of living in society, even if this seems to cost to many what is more sacred: their independence. However, he says that isolating from the world is not the only way to remain true to your highest values. A man’s character is actually proven when he must face others and still proves himself loyal to what he believes to be true: “[...] The perfect man is who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (Emerson, 1841: 5). Furthermore, the solitude Emerson speaks about is a “spiritual” solitude. When you come to be surrounded by people, always make sure you keep your soul clean from their messiness, do not allow them to corrupt you with what they say or act like. Remember your true values: “But your isolation must not be mechanical, but spiritual [...] keep thy state, come not into their confusion” (Emerson, 1841: 13).

In order to not conform to the reality men have been imposed to live, they must accept the painful truth. According to Emerson, the only truth is the one that aligns with someone's nature. This has often been negatively judged, as we have adopted a strict idea of what is wrong and what is bad. What seems to be right is to fight for your country, care for the poor, and do what institutions want you to do. Nevertheless, Emerson claims that he must state his truth and transgress what has been labelled as good and bad, even if it is something that does not resonate with the majority, who are often brainwashed by an imposed ‘philanthropy’: “I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions. [...] I ought to go upright and vital and speak the rude truth in all ways” (Emerson, 1841: 4). Emerson believes that sometimes these ideas of good and bad keep people in a perpetual necessity to redeem themselves. They do not indulge in philanthropy because it is what their soul tells them to do, but because they feel like they owe to act virtuously in exchange for their existence. This idea limits people from living, and according to Emerson, living should be the main goal: “My life is for itself and not for a spectacle. [...] I cannot consent to pay for a privilege where I have intrinsic right” (Emerson, 1841: 5). Basically, Emerson states that the biggest compromise a man has with himself is to stay true, no matter how uncomfortable this may be for some people. It is not something that a right man does to offend, but a requirement of honesty. It is incoherent not to speak the truth, as truth is nature, and nature will always reveal itself: “It is alike your interest, and mine, and all men’s, however long we have dwelt in lies, to live in truth” (Emerson, 1841: 14).

Apart from acknowledging the truth, men must also learn to embrace incoherence in order to be authentic and non-conforming. Emerson reflects on how commonly it is for men to be afraid of committing any inconsistency with what they have claimed or done in the past. They are scared of making a mistake. Nevertheless, for Emerson, incoherence and mistakes are inevitable in life. What you associate today with truth may not be what you believe tomorrow, as the present will reveal to you new things that the past had not. What seems to stop people from accepting this is their fear of not being understood. However, this is not something negative, but something that has always characterized wise people, even the relevant thinkers that we acclaim today: "It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgement into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day." (Emerson, 1841: 7). In addition, no matter how inconsistent the actions you take may seem to you in the first instance, if they were aligned with your nature and what you felt was the truth, they will still guide you towards your best outcome. In addition, they are what provide you with 'honor': "Greatness appeals to the future. [...] The force of character is accumulative" (Emerson, 1841: 8).

It is remarkable how on his essay Emerson adopts an anthropocentric perspective to defend his ideas, placing the man who acts authentically in the center of the world. He is not determined by either his time or his circumstances, but he can influence the world around him and the world that is yet to come. The man who is aligned with his highest good does not exist aside from nature but embodies it with his behavior. His beliefs, his truths will not die with him but will be followed and completed by numerous men who will dedicate their lives to the mission he started. That is what, according to Emerson, happened with figures like Caesar and Jesus: "[...] a true man belongs to no other time or place but is the center of things. Where he is, there is nature. [...] posterity seems to follow his steps as a train of clients" (Emerson, 1841: 8). Every man, no matter his origin, has the potential to be an authentic man. It is not a benefit that has been reserved for the rich and the royal, even though, as they are the ones who have written history, they have presented it as such. A man who acts according to his values in his ordinary life can reach the same level of authenticity as those famous and rich figures that stories speak about: "As great a stake depends on your private act to-day, as followed their public and renowned steps" (Emerson, 1841: 9). Emerson also claims that a man should not pray for something outside of himself. He must acknowledge that he already has divine values and

potential within him. For this exact reason, he should not allow creeds to dictate what he must believe or how he must act. He must recognize that he is “one with God” and that praying should be used as a way of reflecting on life, on our nature, and what we believe in: “As soon as the man is at one with God, he will not beg. He will then see prayer in all action” (Emerson, 1841:16). Emerson also sustains his anthropocentrism by praising both spontaneity and instinct. For him, there is something more revealing than science, a wisdom that can be found in every one of us and the whole of existence: instinct. This intuition guides us when we act according to what is true, even if we do not realize it. It comes from God directly to the soul of every individual, instead of from the institutions that claim to speak by his law: “For my perception of it is much a fact as the sun. [...] All things are made sacred by relation to it—one as much as another” (Emerson, 1841: 10-11). Emerson thinks that most of the troubles the man of his time experiences are due to his lack of connection to his primitive instinct. This has happened because of the obsession with developing a more advanced society. On the quest for modernity, men have lost their connection with nature. They have forgotten that it is the self-reliance of the individual that counts, not the advances he surrounds himself with: “The arts and inventions of each period are only its costume, and do not invigorate men. [...] The great genius returns to essential man” (Emerson, 1841: 20).

### **Style of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self-Reliance”.**

“Self-Reliance” is composed of numerous symbols regarding spirituality and nature, as well as symbolism regarding the relation of those two. Although he sometimes uses Christian symbolism, Emerson’s symbols are mostly related to his transcendental view of God, and not so much to the traditional ideas of the Church. This can be seen at the beginning of his essay, when he compares the remorse of not honoring our truth with the sound of the trumpets of the Last Judgement: “[...] Our first thought is brought back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgement” (Emerson, 1841: 1). Another example is when he remembers a conversation with his adviser in which he was told that acting according to his instinct was the result of being guided by the “Devil”. Emerson defies the existing conception of good and bad by claiming the Devil as his referent. He uses this symbol to challenge the strict rules marked by the Church’s institution: “[...] if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil” (Emerson, 1841: 4).

For Emerson, nature and spirituality are strongly connected. Nature is the guide of men through the instinct it provides them with. Something that children always seem to have, but can be silenced by conforming to society. Emerson also claims that the inner voice that provides us with the truth comes directly from God. It seems like the closer we are to nature, the closer we are to God. This, and Emerson's particular opposition to the institutions that dictate what men must do, again demonstrates his Transcendental approach to faith. This is easy to see in one of Emerson's quotes that correlates God, the individual, and nature: "When a man lives with God, his voice shall be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn" (Emerson, 1841: 12).

Emerson's tone is assertive and encouraging. He makes several strong points in his essay on how men must approach life, insisting on "self-reliance" and "non-conformity" as universal truths. He portrays almost radical confidence when defending his ideas, without any glimpse of reflection or openness to debate. This perfectly aligns with the main prompt of his essay, which is self-trust. Emerson encourages the reader to convey to this new way of living and seeing the world, forgetting the social pressures and the expectations imposed by formal institutions. He associates courage with living this lifestyle, while cowardice is associated with conforming. This type of passionate speech makes his words more motivating to the reader. Emerson uses both formal and personal tones in his essay. Most of the vocabulary he uses is elevated and elegant. He displays a perfect use of English grammatical rules. The constant use of the personal pronoun "I" is a clear indicator of the personal character of his essay and of the idea of trusting the self he conveys everywhere.

### **Aim of Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance".**

It is impossible to introduce the aim behind Emerson's "Self-Reliance" without understanding Transcendentalism and how it marked society. At the beginning of the 19th century, some American Christians who had inherited the Puritan faith felt a disengagement with the Church. According to their view, religion had become materialistic and disconnected from God. That is why a new philosophy able to 'transcend' the material world while connecting with the divine, nature, and self-trust started to gain popularity (Capper, 2014).

Emerson's masterpiece was able to constitute a perfect repertoire for the central notions of American Transcendentalism. This philosophical and literary movement's principal ideas are centered around the importance of the "self". Individualism is seen as the essential key to living a fulfilling life. That is why ideas like self-value, realization, and awareness are promoted in this essay as the defining features that every great man must possess (Amit, 2022).

Another key idea defended in the 1841 essay is "non-conformism". The individual should not accept as truth what traditional norms have set to be so. It is through the individual that the ideas that we find in literature, religion, and institutions acquire sense and meaning. This is why men should not allow the limits set by others to condition their existence; they must opt to trust their own experience (Read, 2009: 1).

Self-reliance aims to express Emerson's conception of human nature as inherently valuable. He deepens in his belief that human beings are good at their core, which supports his defense of intuition as the main guide in people's lives. Through his advocacy of the individual and self-reliance, he reaffirms his beliefs in democracy and freedom as essential rights that should be accessible to every person. This strongly relates to his advocacy for abolitionism and women's rights (O'Dwyer, 2012: 103).

What influenced 'Self-reliance' and Emerson's essays in general is, essentially, Transcendentalism. Nevertheless, he was also inspired by European Romanticism, philosophers like Plato and Kant, as well as by Hinduism. At the same time, Emerson's work would end up influencing, among others, his fellow compatriot Henry David Thoreau and German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (Russell, 2002).

Finally, it is necessary to point out that the aims of Emerson to defend self-reliance and individualism have sometimes been criticized. They have been accused by some discrepant voices of being extreme and inconsiderate, considering the political and economic context of the United States at the time he wrote his work (Alfonso, 2017: 6-7).

### **3.2. Jordan B. Peterson's *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*.**

#### **Main ideas in Jordan B. Peterson's *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*.**

In the first chapter of his book, Peterson writes about how human hierarchy can be perceived as a reflection of animal nature. He states that hierarchical structures are inherent to the majority of species, not just to humans. He aims to disprove what he views as a mistaken conception: that the hierarchical structure in which human societies are divided is the result of cultural and social phenomena. Peterson believes that it is the cause of a biological phenomenon, one that took place through millions of years of evolution and can be observed in other animals. To defend this idea, he focuses on lobsters and how their nervous system is programmed to defend their hierarchical position in nature from other specimens that could threaten it.

Peterson states that the nervous system of lobsters works through the same basic neurotransmitters as the human brain. A lobster that manages to defeat its opponent secretes serotonin and manifests it through its posture. That is the reason behind the name of this first chapter: "Stand up straight with your shoulders back". Through association, if a human wants to obtain a higher social position, he must be aware of his posture, which reflects the confidence he has in himself:

So, attend carefully to your posture. Quit dropping and hunching around. Speak your mind. Put your desires forward, as if you had a right to them—at least the same right as others. Walk tall and gaze forthrightly ahead. Dare to be dangerous. Encourage the serotonin to flow plentifully through the neural pathways desperate for its calming influence (Peterson, 27-28).

Therefore, it seems like Peterson carries out some type of biological reductionism by comparing both species. A type of comparison that aims to explain how human societies are not far from the most primitive animal nature: "And this brings us to a third erroneous concept: that nature is something strictly segregated from the cultural constructs that have emerged within it. [...] Dominance hierarchies are older than trees" (Peterson, 2018: 14).

Another of the main ideas in his volume is first explored in the book's second chapter, "Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping". Dr. Jordan B. Peterson focuses on how often people find it easier to care for someone they love than for themselves. To understand the root of this behavior, he relates the dichotomic balance between order and chaos, the story of Adam and Eve from Genesis, and the relationship between good and evil.

Making use of references from several religions, such as Taoism, he explains one of the notions that can most commonly be found in his work: the relationship between order and chaos and how both constitute an inherent part of human existence. Peterson points out that both ought to be in balance. On the one hand, order is the source of stability and comfort, but if it is excessive, it may lead to tyranny. On the other hand, chaos, in its fair measure, may lead to discovering the new and the unexplored, but when unmanaged, it leads to despair and exhaustion. He claims that many people feel overwhelmed by the unknown and how to face it, especially when it comes to taking care of themselves:

We eternally inhabit order, surrounded by chaos. We eternally occupy known territory surrounded by the unknown. We experience meaningful engagement when we mediate appropriately between them. [...] Chaos and order make up the eternal, transcendent environment of the living (Peterson, 2018: 43).

For Peterson, the root of this incapacity to confront life's inevitable chaos can be found in the parable of Adam and Eve. He maintains that Eden symbolizes order, while chaos is represented by the snake. His reference to Milton in this regard seems relevant: "[...] This is the reason, as far as I can tell, for the strange Christian insistence, made most explicit by John Milton, that the snake in the Garden of Eden was also Satan, the Spirit of Evil itself" (Peterson, 2018: 46-47). He relates this biblical and primordial story to the impossibility of reality to maintain itself closed to chaos and the unknown. Not even paradise itself can hold away what is intrinsic to the world: the relationship between order and chaos. Peterson also claims that the apple that Adam and Eve ate led them to feeling vulnerability and remorse, something that we all as humans carry because of the original sin. This is what seems to torment us, making it difficult to face the challenges of life and become strong and courageous: "[...] It means that people, unsettled by their

vulnerability, eternally fear to tell the truth, to mediate between chaos and order, and to manifest their destiny. In other words, they are afraid to walk with God” (Peterson, 2018: 51). The snake promised Eve that if she ate from the forbidden apple, she would obtain the consciousness that God possesses of good and evil. By this premise, both Adam and Eve, wanting to become closer to God, decide to eat from the fruit. Nevertheless, this knowledge does not make them satisfied but instead brings them vulnerability and self-consciousness. It is this view that humans have of themselves that makes them feel worthless and undeserving of compassion. It is for this reason that humans do not dare to value themselves: “If we wish to take care of ourselves properly, we would have to respect ourselves—but we don’t, because we are—not least in our eyes—fallen creatures” (Peterson, 2018: 58).

In the fourth chapter of his book, Peterson reflects on how we all have an inner critic within us. One that tends to compare us to others seeking insufficiency. This voice always tries to bring us down. To some degree, it allows us to differentiate areas where we are performing well from those that leave room for improvement. However, it can turn out to be our worst enemy when it questions the value of our existence:

Inside us dwells a critical internal voice and spirit [...] It’s predisposed to make its noise case. It condemns our mediocre efforts. It can be very difficult to quell. Worse, critics of this sort are necessary. [...] If the internal voice makes you doubt the value of your endeavors—or your life, or life itself—perhaps you should stop listening (Peterson, 2018: 86-87).

To stop listening to that inner voice when it becomes hypercritical, we have to start by understanding our uniqueness. By getting to know ourselves. Many people who guide themselves through criticism do not have a good relationship with themselves because they are not even aware of who they are:

Who are you? You think you know, but maybe you don’t...You have a nature. You can play the tyrant with it, but you will certainly rebel. [...] Before you

articulate your own standards of value, you must see yourself as a stranger—and then you must get to know yourself (Peterson, 2018: 89-90).

Another of the ideas Peterson is very vocal about is the relevance of educating children under basic disciplinary rules. He insists that this is essential for them to achieve functioning in society. Therefore, parental figures should overcome the discomfort associated with correcting their children for their highest good. Many people struggle with this because they assume that humans are inherently good without the need for disciplinary measures. This, according to Peterson, derives from the ideas popularized by the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “Rousseau was a fervent believer in the corrupting influence of human society and private ownership alike. He claimed that nothing was so gentle and wonderful as man in his pre-civilized state” (Peterson, 2018: p. 119-120). However, Peterson claims, once again, that the behavior of humans is not only conditioned by social and cultural influences. Furthermore, there are also biological factors that play an important role in the development of conflictive behaviors. Some of them can be observed in animals that are similar to the human species, like chimpanzees, as well as in isolated tribes that are not ruled by the same social structures that we are familiar with in the rest of the world. In addition, Peterson insists that educating in discipline will help children who will have to learn how to navigate social norms either way: “You can discipline your children, or you can turn that responsibility over the harsh, uncaring judgmental world [...]” (Peterson, 2018: 134).

In the sixth chapter of his book, Peterson meditates on the cruelty and suffering of the world. The number of massacres occurring in the United States, the abuses, and the horrors experienced by children, or the corruption that is spread all over the world, can easily take people down the path of nihilism. Peterson even mentions some cases of serial killers who decide to engage in their crimes because of their terrible childhood experiences. He then states that it is easy for many to lose faith in human beings and God, even in life itself. However, he acknowledges that there is another possibility. One that he reflects upon after quoting Nietzsche, and that could serve as a way to escape from nihilism: “[...] people who have experienced evil may certainly desire to perpetuate it, to pay it forward. But it is also possible to learn good by experiencing evil” (Peterson, 2018: 153).

Some people who have undergone hardships decided to reflect on themselves in search of how to act good instead of spreading the pain that they are so familiar with. They have understood that life difficulties are unavoidable, and pain is part of life. But instead of responding with hate, they decide to ‘clean up their life’. They have taken responsibility for themselves and their part in the world: “You can use your own standards of judgment. You can rely on yourself for guidance. [...] You will then be left with the inevitable bare tragedies of life, but they will no longer be compounded with bitterness and deceit” (Peterson, 2018: 158-159).

In chapter seven, Peterson explains how we often forget the importance of sacrificing what is convenient for what is better for ourselves and the world around us. He claims that the problem starts with Christianity. Even if faith had provided us with a system of values, many acolytes use the sacrifice of Christ as a redemption of their own need to sacrifice themselves. “[...] Christianity meant accepting the proposition that Christ’s sacrifice, and only that sacrifice, had redeemed humanity” (Peterson, 2018: 189). Furthermore, when science started to somehow displace religion, nihilism threatened to remove all the value in life, as well as every possible system of beliefs that prevented chaos from leading the world. Peterson explains how Nietzsche, who claimed that God had died and recognized that religion had limited the freedom of many, understood that absolute freedom without limitation could be devastating. Some type of dogma or system of beliefs was necessary: “For Nietzsche and Dostoevsky alike, freedom—even the ability to act—requires constraint. For this reason, they both recognize the vital necessity of the dogma of the Church” (Peterson, 2018: 192). This seems to be a case of Peterson’s willful misreading of the Nietzschean critique of religion and his radical call to not substitute religion for new secular dogmas. However, Peterson simply states that not every dogma or system of beliefs should be considered as a possibility inasmuch as the church has proven its capacity to be destructive, just as the totalitarian movements have during Europe of the 20th century. However, he proposes instead a system of beliefs presumably based on the highest good. One that requires that we sacrifice what is convenient today for a better world tomorrow: “Expedience is the following of blind impulse. [...] If you act properly, your actions allow you to be psychologically integrated now, and tomorrow, and into the future, while you benefit yourself, your family, and the broader world around you” (Peterson, 2018: 199).

In chapter eight, Peterson reflects on how relevant it is to tell the truth and not lie. He identifies not telling the truth with not having the courage to fully live your life. He differentiates the existence of two opposed ways of living. One is marked by the fear of the unknown and by conformity, whereas the other takes courage and embraces reality and its possibilities: “Taking the easy way out or telling the truth—those are not merely two different choices. They are different pathways through life. They are utterly different ways of existing” (Peterson, 2018: 209). He claims that not telling the truth is a strategy that many people use to manipulate the reality they live in. These people do not care about what is honest, they just want life to adjust to the conceptions they have built in their minds. They are seeking safety, and this safety feels threatened by any truth that is not their truth. According to Peterson, this way of thinking shows arrogance and naivety: “Someone living a life-lie is attempting to manipulate reality with perception, thought, and action, so that only some narrowly desired and predefined outcome is allowed to exist” (Peterson, 2018: 210). Furthermore, not telling the truth or not denouncing lies leads to you limiting your potential and your growth. You are restricting yourself from meeting the world you know is possible by allowing the scarcity of others or your misconceptions to guide you: “If you will not reveal yourself to others, you cannot reveal yourself to yourself. [...] It means that so much that you could be will never be forced by necessity to come forward” (Peterson, 2018: 212). It is, in fact, this lack of speaking the truth that has led to totalitarianism and other injustices in the past and continues to do so: “Untruth corrupts the soul and the state alike, and one form of corruption feeds the other” (Peterson, 2018: 215).

In chapter nine, Peterson speaks about the importance of listening to yourself and others based on his experience as a therapist. He acknowledges that most of his patients come to counselling seeking to speak with someone, but what they want is to be able to think for themselves, to understand. The capacity to think allows humans to comprehend the past and plan the future. Peterson claims that sometimes we are not able to indulge in the thinking process. Some people tend to believe they are reflecting when they are practicing self-criticism. Thinking can sometimes be a hard task: “People think they think, but it's not true. It's mostly self-criticism that passes for thinking. [...] Thinking is listening to yourself. [...] Thinking is an internal dialogue between two or more different views of the world” (Peterson, 2018: 241).

As important as it is to listen to yourself, it is also to listen to others. And as difficult as it is to do the former, it is to do the latter. It is particularly common that in conversations, people do not listen as much to others. They are, instead, waiting to speak, or trying to prove themselves right, or seem appealing. Real conversations with active listening require the involvement of the participants. They provide new and profound insight:

But if you are meditating as you converse, then you listen to the other person, and say the new and original things that can rise from deep within of their own accord. It's as if you are listening to yourself during such a conversation, just as you are listening to the other person (Peterson, 2018: 255).

In chapter ten, Peterson writes about how many people feel shocked after suffering from betrayal or the chaos that seems to suddenly fill their lives. Peterson claims that even if sometimes this can be unexpected, it is not uncommon for people to look the other way when they are faced with hard conversations or inconveniences. It is usually a matter of perspective. People seem to ignore things or not give them importance as they perceive them as insignificant, or because they are afraid of the potential challenges that come with them. They usually think, or wish, that those issues will be resolved on their own. Nevertheless, something that at the beginning may have seemed like a trivial inconvenience may slowly become a big problem that could have been solved, or at least faced, when it was smaller and when it first emerged: "If you shirk the responsibility of confronting the unexpected, even when it appears in manageable doses, reality itself will become unsustainably disorganized and chaotic" (Peterson, 2018: 281).

Peterson also speaks about how overprotecting or excessively trying to control children makes it complicated for them to grow and prove to themselves how much they are capable of. That is why he insists that trying to shape them into rigid social and parental expectations is inconvenient and counterproductive. Even when they sometimes put themselves in danger and it is likely that they get hurt, as logical as it may seem to intervene, it is better to let them see how much they can take, how far they can push themselves. That is a lesson that will be useful for them as they learn to manage the suffering inherent to their future life:

Kids need playgrounds enough to remain challenging. [...] When untrammelled—and encouraged—we prefer to live in the edge. There we can be both confident in our experience and confronting the chaos that helps us develop (Peterson, 2018: 287).

Peterson addresses in several instances that life is full of suffering and things that leave us asking: “Why me?”. When times get rough, they require courage and strength. There is no easy way out. However, it is useful to remember to appreciate life, even the smallest details that make us remember how meaningful existence is. It is not about trying to ignore suffering or only focusing on the positive aspects of life. It is about not drowning yourself in the problems you are facing. Take time to think about them, but also take your time to rest and appreciate the little things you are grateful for, even if they appear insignificant: “If you pay careful attention, even on a bad day, you may be fortunate enough to be confronted with opportunities of just that sort” (Peterson, 2018: 353).

### **Style of Jordan B. Peterson’s *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*.**

Symbolism is a powerful element within Jordan B. Peterson’s book. It is a constant element throughout all his work. Symbols alluding to different religions, nature, or historical events are the most prevalent. He often associates these symbols with references to religious writings, certain philosophers and thinkers, science (and pseudo-science), historical human catastrophes, as well as with elements from popular culture. For this section, the focus will be on symbols concerning both religion and nature.

Religious symbolism can be found throughout Peterson’s volume. There are numerous examples of these, and they are not limited to Christianity, although it is safe to state that most of them are Christian or, more specifically, the result of Peterson’s interpretations of Christianity. However, he additionally uses symbolism from old religions like the Egyptian and the Mesopotamian. Peterson also refers to the Taoist symbol of Yin-Yang and uses traditions from Buddhism and Judaism to explain some of his rules. For Peterson, the Yin-Yang is the representation of order and chaos, represented at the same time by the masculine and the feminine personality, respectively. He uses the

Taoist icon to back his claims that order and chaos must be in balance and are both necessary in life: “The famous yin-yang from the Taoists [...] often translated as feminine and masculine [...] are more accurately translated as Chaos and order” (Peterson, 2018: 12). Furthermore, according to Peterson, the Egyptian God Horus embodies sacrifice as he decides to fight against Set. He faces all “the demons” and sacrifices his eye to defend what he knows is right and to understand his inner world. Peterson goes as far as to compare both Horus and Jesus, saying they both embody this sacrifice: “Horus—often regarded as the precursor of Christ [...] confronted his evil uncle Set [...] He loses an eye. [...] But perhaps he may gain in internal vision. [...] something proportional to what he loses [...]” (Peterson, 2018: 181). Peterson also uses the main ideas of religions to back his maxim that suffering is inherent to life. He claims that three of the most widely spread religions, Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism, accept this as a truth: “Life is suffering. Buddha stated that, explicitly. Christians [...] with the divine crucifix. The Jewish faith is saturated with its remembrance” (Peterson, 2018: 227).

Nature symbolism is also a common feature found in Peterson’s book. He mainly uses nature as a resource to biologically explain common human behavior. But additionally, he uses it to express his notion of chaos and order. He views nature as a constant metamorphosis that interacts with the creatures that inhabit it. Peterson opposes viewing nature as idealistic, either. He claims that nature should not be seen as the source of good in opposition to the evilness of humans. We must understand the potential dangers of nature while comprehending that nature does not exist outside of human culture; they are intermixed, and culture itself is the result of nature. We as humans, and all the structures we have built around us, are the result of nature. From nature comes order and chaos, and we as a species cooperate with it, adapting to the different realities that it offers us. Therefore, humans should embrace nature and the systems the organized systems of life they have built around it. For Peterson, hierarchical structures are part of the biology of all living creatures, including humans: “There is little more natural than culture” (Peterson, 2018: 15).

The tone used by Peterson in his book is one of encouragement, presenting his ideas as a salvation from the most devastating realities of life. Peterson appeals to the readers to take responsibility for their lives as he mentions how we are surrounded by ancestral histories and traditions, as well as nature itself, that can serve us as an inspiration for believing in the capacity to balance order and chaos for a higher good. He speaks to

the reader directly, as a lecturer. This way, he places all the responsibility on the reader, without any intermediaries. This perfectly aligns with the nature of his rules, which are completely individualistic, as well as with his opposition to blaming all suffering on the social structures humans have organized. His discourse acquires a paternalistic undertone, as it seems you are being educated on how to live your life accordingly. In addition, Peterson seems to combine both a formal and informal tone as he uses the former to refer to philosophical and biological claims and theories, while using the latter when speaking about personal experiences and making humoristic and satirical remarks.

As a final point, it is difficult to ignore the political undertone of his work. As he directly accuses socialists of “hating the rich”, criticizes postmodernists (or what he refers to as neo-Marxists), proclaims the existence of just two genders, and seems to whitewash the patriarchy. With such claims, Peterson seems to portray his far-right political ideology in his book.

### **Aim of Jordan B. Peterson’s *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*.**

As stated by Peterson in the overture of his book *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, what inspired him to write this book was an interaction on an online platform named Quora. Quora allows users to ask questions that others respond to, as well as upvote those they consider useful. Peterson answered the question: What are the most valuable things everyone should know? He uploaded a list of rules, which became incredibly popular. As he understood that people needed this guidance and felt comfortable with rules and lists rather than denser works like his previous book, *Maps of Meaning*, he condensed the maxims uploaded in Quora to 12 and wrote *12 Rules for Life* (Peterson, 2018: 25-35).

In Peterson's words, life is full of suffering, and to be able to navigate these challenges, a person should believe in something meaningful. He wants people to understand that this meaning can only be obtained through personal responsibility. That is the solution for the inevitable chaos that surrounds life. As a maxim that dictates his book he states Nietzsche’s quote: “He who has a why can bear any how.” Taking this into account, he aims for people, especially young generations, to find direction in their lives through their search for meaning (Fox News, 2018).

Among the influences of his book, we find English authors like Aldous Huxley with *A Brave New World*, and George Orwell with *1984* and *Road to Wigan Pier*. The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky seems to constitute a pillar among his bibliographical influences. Especially with his novel *Crime and Punishment*, which he often references in his works. As a therapist himself, he is directly influenced by his pioneers in the field: Viktor Frankl and Carl Jung. Another of the names that has inspired Peterson is Friedrich Nietzsche, especially through his work *Beyond Good and Evil* (Admin, 2016).

However, it is important to state that Jordan B. Peterson's book and figure have received a considerable amount of criticism regarding the ideas they promote. Peterson and his book have been accused of leading his readers towards authoritarianism. His criticism of postmodern culture, his polemical view on gender identity, and his peculiar association of femininity with chaos position him on the far right, politically speaking. This raises the possibility of a political aim of his work masked as the intention of helping young, lost men (Livingstone Smith & Kaag, 2018).

### **3.3. Comparative analysis of both works' main ideas, style, and aims.**

From a thematic perspective, it is impossible to ignore the similarities both Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and J. Peterson's *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* share, even if Peterson's work does not reference Emerson's work at any point. Particularly, both insist on the specific importance of facing chaos in life. Something that they insist is a mandatory responsibility for grown men. The approach Emerson takes to chaos is much more concise than that of Peterson, who seems to base a considerable part of his book on this notion. However, it is noticeable how both of them have decided to use the same terminology to allude to the importance of responsibility and self-reliance.

Another common subject element is the importance given to honesty and personal truth-seeking. For Emerson, a man lives his authentic truth when he guides himself by his intuition and avoids conforming to the expectations of others. Peterson does not share the same reservations towards conforming to society, but he reaffirms how essential it is to honor the truth or, at least, not lie. It can therefore be stated that both works emphasize the importance of honesty and authenticity.

Both Emerson and Peterson reference posture as an indicator of confidence. Emerson seems to use it as a metaphor for being able to stand up and speak your truth. Peterson decides to take a more complex route and compare the differences in posture to the role of power within hierarchical structures. Nevertheless, they both emphasize how relevant it is to act confidently when it comes to defending your values and moving through life experiences.

A further similarity between the works is the praise of the young generations. Emerson specifically admires the authentic and reckless nature of children who have not yet conformed to society and act according to what nature, or intuition, guides them to do. While Peterson does not perhaps share this romantic perspective of naivety in youth, he does insist on the importance of letting children experience. He thinks children need to be able to explore the limits of their potential, something adults may regard as dangerous, but that takes real courage and is inevitable if you want them to become prepared adults.

Both Emerson and Peterson insist on the importance of listening to yourself. Emerson is very clear about this, as he firmly defends listening to one's intuition over everything else. Peterson does emphasize the importance of listening to your conscience. Nevertheless, he also advises not to mistake it with the inner critic within us, and also encourages us to listen to those who may help us learn something new.

Emerson and Peterson openly write about the importance of courage when facing life. For Emerson, it requires bravery to listen to what God commands us to do through our intuition, as most men are afraid of speaking the truth and adopt an apologetic posture instead. For Peterson, the courage to embrace self-responsibility and discipline is an essential antidote to suffering, as it usually provides us with the meaning we need.

From a symbolic perspective, it is impossible to negate the resemblance between the authors. Religion, spirituality, and nature play an essential role in the work of Emerson and Peterson. Both authors make constant references to elements of Christianity, although Peterson's are higher in number. Emerson does approach faith through a more transcendental spirituality, while Peterson tends to use a variety of religious written records to symbolize his ideas.

For both authors, nature cannot be conceived outside of human experience, both are inseparable. Emerson believes that nature is connected to each of us through God and

intuition. Peterson explains that cultural phenomena are perfectly explainable through nature, and that human behavior is dictated by the commands of Mother Nature.

There are also remarkable similarities in terms of the chosen tone by both authors. Both of them display a great level of assertiveness and encouragement. They also confidently portray their ideas. Emerson presents them as a kind of universal truth, while Peterson exhibits them as rules or maxims that everyone should follow. Both of them showcase a marked personal tone. Emerson constantly makes use of the personal pronoun “I”, and Peterson alludes to several of his personal experiences. Additionally, both present a considerable level of formality through the use of elevated vocabulary and cultural references, although Peterson breaks this formality on several occasions.

Finally, there also exist similarities in terms of the purpose of both works. They both want to educate people on how to live a more fulfilling life and face the struggles they may be presented with. This is a common feature shared by self-help literary pieces. Furthermore, they both seem to provide a political undertone based on individualism. Although while Emerson defends a radical version of individualism and freedom, Peterson advocates for conservative individualism and a more right-wing ideology.

### **3.4. Between Emerson and Peterson: Nietzsche’s Intermediary Role.**

The various similarities both authors share may have to do with the intermediary role played by Nietzsche’s philosophy. The German philosopher declared on several occasions his admiration towards Ralph W. Emerson’s ideas, whom he had read since he was young. Emerson’s transcendentalist ideas revolving around authenticity, self-creation and individualism considerably resonated with Nietzsche. This was also the case when it came to the ideas Emerson held in regards religious institutions and conformity. As it has been previously stated in the analysis of “Self-Reliance”, Emerson had a transcendentalist approach to religion, which defends a direct relationship with God that does not conform to the conventionalities established by the Church. This criticism of the Church deeply resonated with Nietzsche, who wrote several times against the dogmas of Christianity (Zavatta, 2019: 8-11). However, rather than seeing man as a source of divine truth, as Emerson did, Nietzsche saw the need for man to find meaning in a world where mystical values were gone, and where even the idea of God was also lost.

At the same time, Jordan B. Peterson positioned the German philosopher as one of his main intellectual influences, and he is constantly quoting Nietzsche's work in his book. Nietzsche's moral relativism deeply resonates with Peterson when it comes to what can be defined as the main idea of his book: the pursuit of meaning that makes life's suffering bearable. As mentioned in the analysis of the aim of *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, Peterson has often alluded to the famous quote by Nietzsche: "He who has a why can bear any how". For Nietzsche, as well as for Peterson, suffering is inherent to life, and after the loss of popularity experienced by faith, popularized through Nietzsche's dictum that "God is dead", people were consumed by the loss of life's meaning or nihilism. Here is when individuality and finding what your pursuit and truth are acquire essential importance when facing reality. And yet, Nietzsche's call to face the risks of total nihilism and moral collapse without falling into new dogmas seems to be lost on Peterson. In contrast, Peterson evades this more radical take on Nietzsche's philosophy and goes on to propose a pragmatic set of rules to help man navigate the chaos and uncertainty of life. This way, Peterson proposes a way out of the existential instability theorized by Nietzsche through the affirmation of a new moral order, based on conservative principles and social hierarchies.

Despite the significant differences between Emersonian optimistic idealism, Nietzschean existential nihilism and Petersonian conservative pragmatism based on hierarchy, the three of them agree on the need for the individual to confront chaos and make meaning through personal effort and responsibility. It can be claimed that Nietzsche can constitute a possible link between some of the ideas shared by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Jordan B. Peterson. Although, as stated in the theoretical framework of this thesis, ideas related to individuality and autonomy have been historically linked to the history of liberal democracies. This could be an alternative explanation for the common ideals shared by both Emerson and Peterson, who are both citizens of democratic countries of North America.

## 4- CONCLUSION

Even if a direct pattern of influences and borrowings between Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and Peterson's *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* cannot be identified or confirmed, both share considerable similarities in terms of themes, style, and aims, allowing us to see them as if in a constant dialogue. These intertextual echoes and shared symbolic structures could be the result of the socio-cultural similarities shared due to both authors being North American, and heirs to early Puritan visions and later transcendentalist understandings; or we could also trace those echoes to Nietzsche's influence as an intermediate link between both authors. But what can be concluded is that Emerson's idealist echoes are present, if adapted and reformulated, in Peterson's self-help bestseller. Therefore, it can be said that Ralph Waldo Emerson's tropes, metaphors, and symbolic structures reverberate in one of the mainstream literary genres of our current time, demonstrating that his ideas on "self-reliance" and "individualism", and his metaphors of chaos and order, continue to resonate with North American readers almost two centuries after he first presented them. These notions seem to have shaped, and continue to shape, the social behaviors of liberal democratic countries, as their citizens have been relying on autonomy and self-responsibility for years to navigate their lives. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to mention that, while Emerson's philosophical essay echoes in Peterson's best-selling book, the latter is the result of a wide variety of intertextual echoes. These also include religious doctrines like Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, and Paganism among others, as well as the work of several psychologists like Jung and Freud, philosophers such as Nietzsche, writers like Huxley and Dostoevsky, science, and popular culture.

It is of great interest how, perhaps without noticing it, Americans are still hearing the message that influenced their ancestors in a period of social reforms and convulsion. Emerson's words helped many navigate the instability of the 19th-century United States by trusting in self-reliance against uncertainty. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the new underlying message that this old wisdom is acquiring. With authors like Peterson adapting former transcendentalist ideas and encouraging notions to defend their approach to authoritarianism, it is more important than ever to analyze, as readers, the conservative message presented to us. That way, we can understand what ideas resonate with us as

citizens of democratic countries, and which are discreetly, or not so much, trying to lead us to more radical ideologies that could impact the politics and society of our Era.

As the self-help genre continues to grow in popularity, it would be interesting to dedicate further study to the field, especially from a literary perspective. Literature is a powerful tool that takes shape in, and in turn shapes, the society of its time, so the content and form of its message should always be considered by philologists. While paying attention to the perpetually ignored self-help genre, we will obtain a better understanding of our culture, as we relate it to the literary pieces that have marked previous moments of our history.

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