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Quest for Meaning in Life in *Peter Camenzind* by Hermann Hesse:

**A Critical Study**

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In the novel *Peter Camenzind* the protagonist poses some sensitive questions toward the end of the novel:

What was the meaning of my life? Why had so many joys and sorrows passed over me? Why had I thirsted for the true and the beautiful and why was my thirst still unquenched? Why had I been in love and suffered so much for these women-- I whose head was bowed again in shame for an unfulfilled love. And why had God placed the burning need to be loved in my heart when in fact he had destined me to live the life of a recluse whom no one loved? (Peter Camenzind 1969 :129)

These and many other questions are asked to the self for giving a meaning to the life lived by the protagonist throughout the novel. *Peter Camenzind* is essentially a bildungsroman, a novel of education wherein the protagonist struggles to educate his self, to give a meaning to life. It is primarily concerned with the Endeavour partaken by the protagonist, here, Peter, to embark upon the search of the self. In the beginning of the novel, we see that Peter is struggling to give meaning in many of his day to day activities. In his classroom he is grappling with the trouble giving meaning to his life. He is yearning for a companion that can help him in his this endeavor.

Even that did not strike me as exceptionally important. Still, I respected my teachers because I thought they were in possession of the secret of science and science overawed me. And though my teachers were of one mind about my laziness, I managed to make some headway and my place in the classroom was just forward of center. Indeed, it did not escape me that school and school science were an inadequate patchwork, but I was biding my time. Beyond these preparations and fumbings there lay, I assumed, a realm of pure intellect and an unambiguous dead-certain science of truth.

Once I reached this realm I would discover the meaning of the dark confusion of history, the wars of the nations, and the fearful questions that bother each and every soul. (Peter Camenzind 24)

Just later, we come to know that this search is endless. It is as huge as this universe is; it is as large and unfathomable as is this cosmos. He is confused how to find it, how to behave, how to speak, how people take it? Thus his quest for meaning begins right from the beginning of the novel and it continues till the end of the novel. His search is for the superior than himself; it is



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pernicious, accurate and heart-rending. As he discovers:

Another yearning, however, held an even stronger and more urgent sway over me: I longed to have a friend. There was Kaspar Hauri, a brown-haired, serious-minded boy two years older than I, who had about him a calm and self-assured air, who held his head erect and spoke little to his classmates. I venerated him for months. I followed him about in the streets and longed to be noticed by him. I felt envious of every person he greeted and of every house I saw him leave or enter. But he was two classes ahead of me and presumably felt superior even to those in the same grade as he. We never exchanged as much as a single word. Instead, a puny, sickly boy attached himself to me, without any encouragement on my part. He was younger than I, timid and untalented, but he had beautiful doleful eyes and features. Because he was weak and somewhat misshapen, he was subjected to much bullying in his class and looked to me, strong and respected as I was, for protection. Soon he became too ill to attend school. I did not miss him and quickly forgot him altogether. (Peter Camenzind 24)

He has decided to give a meaning to his life, and for that he needs someone, that is also decided. Henceforth, he would be seen pondering on the meaning of life; on finding out the persons that may help him in giving a meaning. So, whenever we find him alone he is cogitating, searching for the meaning to his life. Typically, at the end of each of his juvenile adventures he philosophizes on the mundane activities or otherwise. In his constant quest for giving a meaning to life, he makes, turns everything "philosophical". In his these attempts he is necessarily trying to come to terms with his self-search. He tells us everything: about his friends, about his love, about his attitudes toward life. Even in the commonest details of his fascination there is the tinge of his self-search, his trying endeavors at giving meaning to his life. Here, he shares with us his fascination with a young girl. The language is remarkable for its minimalism, poignancy, matter-of-fact narration and lyricism of a poet, though he is not one:

At seventeen I fell in love with a lawyer's daughter. She was beautiful and I am genuinely proud that all my life I have fallen in love only with very beautiful women. What I suffered because of her and other women, I will tell another time. Her name was Rosi Girtanner and even today she is worthy of the love of better men than I. At that time, all the untapped vigor of youth coursed through my limbs. With my schoolmates I was forever becoming involved in the wildest scrapes. I



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was proud of being the best wrestler, batter, runner, and oars-man-yet I still felt melancholy. This had hardly anything to do with being unhappily in love. It was simply that sweet melancholy of early spring, which affected me more strongly than others, so that I derived pleasure from mournful visions of death and pessimistic notions. Of course, someone was bound to make me a gift of Heine's *Book of Songs*, in a cheap edition. What I did with this book did not really qualify as reading. I poured my overflowing heart into the empty verses, suffered with the poet, composed poems with him, and entered states of lyrical intoxication that were as well suited to me as a nightgown to a little pig. Until that time I had had no idea of Literature. Now there followed in rapid succession Lenau, Schiller, Goethe, and Shakespeare; suddenly the pale phantom, literature, had become a god. (Peter Camenzind 27)

Finding himself fallen in love, he tries to become a poet and scribbles poetry. His heart is flowing with tender thoughts that a poet has when he has fallen in love with a girl. He wants to be like Goethe, Shakespeare, Schiller and what not. These are nothing but the streaming thoughts that he is grappled with. It seems he is suffering from “*unmada*”, euphoria—a mental, indescribable joy—a joy that can only be experienced but difficult to put in words. Therefore, when he describes, the descriptions become sporadic, elliptical, with scattered words and unfulfilled impulses. These impulses after all, are making him a man, educating his personality, repairing his attempts at the quest for meaning in life. He finds himself metamorphosed in the characters of the works by the authors aforementioned:

With a delicious shudder, I felt streaming toward me from these books the cool but pungent fragrance of a life not of this world yet real nonetheless, a life whose waves now pounded where it sought to realize its fate- in my ecstatic heart. In my reading nook in the attic the only sounds to reach me were the hourly chimes from the nearby tower and the dry clapping of nesting storks, but there the characters of Shakespeare's and Goethe's worlds walked in and out. The sublime and the laughable aspects of everything human were revealed to me: I realized the enigma of the sundered unruly heart, the deep meaningfulness of the world's history, and the mighty miracle of the spirit that transfigures our brief stay and through the power of reason raises our petty lives into the realm of fate and eternity. When I stuck my head out through the narrow dormer window, I could see the sun shining on the roofs and in the narrow alley. With astonishment I would listen to the tangled small noises of work and everyday existence rushing up. I sensed the loneliness and



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mysteriousness of my attic nook filling with great spirits as in remarkably beautiful fairy tales.

The more I read and the more strangely the roofs, streets, and everyday life affected me, the more often I was overcome by the timid and intimidating feeling that I too might be a visionary: the world spread out before me expected me to discover part of the treasure, to rip the veil that covered the accidental and the common to tear my findings out of chaos and immortalize them through the gift of poetry--- (Peter Camenzind 28)

He begins to compose poems out of the sheer confused joy. He fills up some notebooks with poetic quips, scribbling, sketches and short stories. These are the things, as he confesses, looking at which his heart throbs with ecstasy. He is overwhelmed by fantasy of a romantic poet. He fails as a critic of his self but succeeds as a creative writer, as a poet, as he says:

With some embarrassment I began composing a few poems, and gradually several notebooks filled up with verses, sketches, and short stories. They have perished; probably they were worth little, but they made my heart beat faster and filled me with ecstasy. My critical faculties and powers of self-examination were slow in catching up with these attempts. I did not experience my first great and necessary disappointment until my last year in school. I had already begun the destruction of my juvenilia-my scribbling had become suspicious to me-when I came upon a few volumes of Gottfried Keller's works, which I immediately read two or three times in succession. Then suddenly I realized how far removed my stillborn pipe dreams were from real, genuine, austere art. I burned my poems and stories, and with some of the embarrassed feeling that accompanies a hangover, I looked soberly and sadly out at the world.(Peter Camenzind 28-29)

Back in Zurich, he was always concerned with something that is meaningful—something by which he can establish his name, his identity. His journey is for achieving a meaning in life. He becomes sharper than ever in his vision of the world now. His lived experience makes his vision clearer about life and about the meaning of it. As he notices here, his is the soul not of the urban life, but of the rural, rustic one. So, he envisions peacocks in the fashionable women he sees. He fantasizes the soil, the native, the provincial and the real meaning of life in the urban environment which his soul disapproves. He confesses this meaning in a description:



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I arrived in Zurich, ready to conquer a piece of the world and to prove as quickly as possible to the roughnecks back home that I was made of different stuff from the other Camenzind's. For three wonderful years I lived in the same drafty attic with its commanding view, studied, wrote poems, longed for and sensed myself imbued with everything that is beautiful on earth. Although I did not have a hot meal every day of the week, every day and every night my heart sang and ... glided ...with joy and cleaved fervently, longingly to life.

This was my first real city. Greenhorn that I was, I walked about wide-eyed and bewildered for several weeks. It never occurred to me to admire genuinely or be envious of city life-- I was too much of a farm boy for that-- but the multitude of streets, houses, and people delighted me. I observed how alive with carriages the streets were; I inspected the moorings on the lake, the plazas, the gardens, the ostentatious civic buildings and churches; I saw crowds hurry off to work, students dawdling, the well-to-do on outings, dandies preening themselves, foreigners ambling aimlessly about. The fashionably elegant and haughty wives of the rich seemed to me like peacocks in a chicken yard, pretty, proud, and a little foolish. No, I was not really shy-- only awkward and stubborn-- and I had no doubts that I was man enough to become thoroughly acquainted with this lively city and to make my way in it. (Peter Camenzind 49)

This observation is essentially education of the self which is fundamental to bildungsroman. *Peter Camenzind* goes a step further in presenting not merely the essential education of the self but the quintessential quest for meaning that Peter assigns to his life. In order to find out this meaning he has to undergo the rites of passage; he has to pass through acid tests of life which he undertakes as "adventures". They are rather mental than physical. He prefers to inculcate in him "feminine" virtues rather than 'masculine" virtues. Music, dancing, watching Nature are some of the virtues that he educates/inculcates in him in order to give better meaning to his life. He appreciates virtues of life in the following words:

Making the acquaintance of a handsome young fellow who lived in two rooms on the second floor of my house, and who was also a student in Zurich, was the first move I made in this direction. Actually I did not take this step myself, for he came up to me. I heard him practicing the piano every day, and listening to him, I felt for the first time something of the magic of music, the most feminine, the sweetest of the arts. I would watch him leave the house, with a book or a score in his



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left hand, in his right a cigarette whose smoke trailed behind him as he walked off with easy and graceful steps. I was fascinated but I kept my distance. I was afraid of making the acquaintance of someone so easygoing, free, and well-to-do, fearing it would only humiliate me and underscore my poverty and rough manners. Then he came up to see me: one evening there was a knock on my door. I was startled, for no one had called on me before. (Peter Camenzind 49-50)



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