Reviewing the ongoing research in my field of study to check if there are any gaps that need to be filled has been an intimidating, yet humbling experience. The cumbersome venture of finding a research topic pushed me into discovering an area of interest congenial to my personal inclinations. A preference for qualitative research and the desire to dabble with a domain which, till date, has remained an enigma despite the profound and priceless contributions of a number of thinkers, past and present, led to the decision to study ‘LIFE.’ LIFE is interesting and yet intriguing with its matrix so complex, or perhaps so unbelievably simple, that no one has succeeded in decoding or deciphering its entire meaning.

Regardless of positive accomplishments and devastating failures, man is often troubled by the singular question: “What is the purpose of life?” Sadly enough, it remains only a question for the majority. Indeed, a perfect answer to this question is beyond man’s reach. Sometimes, the answer appears exasperatingly ordinary. But, given the complexity of the life he leads, this simple answer seems unacceptable to man. Hence, the decision to explore this puzzling question was made. Initially, there was, perhaps, an imprudent confidence that a definite direction can be found, but this was coupled with a stubborn resolution to embark on the quest for purpose.

In the meantime, I happened to lay my hands on the novels of Iris Murdoch. Like many great modern writers, Murdoch’s pre-occupation in all her works has been
with LIFE. Her characters are constantly in search of the meaning and purpose of life. The interesting thing about Murdoch’s plots is that they talk not merely about what happens to man, but about what man ‘is’. Her knowledge of the working of the human mind, her concern for matters of the heart, and her expertise in the ways of the intellect, when put together and consolidated, became an artistic strength that helped churn out stories of ordinary everydayness. Only an artist who revels in life would know that every minute, and every moment resounds with LIFE. It is with this conviction that her novels present the unique and bizarre nature of life in all honesty. A reading of Murdoch’s novels allows one to relive the realistic experiences of life. Needless to say, her unassuming story-telling style, her lucid and profound diction, and the subtle and symbolic plots provided the right premises for an in-depth study.

The first chapter of the thesis is, thus, an introduction to Iris Murdoch, the acclaimed British novelist and philosopher, whose novels are complex bundles of images, archetypes, symbols, dreams and multiple perspectival characters knit into a ‘seemingly’ simple fabric of unpretentious stories.

A couple of Murdoch’s novels, which quite evidently reflect meaninglessness and a quest for purpose, have been chosen for the study. Journeying with the characters of the ‘Murdochian’ world as a reader and a researcher, one stumbles upon certain archetypal characters and situations that form recurrent motifs in the novels. The Message to the Planet and The Green Knight have mystic masters as their central characters. These ‘master’ characters are followed and pursued by their pupils in a quest for the ultimate meaning or the talisman which is believed to be in the master’s possession. A close study of the ‘master’ character reveals certain characteristics that mirror the Jungian archetype of the ‘wise old man’ whose presence and wisdom leads the hero to the Holy Grail.
In course of the study, certain crucial questions are raised: “What is the destination of life?” “What is the path like?” “Who is the ‘Master’ in possession of knowledge, as regards the true purpose of life, who can/will lead?” Perhaps, the most important question is “Why does man feel the need to be led?” The second chapter uses The Message to the Planet and The Green Knight to look at the different facets of these questions, and tries to answer them in a subtle, yet profound, manner. However, it was surprising to note that, at places, these novels also delineate the very same master (Marcus) as sinister, or as a devil who curses (Pat). By doing so, the novels hint at the idea of evil or ‘undesirability’ which is another side of the ‘master.’ This was something unexpected but important. It appeared obvious that Murdoch’s tale was leading to the idea of the ‘undesirability’ of the ‘master,’ questioning the need for one. This subtle twist was very interesting and revelatory. In order to get a comprehensive view of the course of the journey of life, the study needed to closely examine the implications of this strange twist.

To exclusively explore the idea of the ‘master’/ (d)evil, and the idea of undesirability, the third chapter introduces another set of two novels, A Fairly Honourable Defeat and A Word Child, the former with an enchanter or devil figure as one of its characters, and the latter that vividly delineates the struggle of the protagonist with the (d)evil within. The dissuading plot of A Fairly Honourable Defeat gives rise to curiosity in the readers to study the character of Julius King, the enchanter. However, the subtext helps the readers to resist the temptation of focusing on the devil and, instead, focus on the impact of the (d)evil on the lives of the characters. By portraying the futility of the characters’ attempts to escape the devil, the novels brilliantly lead the reader to understand that the devil is not outside us. The novels subtly fashion the enchanter or the devil figure after another important Jungian
archetype, the Shadow which is nothing but the repressed evil in the unconscious part of the psyche.

The novels present the intense struggle of the characters to abscond from the evil inside them, which they call the devil. The chapter, however, makes a close study of the novels to discover the importance of the journey with the devil and the ways to face the challenge of walking with him.

Thus, the novels that have been studied in the second and third chapters represent situational archetypal narrative patterns, the quest motif, and certain character archetypes like the ‘wise old man’, the ‘devil,’ ‘puer aeternus’ and ‘trickster’. Thus, in an attempt to unravel the purpose of life, the thesis takes the support of Jungian psychology which naturally leads to an exploration of the connection between the storyline of the novels and the ‘collective unconscious.’

In a way, the study of the idea of being ‘led’ (the idea of the desirability of the ‘master’), in the second chapter, shifts to the idea of being ‘chased’ (the idea of the undesirability of the ‘devil’) in the third chapter. And, when the devil is, at places, described as God, the thesis raises the most singular question: “Are the master and the devil one and the same?” In an attempt to explore the different dimensions of this question, the study shifts its attention back to the idea of goodness as being latent in the idea of evil.

The inevitable oscillation between extremes – good and evil, master and devil – opens the avenue and sets the platform for the study of the nature, significance and outcome of such oscillation in the fourth chapter. The novels, *The Sandcastle* and *The Bell*, vividly portray this battling of the opposites and the inner conflict that the characters go through to achieve the most sought-after goal of life: the stable point of equilibrium. The characters and situations in the novels brilliantly present the
predicament of man struggling between these seemingly cruel forces/ extremes. Nevertheless, since the novels subtly reflect the significance of such a struggle, the chapter endeavours to define the process and highlight the importance of this oscillation.

Certainly, this is a disconcerting experience since it challenges the fundamental and deep-rooted idea of opposites (especially good and evil). The chapter runs the risk of ‘seeming’ to endorse the awareness of evil just for the wholesome experience of life. But, viewed in a broader perspective, the study only reiterates the inevitability of experiencing the opposites till one achieves an objective stance or vantage point at which the opposites cease to exist. As Eliot put it, a complete knowledge of good or a complete knowledge of evil never corrupts. What corrupts is partial knowledge, of either good or evil. In its deep reading of the novels, the thesis suggests the futility of giving ‘privilege’ to one opposite over the other, an idea endorsed by the deconstructionists. This insight has been an opening towards a whole new depth and breadth of the work.

Therefore, instead of celebrating the good and denigrating the evil, the chapter attempts to shift the focus to an exploration of the reasons and the consequences of the inevitable oscillation between good and evil in the journey of life. The study does not try to suggest any single way to attain equilibrium since the novels do not prescribe any such antidotes. Instead, it records and analyses the rare moments of equilibrium experienced by the characters.

All things considered, in its attempt to find the purpose of life, the thesis arrives at different phases in man’s journey as reflected in the novels: **Following the master** with the hope of finding ultimate knowledge or the purpose of life unconsciously drags man outward. In the process, man **encounters the devil** who,
unexpectedly, leads him back to the reality or the inward truth. Exhausted by the oscillation between the inner and the outer, the ideas of good and evil, both of which are the outcome of his limited understanding, man is forced inward to nurture the rare moments of clarity and equilibrium that the eventful journey unassumingly bestows on him. Murdoch’s novels portray these moments so consummately well that it becomes clear that all that has been the ‘master’ or the ‘devil,’ the good or the evil has only been the result of wrong or limited perception. The reality is the present moment stripped of the extravagance of imagination and perception.

The novels suggest that such an understanding can take place only if one endures the journey or process called LIFE. The thesis concludes on the reiterative note that the quest or the journey is in itself the goal. The fifth and concluding chapter sums up the inferences and insights drawn from the previous chapters, and also highlights the narrative style of Iris Murdoch, her in-depth treatment of life, and her belief in the sanctity of the ‘journey.’ While some critics remark that Murdoch’s plots are redundant, with the initial situation and the denouement invariably meeting at one point, the thesis emphasises that this is a technique deliberately or unconsciously employed by the author to suggest that the edifice of life begins and ends at the same point. Indeed, what man achieves towards the end of life is only an ‘awareness’ which is the product of complex experiences.

Thus, by studying the structure of the novels as well as the outward archetypal structures that are ingrained into them, the research project attempts, to an extent, what Northrop Frye calls, a centripetal and centrifugal approach.

To put it in a nutshell, the thesis, entitled “From Purposelessness to Purpose: A Study of Shift in Perspective in Select Novels of Iris Murdoch,” attempts to trace the journey of life in a quest for purpose along the three phases of following the
master, encountering the devil and battling the opposites. The structure of the thesis is deliberately kept conventional, using the familiar terminology of master, devil and conflict which one can easily relate to, since the thought line (about life) is blurring, at times. These are fluid concepts which wear the mask of simplicity and raise certain difficult questions about life and its purpose, its path and destination. Life is not always about the right answers. It is often about asking the right questions. Therefore, the research work does not intend to plunge into answering certain questions falsely. Instead, it aims to raise a couple of important questions. In studying the different phases of life’s journey, as discussed in separate chapters, the thesis endorses Jung’s concept of individuation, the process necessary for the integration of the psyche by giving up the mask/persona and aligning with the authentic self. Besides placing the study in a communal experiential space, in an endeavour to uncover the enigma of life and its purpose, the thesis also takes the support of various approaches such as narratology, post-structuralism, Jungian archetypal criticism and psychoanalytic criticism.

(The 7th edition of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers and the 3rd edition of the MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing have been followed throughout the thesis for the formatting, bibliography and citation rules.)