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THE DIALECTICS OF LIFE IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF ANTIQUITY SCHOLARS

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Abstract

This article examines the formation and development of the concept of the dialectics of life within the philosophical and literary-aesthetic thought of antiquity. It analyzes how ancient Greek philosophers and theorists of literature interpreted such fundamental problems as the changing nature of human life, its development through contradictions, fate and choice, life and death, good and evil, knowledge and ignorance, necessity and freedom. In particular, the article provides a comparative study of Heraclitus's doctrine of the continuous change of being and the unity of opposites; Socrates' views on self-knowledge and moral choice; Plato's conception of the world of Forms, the soul, and the imitative nature of art; and Aristotle's comprehensive interpretation of human action, fate, happiness, virtue, and artistic conflict. The study substantiates that the fundamental principles of the dialectics of life in antiquity-movement, change, contradiction, negation, choice, causality, and development-became among the important principles underlying philosophical and artistic thought.

Keywords: dialectics of life, ancient philosophy, Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, tragedy, fate, free will, contradiction, human nature, artistic thought.



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Introduction

In the history of human thought, questions concerning the essence of life, the place of the human being in existence, the relationship between the individual and fate and necessity, and the purpose of human life have been among the oldest and, at the same time, most complex philosophical problems. From the earliest philosophical inquiries, questions such as “What is life?”, “How should a human being live?”, “Can a person determine his or her own fate?”, “What is the relationship between change and stability?”, and “Is the course of human life merely a collection of accidental events, or does it follow a certain causal order?” have remained at the center of philosophical and artistic thought. The complexity of the phenomenon of life lies in the fact that it always manifests itself through movement and change. A person is born, grows, makes choices, makes mistakes, searches, struggles, strives toward a goal, experiences loss, and ultimately encounters the inevitable end of life. Thus, life itself is a process composed of opposing states, changes, and transitions. In this respect, the concept of the “dialectics of life” makes it possible to understand human existence through its internal and external contradictions.

Although the term “dialectics” was considerably developed in later periods from a philosophical and methodological perspective, the roots of such concepts as contradiction, movement, change, development, causality, and negation-which constitute its essential content-can be traced back to ancient philosophy. In particular, Heraclitus’s conception of being as continuous movement and change, Socrates’ placing the question of self-knowledge at the center of philosophical inquiry, Plato’s interpretation of the contradiction between material and ideal existence, and Aristotle’s views on movement, potentiality and actuality, causality, human activity, and happiness provided an important foundation for subsequent dialectical thought. The artistic expression of the dialectics of life is most clearly



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manifested, above all, in ancient Greek tragedy. Greek tragedy is not limited to the human being's confrontation with external forces. It presents, in the form of artistic conflict, contradictions between the individual and the self, knowledge and ignorance, desire and obligation, fate and will, and good and evil. In this sense, Sophocles' Oedipus Rex may be regarded as one of the ancient works that most fully expresses the dialectical nature of human life in artistic form.

The relevance of the topic lies primarily in the fact that the problem of the dialectics of life is not merely an issue in the history of philosophy but also has significant methodological importance for literary studies. A literary work depicts human life in the process of its development, together with its contradictions and turning points. The psychological evolution of a character, his or her life choices, mistakes, and realizations constitute, in essence, an artistic model of the dialectics of life.

In his Poetics, Aristotle defines tragedy as the imitation of a serious, complete action of a certain magnitude. In his view, action, rather than the external appearance of the characters, lies at the center of tragedy. The plot, in turn, constitutes the organized structure of that action. Aristotle considers the plot of a tragedy as a unified action and emphasizes that it must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. From this perspective, the study of the dialectics of life in ancient philosophy and literary theory makes it possible to analyze two fundamental manifestations of human existence-philosophical understanding and artistic representation-as interconnected phenomena.

Methodology

This article employs a methodological approach based on the interrelationship between the history of philosophy, literary theory, and comparative literary studies. The theoretical framework of the study consists of historical-philosophical, comparative-typological, hermeneutic, and dialectical methods. Particular



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attention is given to examining reality in ancient literature not merely as a historical phenomenon, but as an artistic and philosophical model expressing the universal patterns of human existence.

Main part

One of the earliest conceptual manifestations of the dialectics of life in ancient philosophy can be found in the thought of Heraclitus. For Heraclitus, being is not a static, immutable phenomenon that exists in an unchanging state. On the contrary, existence manifests itself through constant movement, change, and the interaction of opposing forces. One of the fundamental principles of Heraclitean philosophy is the understanding of existence as a process. The significance of the image of the river is rooted in precisely this idea: although a river may appear externally to remain the same, its waters are constantly changing. Thus, “unity” and “change” do not negate one another; rather, they constitute two aspects of a single phenomenon. From the perspective of the dialectics of life, this idea is of exceptional importance. A human being, too, remains the same person at different stages of life while simultaneously undergoing constant change. A person in childhood is not biologically or psychologically identical to the person he or she becomes in adulthood. Nevertheless, continuity exists between these stages. Therefore, the dialectical nature of life manifests itself in the unity of change and continuity.

In Socratic philosophy, attention shifts from nature to the human being. Whereas the early Greek philosophers were primarily concerned with the origins of the cosmos and the structure of being, Socrates placed human moral existence, knowledge, and virtue at the center of philosophical inquiry. For Socrates, one of the most important tasks of the human being is self-knowledge. The principle “Know thyself” makes it possible to understand human life not merely as a



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collection of external events, but as an internal psychological and moral process. Here, the dialectics of life manifests itself less in external natural phenomena than in the inner world of the human being. A person is simultaneously a being who knows and a being capable of recognizing his or her own ignorance. Spiritual development takes place precisely through this inner contradiction.

Socrates' dialogical method is likewise dialectical in character. He does not provide ready-made answers; rather, through questions, he compels his interlocutor to reconsider his or her own views. As a result, an ordinary assumption develops into a more complex conception. This principle is particularly important for literature because the inner development of a literary character often consists of a process of questioning and answering, doubt and conviction, knowledge and realization. The process of self-understanding generally takes place through conflict. A character confronts values in which he or she previously believed, while life experience transforms earlier convictions. In this sense, the dialectical mode of thinking found in Socratic philosophy may be regarded as an important philosophical foundation for the artistic representation of the human inner life.

In Plato's philosophy, the question of life and being acquires an even more complex structure. According to his Theory of Forms, the material world is changeable and imperfect, whereas true essence is associated with the world of Forms. This conception introduces a distinctive duality into the dialectics of life. On the one hand, there is the material world in which human beings live; on the other, there is an ideal and absolute realm of essence. Plato's views on art are also directly connected with his ontological position. In *The Republic*, he evaluates art, particularly poetry based on imitation, from a critical perspective. For Plato, *mimēsis*, or imitation, carries the danger of distancing the individual from truth. However, interpreting Plato's attitude toward art merely as an "anti-art" position would be one-sided. His dialogues also attach considerable importance to the



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relationship between beauty, inspiration, poetry, and the spiritual elevation of the soul. In particular, the dialogues Phaedrus and Ion explore the distinctive nature of poetic inspiration.

One of the most important aspects of Plato's thought is that human life is interpreted not simply as a sequence of external events, but as a spiritual journey of the soul. This conception exerted considerable influence on the representation of characters' inner worlds in subsequent literature. A character's external actions become organically connected with his or her internal psychological state. Consequently, in Platonic philosophy, the center of the dialectics of life shifts toward such oppositions as "materiality and ideality," "ignorance and knowledge," "desire and reason," and "appearance and essence."

One of the most developed systems of the dialectics of life in ancient philosophy was formulated in Aristotle's thought. Aristotle explains human life not as an abstract form of existence, but as a process manifested through activity, choice, and virtue. One of the central concepts of the Nicomachean Ethics is eudaimonia, that is, human flourishing and the attainment of happiness and a meaningful life. Aristotle emphasizes that the primary purpose of ethical inquiry is to determine the conditions necessary for human flourishing and living well. From this perspective, life is not merely biological existence. Human life in its fullest sense manifests itself through activity, choice, and virtuous action.

For Aristotle, a human being does not attain a good life by chance but through particular virtues and rational choices. Thus, the meaning of human life is not given in a ready-made form; rather, it is formed through the process of human activity. This perspective reveals an important dimension of the dialectics of life: human life moves from potentiality toward actuality. At birth, not all of a person's future possibilities have yet been realized. Through education, experience, choice, and activity, individuals actualize their potential. A dialectical principle can also be



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observed in Aristotle's conception of virtue. Virtue is associated with finding a particular "mean" by avoiding two extremes-excess and deficiency. Thus, finding balance in human life likewise requires continuous inner struggle and choice.

Accordingly, in Aristotle's philosophy, the dialectics of life can be observed through the following relationships: potentiality-actuality, knowledge-experience, desire-reason, free choice-necessity, virtue-excess, and happiness-activity. These categories make it possible to understand human life as a dynamic and processual phenomenon.

Aristotle's Poetics is one of the most important sources in the history of literary studies for theoretically explaining the relationship between life and artistic representation. Aristotle defines tragedy as an imitation of action. This is particularly significant because he places human action, rather than external description, at the center of the literary work. Human action, in turn, always has a purpose, a cause, and a consequence. Therefore, a literary plot is not a random collection of events from life, but a system of causally interconnected actions. Aristotle regards plot as the "soul" of tragedy. In his view, the plot must represent a unified action, with its parts connected by necessary or probable relationships.

This idea is directly related to the dialectics of life. Events in human life do not occur in complete isolation from one another. A person's previous choices influence his or her subsequent life. One decision gives rise to another event. In some cases, a consequence that a character does not anticipate emerges precisely from a previous action. In this way, Aristotle connects the internal logic of artistic plot with the causality of life.

Another important idea in Aristotle's Poetics is that the poet's task is not merely to narrate "what has happened," but to demonstrate "what could happen." For this reason, Aristotle distinguishes poetry from history, emphasizing that poetry tends toward the representation of the universal, whereas history is concerned with



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particular events. This idea clearly demonstrates the capacity of literature to comprehend the dialectics of life. History may record a particular person and a particular event, whereas literature reveals the universal patterns of human existence through a particular event.

To understand ancient Greek tragedy as an artistic model of the dialectics of life, it is necessary to examine its fundamental conflicts. At the center of Greek tragedy generally lie contradictions between the individual and fate, the individual and society, the individual and the gods, the individual and the self, and knowledge and ignorance. In the tragedies of Aeschylus, the relationship between human beings and divine and moral order is particularly significant; in Sophocles, the questions of human responsibility before fate and the problem of knowledge become more pronounced; Euripides, meanwhile, pays greater attention to the complexity of human psychology, individual passions, and social contradictions.

Different manifestations of the dialectics of life can be observed in the works of these three dramatists. In Aeschylus, one may identify the internal pattern guilt → suffering → realization → responsibility; in Sophocles, ignorance → inquiry → truth → tragedy; and in Euripides, desire → conflict → choice → consequence. These patterns demonstrate how human life develops through opposing states.

Oedipus Rex represents one of the most vivid artistic models of the dialectics of life. Oedipus is a character who seeks to understand the meaning and truth of his own existence. In an effort to save his city from the plague, he sets out to find the murderer of Laius. However, in the process of searching for the murderer, he gradually realizes that he is, in fact, searching for the truth about his own past. The central dialectical paradox of the tragedy lies in the fact that Oedipus comes to understand his tragedy precisely through his pursuit of truth. Had he not searched, the truth would have remained hidden. Yet because he searches for the truth, he ultimately discovers it. Thus, a chain emerges: the desire for knowledge → the



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revelation of truth → tragic realization. Here, the human pursuit of knowledge becomes simultaneously the source of both salvation and tragedy.

Although Oedipus's fate is predetermined, it is through his own actions that he brings the truth to light. Therefore, fate and will in the tragedy do not appear as two absolute forces that simply negate one another; rather, they emerge as phenomena engaged in a complex relationship. Oedipus attempts to escape his fate. Yet precisely those actions through which he seeks to avoid his fate bring him closer to the foretold outcome. This represents a classic manifestation of the dialectics of life: a person acts toward a particular goal, but his or her actions may produce an unforeseen result. This phenomenon recurs frequently in later literature as well. A character may attempt to change his or her fate, only to contribute, through those very actions, to the fulfillment of that fate.

In ancient tragedy, the concept of fate does not imply absolute passivity. The character's choices also play an important role in the development of the tragedy. Therefore, the simplistic interpretation that "fate determines everything" cannot fully reveal the complexity of ancient tragedy. Oedipus is not merely a passive victim of fate. He actively searches, makes decisions, and assumes responsibility. His tragedy lies in the fact that, although he commits the crime unknowingly, once he discovers the truth, he does not flee from it. Thus, the most important ethical meaning of the tragedy manifests itself in the individual's attitude toward what has happened. Oedipus's greatness lies not in overcoming his fate, but in refusing to escape from it after recognizing the truth. This aspect deepens the dialectical nature of human existence. A person cannot control everything, but he or she can determine his or her attitude toward reality.

Aristotle attaches particular importance in tragedy to peripeteia-the sudden reversal of circumstances-and anagnorisis-recognition or realization. In a complex plot, a character's fate changes precisely through such reversals and moments of



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recognition. In essence, peripeteia represents an artistic form of the dialectics of life. A character initially occupies one state: happiness → confidence → success; subsequently, however, a new sequence emerges: doubt → reversal → realization → tragedy. Thus, the reversal in the literary plot expresses the changeability of human life. Anagnorisis, in turn, represents an internal stage in the character's transformation. The character comes to recognize not merely an external event but, above all, his or her own condition.

This process is particularly evident in Oedipus Rex. By discovering who he truly is, Oedipus is compelled to reconsider the meaning of his entire life. In this respect, Aristotle's theory of tragedy explains the dialectical model of human existence through artistic structure.

In ancient thought, the problem of life was not interpreted separately from the question of death. The finiteness of life gives meaning to human existence. If human beings lived forever, the value of choice and time would be fundamentally different. In ancient tragedy, death is not merely a biological ending. It often becomes a point at which the character comes to recognize their true essence. Confronted with death or destruction, the character reveals their authentic nature. Thus, in ancient tragedy, death becomes an integral component of the chain ending → realization → meaning. From this perspective, the meaning of life is determined not merely by its duration but by the way in which a person has lived. In Aristotle's ethics as well, the quality of human life is not judged by a single moment but in relation to the individual's entire life activity. Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia connects human flourishing with virtuous activity.

In ancient thought, happiness and suffering were likewise not treated as absolutely separate concepts. Aristotle does not equate happiness merely with pleasure or external prosperity. In his view, a good life is connected with virtuous activity. Therefore, the presence of difficulties in human life does not automatically mean



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that life is meaningless. Tragedy expresses this idea in artistic form. A character's suffering often reveals their moral essence. Oedipus's tragedy, for example, does not reduce his life to a meaningless sequence of events. On the contrary, his determination to seek the truth defines the spiritual significance of the character. Thus, in ancient artistic thought, suffering is not merely pain but also a means of realization.

Plato's and Aristotle's attitudes toward art differ from one another. For Plato, *mimēsis* (imitation) may create the danger of distancing the individual from truth. In *The Republic*, he criticizes the influence of poetic imitation on the human soul. Aristotle, by contrast, regards *mimēsis* as a natural human capacity and interprets it as one of the principal mechanisms of artistic knowledge. For Aristotle, a work of art is not a simple copy of real life. It reorganizes events from life on the basis of causal, probable, and necessary relationships. Therefore, Aristotle's *Poetics* is of particular significance for understanding the dialectics of life in artistic form. Literature does not simply reproduce life. It reveals its internal laws. For this reason, Aristotle's view that "poetry tends toward universality" establishes the philosophical potential of literature in understanding human life.

The dialectics of life in ancient philosophy and literature developed on the basis of several fundamental principles:

First, life was understood as a process. Heraclitus's views on change and movement represent one of the earliest philosophical manifestations of this principle.

Second, human life was interpreted as a unity of contradictions. Oppositions such as life and death, happiness and suffering, knowledge and ignorance, fate and will were manifested as inseparable aspects of human existence.



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Third, self-knowledge was regarded as one of the fundamental processes giving meaning to human life. This aspect is particularly prominent in Socratic philosophy.

Fourth, art became a means of understanding human life. While Plato was concerned about the influence of art on the soul, Aristotle justified artistic imitation as an important human capacity.

Fifth, artistic conflict developed as an aesthetic form of the dialectics of life. Conflict in tragedy concretizes the contradictions inherent in human existence.

Sixth, Aristotle connected action in a work of art with the causal structure of life. The beginning, middle, and end of a plot, together with the necessary or probable relationships among events, ensure the internal coherence of the artistic model of life.

Seventh, in ancient thought, human fate was manifested not as a passive phenomenon but as a process connected with active choices. This is particularly evident in Sophoclean tragedy, where the protagonist's search and choices constitute forces contributing to the emergence of the tragedy.

The concept of the dialectics of life also possesses considerable methodological potential for contemporary literary studies. The life trajectory of a literary character is generally not static. A character changes, confronts their environment, makes decisions, makes mistakes, realizes certain truths, and moves to a new stage. Therefore, when studying character development, it is important to identify the opposing forces operating within the character's life. These may include: the character's desire ↔ social expectations, individual freedom ↔ external necessity, reason ↔ emotion, faith ↔ doubt, past ↔ future, life ↔ death, fate ↔ choice. These oppositional pairs constitute the basis of artistic conflict. Therefore, applying the concept of the dialectics of life to the analysis of literary works makes it



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possible to determine not only the psychological state of a character but also their position within existence.

In this respect, ancient thought can serve as an important methodological source for contemporary existential literary studies as well. Although such problems as human loneliness, choice, absurdity, fate, death, and the meaning of life emerged in new forms in modern existentialism, their philosophical roots can be traced back to ancient thought. The protagonist of ancient tragedy is also often compelled to understand the meaning of their life. They are forced to question who they are, why they suffer, and how they should live. In this sense, ancient tragedy may be regarded as one of the distant historical and philosophical roots of subsequent existential literature.

Conclusion

An analysis of the views of ancient philosophers and literary theorists demonstrates that the dialectics of life is a complex philosophical and aesthetic phenomenon with deeply rooted origins in the history of human thought. Although the concept of “dialectics” developed as a distinct methodological system in later philosophical thought, the fundamental principles underlying it—change, movement, contradiction, causality, choice, development, and negation—were already present in ancient thought.

Heraclitus revealed the changing and dynamic nature of life. In his philosophy, being manifests itself as a continuous process. This constitutes the ontological foundation of the dialectics of life. Socrates shifted attention toward the inner world of the human being, connecting the meaning of life with self-knowledge, knowledge, and moral choice. His dialogical method leads to new understanding by bringing opposing viewpoints into confrontation. Plato interpreted the problem of life and being through the relationship between the material and ideal worlds.



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His views on art and *mimēsis* transformed the relationship between artistic representation and truth into a philosophical problem. Aristotle, in turn, integrated the philosophical and artistic dimensions of the dialectics of life into a relatively comprehensive system. While in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he associated the good life with virtuous activity and *eudaimonia*, in the *Poetics* he developed a mechanism for the artistic representation of human life through action, conflict, causality, and changes in fortune. In Aristotle's ethics, human flourishing is not merely a matter of theoretical knowledge but is directly connected with the question of how one should live.

The philosophers and literary theorists of antiquity laid the foundations for understanding life not as a fixed, immutable, and one-dimensional phenomenon, but as a complex process constituted by opposing forces, choices, actions, and changes. This scholarly conclusion makes it possible to apply the dialectics of life as an important theoretical foundation for studying the problem of human destiny in later literature, particularly in modernism, existentialism, and contemporary fiction. This is because such problems in modern literature as the human search for the meaning of life, the struggle against fate, the pursuit of free choice, and the awareness of loneliness and death represent new historical and aesthetic forms of philosophical questions that originated in antiquity. Thus, the dialectics of life in ancient philosophy and literature may be regarded not merely as a stage in the history of philosophy but also as a universal model of thought that emerged in the course of humanity's attempt to understand its own existence.

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