

# Sarah Evola

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Major: English and Psychology  
University: University of Missouri-Columbia  
Faculty Mentor: Francis Dickey  
Mentor Department: English  
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## Performing the cycle of life and death: Sylvia Plath's model of female suicide

Suicide is central in Sylvia Plath's late poems as well as her novel The Bell Jar. Psychological research and theory support the notion that suicide is not simply meant to end a suicidal person's perception of the world - it can and often does have a life-oriented purpose. Critics of Plath have taken a wide spectrum of perspectives on death in her writing, from the opinion that Plath treats death morbidly to the opposite view that death is life-affirming in Plath's writing. The most recent critical work tends to balance these life and death-oriented interpretations. In her poems "Edge," "Tulips," and "Lady Lazarus" and her novel The Bell Jar Plath constructs a model of female suicide. In this model the traditional social pressure put upon the suicidal woman to take on a primarily sexual and domestic role compels her to perform for the benefit of others, usually her family, rather than following her own desire and seeking her own identity. She inevitably chooses suicide in response to this intolerable pressure. Death through suicide is not meant to terminate the woman's life; it is a means for her to distinguish herself and to free herself from the required performance. During her death-like state of suicide the woman gains peace but paradoxically loses agency. Thus, inevitably, the suicidal woman must always reemerge into the performances of life. Although her suicide does not change her in any fundamental way, nor does it improve her environment, it does refresh the woman and enable her to continue on in her performance of life for a period without descending into madness and suicide. Yet, Sylvia Plath's model assures that the need for suicide will arise again, because nothing has essentially changed. The suicidal woman becomes trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of life and death.