



Philip de Sa e Silva has taught Upper School English since the fall of 2013. His courses include American Literature, the History of the Novel, the Contemporary Novel, Poetry: Craft and Criticism, and Short-Form Literature. Originally from Seattle, Philip attended Harvard University and is currently working toward an M.A. in English through Middlebury College's Bread Loaf School of English.

## LIFE IN THE UPPER SCHOOL: A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

When I was a junior in high school, I took a French literature class that helped me discover the pleasures of close-reading and the magic of the seminar classroom: two principles that now guide my teaching at SPA. My teacher, a boisterous, gravelly-voiced man who always wore tracksuits (he was also a PE teacher), introduced us to literary devices like enjambment, alexandrines, and litotes as we read works by Voltaire, Baudelaire, Césaire, and Duras. He even had us memorize the international phonetic alphabet so we could pay attention to the sounds of words in poems. I loved this attention to detail because it felt so meaningful; there were important reasons *why* these writers wrote in the precise way they did. Uncovering those reasons, through collaborative discussion, then led to a richer awareness of what it means to be human. Classroom experiences like this are what motivated my desire to become a teacher of literature.

Now, in my fifth year of teaching English in SPA's Upper School, I have discussions like this every day. I have found that literary analysis often brings out our students' best qualities: their intellectual curiosity, their willingness to grapple with complexity, their sense of humor, and their empathy. For instance, in discussions about *Madame Bovary*, one of my favorite novels, students will notice and comment insightfully upon Flaubert's innovations with point of view and his shocking (and often hilarious) juxtaposition of details, as well as Emma's deeply flawed but ultimately forgivable nature.

Part of the joy of teaching at SPA is the daily assurance that students will show me something new about a text. Even when I teach a novel or poem I have read many times, students invariably point out a detail I have overlooked, or show me

new paths of interpretation; I can genuinely say, “I never thought of it that way.” Occasionally, students say things that are so insightful that I literally get chills. While I provide students with the context and critical tools they need to get the most out of a work of literature, I also try to participate in the critical thinking process alongside them. I see my role in Harkness discussions as facilitator, but also as participant: I raise my hand, ask questions, change my mind, and discover new things, just as my students do.

A willingness to engage deeply with ideas is not limited to SPA students; my colleagues on the faculty are vibrant, intellectually engaged, and supportive. In the office I share with three other English teachers, surrounded by bookshelves and student art, it is not unusual for some combination of us to be reading aloud to each other. Many Upper School classes are taught in teams of two or three teachers, meaning we regularly collaborate to share and develop teaching approaches. Teachers often visit each other’s classrooms; I was recently invited to my colleague Matt Hoven’s creative writing class to perform in student-written plays.

Such collaborations model for students what it means to be lifelong learners and thinkers, and they also allow me to engage in the same intellectual discovery that excited me about teaching when I was a student. I also believe that this model encourages students to view their teachers as collaborators as well, and that extends outside the confines of the classroom. One of the luxuries of SPA’s small classes and block schedule is the opportunity for students to meet with teachers outside of class—a skill that serves them well in college. A few weeks ago, a student met with me as he was working on an essay on Sylvia Plath’s poem “Morning Song”; we ended up spending 20 minutes talking just about similes in the poem. Not long after, a student came in to talk about a short story she was working on outside of class, just for fun.

Another joy is the extent to which students invite their teachers into their activities outside of school. I have attended more sporting events, plays, concerts, and dance performances in my almost-five years here than I can count. I’m a life-long theater fan, and I would pay money to watch SPA’s Upper School plays and musicals; the things students can do under the guidance of theater director and

English teacher Eric Severson are inspiring. But I was never a hockey fan until I started going to the Spartans’ games (hockey is not very big on the West Coast—not nearly frigid enough). During hockey games in particular, I am stunned by my students’ speed and facility on the ice—and then the next day, I listen to these same students in class as they talk intelligently and thoughtfully about *The Great Gatsby* or *Zadie Smith*. I am sometimes in awe of our students’ ability to harness their passions and talents, whether in the classroom or outside of it.

These passions and talents are not limited to students, of course. While SPA faculty members are experts in their fields, they have surprisingly interdisciplinary interests, which they share generously with students and colleagues. One of my favorite things about teaching short stories by Alice Munro, for instance, is that I can invite beloved Upper School math teacher (and long-time Munro fan) Jim McVeety to my classes to share his favorite passages. History teacher Ryan Oto recently visited American Literature classes to discuss the practice of redlining, which factors into Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun*. And English teacher Claire Wahmanholm ’04 is an accomplished poet; I recently saw her read at Magers & Quinn from her newly published collection *Night Vision*. We are a deeply and widely engaged faculty in countless ways; even conversations at lunch with colleagues are vibrant and stimulating.

When I first thought of becoming a teacher when I was a high school student, I might have predicted a professional life filled with reading, writing, and illuminating classroom discussions. What I did not anticipate, though, was being a part of the wide-reaching intellectual community of students and teachers that I have found at SPA. It is this culture of exploration, sharing, and discovery that has made SPA, for me, an endlessly rewarding place to teach and to learn.

