

## Advanced Humanities Seminar: Critiquing American Icons

### Summer Assignment: Read and Examine

#### *To Kill a Mockingbird* & *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

This summer, you will read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Lee's novel was published in 1960, the year students organized nonviolent sit-ins that exposed racial discrimination and desegregated public spaces in the US. Angelou's memoir was published in 1969, after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and riots broke out in many American cities. Both books focus on life in the Jim Crow South or the early 1900s, from the perspectives of black and white females. Lee's novel and Angelou's memoir also serve as primary sources for the classic Civil Rights movement.

**For each of the following prompts, write a thoughtful, evidence--based paragraph citing specific pages from the texts.**

1. What is significant about the titles of both books? What do these titles add to (or reveal about) the stories told in the novel and memoir?
2. In both books, class and racial experiences and distinctions shape the main character's or narrator's understanding of the world. Provide examples of these distinctions in the novel and memoir, and discuss why these distinctions are important.
3. Compare and contrast the portrayals of blacks and whites in both books. What purpose do these portrayals play in the novel and memoir?
4. Both stories are told from the point of view of a young woman. What role does gender play in these books? You might start from the fact that both books feature an act of violence against a female. How do these acts of violence show gender interacting with race? In what other ways does gender play a role in each book? Do attitudes about gender interfere with or compound attitudes about race? Does the working of gender in the book provide an analogue for thinking about race—or vice versa—for a mid-twentieth-century audience?
5. Consider some of the patterns that emerge within the novel or memoir. These may include the narrator's or characters' thoughts and behaviors or larger situations that seem to parallel earlier ones. Choose one of these recurring elements and offer your response to that pattern. Why is this pattern significant to the development of an idea in the novel or memoir? How does it shape your understanding of the novel or memoir?