

How the lack of education during the great depression affected southern society

[Profession](#), [Teacher](#)



During the Great Depression receiving an education was becoming more and more difficult for southerners. From not being able to afford the required supplies needed, to not being able to pay the tutions, many people found it nearly impossible to attend school. The novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird* written by Harper Lee shows how the lack of education in society during the Great Depression affected Southerners lives, not allowing them to change their futures for the better. The public school system changed drastically during the Great Depression. Society started to notice the changes during the years of 1930 and 1931, when conditions were at their worst. Many students did not have the right clothing, supplies, and textbooks because parents could not afford the costs. The price of school supplies ran from \$1. 00 for a pen to \$3. 85 for a pair of shoes (Editors of Time-Life 29). In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Scout's teacher, Miss Caroline, asked one of her students where his lunch was. He then explained that he did not have a lunch because his parents could not afford it. " He didn't forget his lunch, he didn't have any. He had none today nor would he have any tomorrow or the next day. He had probably never seen three quarters together at the same time in his life" (Lee 20). In addition, student's schoolwork and progress began to decline due to undernourishment. Many children were not able to stay in school because there was not enough money to keep the schools open. A third of a million children were out of school during the Great Depression (Farrell 14). Also, children of poor families dropped out of school because they felt obligated to help support their family financially. In *To Kill A Mockingbird* Scout describes the Ewell family, who only attends school the first day of every year because their family is poor: They come the first day every year

and then leave. The truant lady gets'em here ' cause she threatens ' em with the sheriff, but she's give up tryin' to hold ' em. She reckons she's carried out the law just getting' their names on the roll and runnin' ' em here the first day. You're supposed to mark ' em absent the rest of the year (Lee 27). In cases like these, the purpose for leaving school was to help out the family with chores like tending to the farm and crops. Teachers were impacted severely during the Great Depression. Many teachers suffered through excessive losses in money during this time. As the Depression worsened debts owed to the teachers increased. At one time twenty million dollars in debt was owed to the 14, 000 teachers in Chicago, IL. That is a debt of \$1, 400 per teacher. In addition, 3, 177 out of 6, 315 teachers said they had a loss of \$2, 367, 000 in bank failures during this time (Wilson 145). Teachers' salaries were another big issue that was affected by the Depression. Some teachers' salaries were cut to as low as \$40. 00 a month. Even though this was such a small amount of payment teachers were pleased with the money because jobs were so rare (Sutton). However, in some states annual salaries from 1932-1934 were \$1, 227. 00 for a public school teacher (Editors of Time-Life 26). This was a generous salary for teachers, but in some schools out of the thirteen school months, teachers were only paid their salaries five out of the thirteen months (Wilson 145). Qualified teachers during the Great Depression were very difficult to find and when they were hired their habits were very unacceptable. For example, " Teachers in the middle and southern states were so frequently drunkards that the alcoholic schoolteacher became a stereotype" (Collins 106). It was very difficult to find qualified male teachers during this time because there were other jobs that were better and

paid more. There was a shortage of male teachers in 1833 of 30, 000 (Collins 106). Due to the shortage of male teachers it made finding qualified teachers more difficult because over three-fourths of the United States' school districts would not hire married women; they would only hire married males (Collins 363). However, in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Scout's teacher, Miss Caroline, was an unmarried woman who was hired to teach the first grade. Unfortunately, Miss Caroline did not succeed in her duties as a teacher. She proved to be underqualified for the job and unable to teach the students. " Miss Caroline's progress next door could be estimated by the frequency of laughter; however, the usual crew had flunked the first grade again, and were helpful in keeping order" (Lee 58). Due to the many problems during the Great Depression there were several programs created to try to resolve these problems. For example, the Civil Works Education Service (CWES) was a relief program under the New Deal. It was established January 22, 1934 and ended in November of 1934. The program was an adult education program that helped the unemployed teachers find jobs. Unemployed teachers were hired to teach adults reading and writing skills. Vocational classes were also offered at some places including typing, sewing, and cooking (Peterson). Another program created during this time was the Federal Emergency Education Project (FEEPS). This program was established in November of 1934 and ended in September of 1935. The program was an improved version of CWES. FEEPS provided any person over sixteen and not in school to attend educational classes (Peterson). In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Mayella Ewell was a nineteen-year-old girl who had dropped out of school because there were already two people in her family who could read and

write (Lee 183). Because of her lack of education, she was not able to meet any friends; this led her to lead a terrible life. One where she had to lie and cheat her way out of things. If Mayella had been able to attend the FEEPS program she might have been able to turn her life around and make her life prosper. Former teachers from CWES or unemployed people on relief who could teach were eligible for a teaching position in the program (Peterson). The School Machinery Act was established in 1931 and was created by the North Carolina General Assembly. The School Machinery Act provided education for all children in North Carolina for free. It was said that " The School Machinery Act provided the life preserver necessary for the education system to survive the Great Depression" (Peterson). Finally, the National Youth Administration (NYA) was a program created to aid high school and college students black or white. The NYA was established in mid 1935 and lasted till January of 1938. The NYA helped unmarried youths find jobs and prepare for occupations they would come across later on in their futures. The money given to the students who participated in NYA was only allowed to go towards the cost of books, carfare, and lunch (Peterson). To Kill A Mockingbird proved that southerners who did not receive a full education suffered greatly during the Great Depression. If it were not for all of the major changes that occurred in the educational system during this time, society would have been able to prosper, thus peoples' lives would have been able to change. Whether it was the lack of teachers, lack of funding, or just because children were not able go to school, education proved to be a major issue during the Great Depression that changed peoples' lives severely. Works Cited Collins, Gail. America's Women. New York: Harper

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