

Discuss the theme of autonomy in *Of Mice and Men*

You must consider the context of the novel in your answer (40marks)

In 'Of Mice and Men' few characters have autonomy. One of the characters who has autonomy is the boss. Because he owns the ranch, he has power over all the workers, including the ability to hire and fire at will. In the 1930s, when the book was written, due to the Great Depression 25% of the workforce in America was unemployed. This meant that employers could fire you with barely any thought involved because there would be dozens and maybe even hundreds of men who wanted the job. The boss' autonomy in turn gives Curley autonomy because he is the boss' son. This means that he can do what he wants without the fear of getting fired. They also both have the financial stability to do what they want.

Slim has some autonomy, while less than the boss' and Curley's, it is still more than the other ranch workers. Slim has job security because he is a 'jerline skinner' which is an in demand skill. He also has power over other workers because he is described as 'the prince of the ranch'. Everyone listens to what he says which means he has more independence than the other workers.

George, Lennie and the other migrant workers on the ranch have little autonomy. Due to the Great Depression and the droughts in the Great Plain states creating the Dust Bowl, they have to move around for work. They can't trust that if they get fired from this job they can get another one. All of the itinerant workers have to constantly think about their behaviour and avoid getting fired because getting fired could mean starving to death. They also have very little money and belongings because they have to move around lots and get payed as low as \$2 a day. All this means that they don't have very much control over their lives. This is what caused many itinerant workers to want the 'American Dream' which was to own your own land and to be in charge of your own life. This is shown through George and Lennie's dream to 'live off the fatta the lan'. Sadly, for most itinerant workers the dream never came true.

Crooks probably has the least autonomy of all the characters because he's black. While Crooks is more permanent than the other workers, meaning he has less fear of getting fired, he has a greater fear. If Crooks spoke out of line or did something wrong he was in danger of getting lynched rather than fired. In the 1930s lynching was common and the police did little to stop it. Often even if the police had tried to stop it they wouldn't have been able to because a white person could quickly get the support of the whole town in lynching a black person. This is shown in the book when Curley's wife says, "I could get you hung up on a tree so fast it ain't even funny". Crooks is also separated from the rest of the workers and lives in a little shed off the side of the barn. He does not even have the free will to go into the bunk house.

Curley's wife also has little autonomy as she has to 'stay in that two-by-four house'. She is stuck on a ranch with a husband who just wants to talk about fighting and a load of men who have an extremely prejudiced view on her. In the 1930s women had few rights and it was generally the view that once married the man was in control of her. It would be near impossible for her to get a divorce from Curley unless he agreed. This means she is stuck with him until one of them dies. Her name in the book shows how she has no independence because she is just called Curley's wife.