

Boarders without borders: exercising authority wherever they go

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



When hard times hit, families must often take desperate actions in order to ensure financial stability in their household, and the Samsas in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* are no different. After Gregor, the main breadwinner of the family, wakes up one morning as a bug, the Samsas must take in three gentlemen as boarders in order to bring in money. However, what they end up bringing in proves to be far worse than just three men. The three boarders are more than characters who make the Samsas their servants. Rather, they are representative of a more sinister foe. The three boarders are a representation of the harsh world outside of Gregor's apartment, where uselessness is not tolerated and where the people with power need to suppress the weak in order to establish authority.

From the instant the three boarders are introduced, it is made clear that "unnecessary clutter was something they could not tolerate, especially if it was dirty" (35). For this reason, the Samsas move all the trash and objects that have no place in the house into Gregor's room. Trash and unnecessary items serve no purpose but to take up space. Much like Gregor as a bug, these items are useless. The trash piled up in Gregor's room is symbolic of the people that society casts aside because they serve no purpose in the world, and the fact that it is stored in Gregor's room serves to highlight that Gregor is as useless as the trash. Therefore, the boarders cannot stand to be around the trash. In order to fit into society, an individual must have a useful role because if they do not have one, society will cast them out.

Furthermore, useless people must remain out of sight from useful people in order to not impede the useful people from doing their job. That is why seeing Gregor repulses the three boarders. The boarders instantly "asked

Gregor's father for explanations" as to what was happening " and moved back towards their rooms only very slowly" (38). They label the Samsas' flat as having " repugnant conditions" because the mere idea of sharing an establishment with a useless individual is an insult to their status as powerful, useful members of society (39). The boarders' reactions also serve to highlight another reality of society: the refusal to accept those who are different. Gregor as a bug is not only useless, but he is also different from everybody else. While his thoughts are still humane, his appearance is not, so society views him as something inhuman. The boarders need to stay away, then, because if they are seen living with someone not accepted by society, they, too, would be viewed as different. Then, the boarders will be made outcasts, and they will begin to lose their authority and power, two traits the boarders worked very hard to gain.

In order to establish themselves as figures of authority, people in power believe they need to suppress the weak. One way of doing this is by imposing one's beliefs and ideas on others. When the boarders moved into the Samsas' apartment, they " brought most of their own furnishings and equipment with them" (35). A person's furniture represents their humanity, their beliefs, and their passions. That is why when Gregor's family removed Gregor's furniture from his room, Gregor felt as if his family had given up on him and were taking his humanity away. When the boarders decided to bring their own furniture with them to the Samsas' apartment, they are removing the Samsas' furniture and replacing it with their own. More than that, they are removing the Samsas' humanity and beliefs and installing their own

beliefs in their place. In effect, this dehumanizes the Samsas because their humanity, much like Gregor's, is being taken away. This makes it easier for the boarders to take control of the household and make the Samsas subservient to them. This concept of one group disregarding the beliefs of another group is very prevalent throughout society and is equally demonstrated by the boarders.

After the boarders move in, the Samsas are no longer the masters of their own house. Gregor's father no longer occupies the seat at the head of the table during dinner as is customary for the patriarch of a household. Now, the boarders "sat up at the table where, formerly, Gregor had taken his meals with his father and mother," and the "family themselves ate in the kitchen," like servants (36). Before taking his meals in the kitchen, "Gregor's father came into the living room...bowed once with his cap in his hand and did his round of the table," further showing that it now the task of the Samsas to please the boarders (36). The Samsas are relegated to eating their meals where laborers and servants typically eat when, in fact, they are supposed to be the leaders of the house. This shows an obvious shift in the authority from the Samsas to the boarders, showing that in the world outside their house, authority is gained by suppressing the weak. The Samsas are vulnerable at the moment because they need the money from the boarders, and this gives the boarders the opportunity to establish power and dominance over them. In society, people are in constant competition with each other, and in order to prove one's worth over another, people tend to exploit their competitors' weaknesses. This happens when people are vying

for leadership positions or the economic sector with businesses competing with each other. For the boarders, it is no different with the Samsas, demonstrating that the boarders are, indeed, a representation of the outside world.

The Samsas spent much of their time enclosed in their apartment that they sometimes failed to see the realities of the world outside their home. However, their choice to take in boarders brought them face-to-face with the harsh realities of life. In order to be accepted as members of society they have to rid themselves of useless possessions and people and forgo their attachment to Gregor. Once they do that, they will no longer be considered weak and no one can ever have complete control over them. The boarders, if anything, served as a learning experience for the Samsas; now, they know what to do to ensure that they never become servants to anyone again.