

# **A Fine and Private Place Short Guide**

## **A Fine and Private Place by Peter S. Beagle**

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# Contents

<a href="#">A Fine and Private Place Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns/Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>



# Characters

Of the characters in *A Fine and Private Place*, Beagle wrote in his introduction to *The Fantasy Worlds of Peter S. Beagle* that "Mr. Rebeck is a flagrant steal from the Robert Nathan novels that I was devouring at the time, most particularly *One More Spring*, (1933).

Michael Morgan was my idea of what being all of thirty-four and unhappily but interestingly married would be like; Laura Durand is me then; and Mrs. Gertrude Klapper, thank God, is herself." The four main characters do not function as separate entities. Instead, they form a complex pattern of foils in which each character complements the other three. Thus Michael Morgan is a ghost who invests all of his mental faculties into remembering past sensations; he desperately wants to hang on to life and to motivate Laura, who only wants to sleep underground, to do the same. He is therefore not only Laura's opposite but Mr. Rebeck's, the ex-druggist who has rejected life and now lives in a mausoleum among the dead. However, Michael is very much like Mrs. Klapper.

His efforts to make Laura want to stay connected to the living resemble Mrs. Klapper's efforts to get Mr. Rebeck to leave the cemetery. Michael and Mrs. Klapper are both lovers who bring life to the dead, and Laura and Mr. Rebeck are the beloved who receive it. Also, acting as Chorus and as a go-between with the outside world is a raven who brings food to Mr. Rebeck.



## Social Concerns/Themes

Beagle is more interested in exploring the difference between life and death in terms of how an individual person creates and maintains an identity than in any wider social issues.

This first novel is set in a Bronx cemetery, where the newly arrived dead quickly lose all sense of themselves as individual people by forgetting the sensations and impressions which composed their lives. The dead cannot leave the place in which they are buried, or make any physical impact on the world of the living. By this definition it is possible to be both physically alive and dead at the same time, as in the case of Jonathan Rebeck, who lives in a mausoleum for nineteen years, avoiding contact with the outside world. Conversely, two dead characters, Michael and Laura, are able to remain somewhat alive by constantly reminding themselves of their past experiences and sensations and by constantly scrutinizing the affairs of the living. Maintaining an identity and being alive are much the same thing; both consist in an intense appreciation of all the overlooked facets of daily existence, and both require an act of will.

Whether or not a character wills to engage in the constant effort of awareness required to maintain life and identity depends on the presence of love. Michael committed suicide because his marriage was failing, and Laura welcomed death because nobody cared about her. When they fall in love as ghosts they find the motivation to hold onto their identities and unique existences by sharing their remembered sensations. The most tragic aspect of Michael's removal to a separate cemetery is that without each other's constant presence the lovers will eventually lose awareness and forget each other. Mr. Rebeck develops the will to leave the cemetery and enter the world of the living only through his love for Mrs. Gertrude Klapper, a middle-aged widow who often comes to visit him in his mausoleum. *A Fine and Private Place* is a *carpe diem* work, as implied by the title's allusion to Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress." It is a work which presents life as a constant effort to apprehend and record the maximum number of sensations, and love as the vehicle for deriving the most sensations from each fleeting moment.

## Techniques

The most noticeable feature of *A Fine and Private Place* is its consistently balanced structure. Not only do the main characters complement each other, but nearly all of the novel's other elements are set up in a series of foils. The setting, a quiet Bronx cemetery, is often contrasted with the busy sounds and activities of life in the city outside. Yet the cemetery's separate burial sections and street names indicate a marked similarity with the city's layout. Character development is often indicated by parallel plot devices.

When Mr. Rebeck first meets Mrs. Klapper, he avoids leaving the cemetery with her by pretending to have to look for a lost wrist watch. Later, when Mrs. Klapper is able to persuade him to leave the cemetery, she contrives to remain behind after the gate is locked by pretending to have to look for her watch. The tone retains a poignant balance between humor and elegy. A description of a raven carrying baloney to a mausoleum introduces the first chapter, and a coffin is referred to as a "worm automat." First novels which deal with philosophical issues like the meaning of life and death are often marred by too much of a philosophical self-consciousness, but Beagle's careful use of humor as a foil for his ideas prevents this flaw from occurring.

## Literary Precedents

The movement in Beagle's novel resembles that of a Shakespearian romantic comedy. There are two pairs of lovers whose actions mirror each other; each pair experiences trials and separation and each is reunited in a kind of "happily ever after" in a new world outside the cemetery. The inability of ghosts to manipulate physical objects or impact the living can also be found in Jean-Paul Sartre's short story collection, *The Chips Are Down* (1947). The theme of life consisting in an intense appreciation of everyday experiences is reminiscent of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938). The title comes from a poem by the Renaissance poet Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress, To Make Much of Time," from the lines "The grave's a fine and private place/ But none I think do there embrace."



# Copyright Information

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