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Six Degrees Of Separation John Guare

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The Enduring Genius of Six Degrees of Separation by John Guare

In the landscape of modern American theatre, few plays have managed to capture the zeitgeist with the precision and emotional resonance of John Guare's 1990 masterpiece, *Six Degrees of Separation*. More than just a compelling drama, the play introduced a phrase that would become a cornerstone of sociological thought, a byword for our interconnected world, and a lens through which we examine the fragile threads of human connection. The concept of **Six Degrees of Separation John Guare**articulated is not merely a mathematical hypothesis; it is a deeply human story about class, race, identity, and the desperate need to belong.

This article explores the rich tapestry of Guare's play, delving into its plot, its profound themes, and its lasting legacy. We will examine how a single, audacious con artist could tear apart the carefully constructed lives of an upper-class New York family, and why the question of how many steps separate us from anyone else on the planet remains so compelling today.

The Genesis of a Modern Classic: John Guare and His Inspiration

John Guare, an acclaimed American playwright known for works like *The House of Blue Leaves* and *Landscape of the Body*, drew inspiration from a real-life event. A young African American man had successfully conned several wealthy New York families by pretending to be the son of Sidney Poitier. Guare, fascinated by the audacity and the sociological implications of the hoax, transformed this news story into a powerful exploration of the human condition. The play premiered off-Broadway at the Mitzi Newhouse Theater in 1990 before moving to Broadway's Vivian Beaumont Theater, where it received the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play and was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play.

The genius of Guare's work lies not in the con itself, but in what the con reveals. It exposes the fault lines of privilege, the hunger for meaning, and the ease with which we project our desires onto others. The central idea —that everyone is connected by no more than six intermediaries—wasn't new in academic circles, but **Six Degrees of Separation John Guare**made it a part of the popular vernacular, forever linking the playwright to the concept.

Unraveling the Plot: A Con in the Concrete Jungle

The play centers on Flan and Ouisa Kittredge, an upper-class Manhattan couple who are art dealers and collectors. Their comfortable, somewhat complacent world is shattered one evening when a young, charismatic Black man named Paul appears at their door, bleeding from a stab wound. Paul claims to be the son of Sidney Poitier, a classmate of their children at Harvard, and immediately captivates them with his charm, intelligence, and seemingly sophisticated worldview.

The Seduction of an Idea

Paul is not merely a con artist; he is a performer of the highest order. He discusses the work of the painter Candido with authority, critiques the dining habits of the wealthy, and weaves a spellbinding narrative of his life. He also introduces the Kittredges to the theory of six degrees of separation, suggesting that they are all connected to anyone in the world, from a farm boy in Finland to a ship captain in South Africa, through a chain of acquaintances. This idea resonates deeply with Flan and Ouisa, who crave a sense of meaning and connection beyond their transactional social lives.

The Cracks in the Facade

Paul spends the night, and the next morning, Flan and Ouisa discover he has been arrested for soliciting a male prostitute in Central Park. Their world collapses. The police reveal that Paul has run the same con on multiple wealthy families across the city, always claiming to be the son of Sidney Poitier. The betrayal is not just financial; it is existential. They feel violated, not because they lost significant money (they didn't), but because they were fooled on an emotional and intellectual level.

The rest of the play follows the aftermath. We see the Kittredges' children, who are essentially strangers to them, and their friends, who all share similar stories. The play asks a searing question: If you can be so easily fooled by a stranger, what does that say about the authenticity of your own life?

Deep Dive into Themes: The Heart of the Play

Guare's play is a dense text, rich with themes that remain startlingly relevant decades after its debut. Let us examine some of the most significant.

The Illusion of Connection in an Age of Abundance

The central metaphor of the six degrees is a profound commentary on modern loneliness. The Kittredges are surrounded by art, money, and people, yet they are profoundly disconnected. They talk past each other, they host dinners out of obligation, and their relationships with their children are superficial. Paul, the ultimate outsider, offers them the very thing they crave: a genuine, if fabricated, connection. He makes them feel seen, intelligent, and important. The play brilliantly demonstrates that it is often easier to connect with a compelling stranger than with the people we know best.

Identity, Performance, and Race

Paul's con is predicated on a double performance. He performs wealth and sophistication, but he also performs a specific racial identity. He uses the figure of Sidney Poitier—a symbol of dignified, respectable Blackness—as his avatar. This choice is deliberate and devastating. The Kittredges and their friends do not see Paul; they see a projection of their own liberal, enlightened views on race. They are so eager to be seen as open-minded and worldly that they fail to ask basic questions. Guare forces the audience to confront their own prejudices and assumptions.

Paul's identity is fluid. He is a chameleon, adapting to the expectations of his audience. In one home, he is a sophisticated art critic; in another, he is a troubled youth seeking guidance. This performance is a survival mechanism, but it also highlights the performative nature of identity itself. Who are we, really, when stripped of our social roles and class signifiers?

Class, Money, and the Art World

The play is a scathing critique of the upper class. Flan and Ouisa are not malicious, but they are deeply superficial. Their lives revolve around acquiring art, hosting the right people, and maintaining a certain image. Their obsession with a Cézanne painting is a perfect metaphor for their values: they value the object over the human connection it might represent. Paul's con works because he understands the language of this world. He speaks of art, travel, and privilege with an insider's knowledge. He gives them a story they want to hear.

Parents and Children: The Great Divide

The Kittredges' relationships with their own children are a stark contrast to their instant intimacy with Paul. Their children, Tess and Woody, are distant, critical, and ultimately strangers to their parents. Paul, on the other hand, is the perfect son: charming, intelligent, and admiring. The play suggests that the Kittredges are so desperate for the validation of a "good child" that they are blind to the reality of who Paul is. This theme resonates with any parent who has ever felt a chasm between themselves and their own children.

The Six Degrees Concept: From Theory to Popular Culture

The play's title is derived from a theory first proposed by Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy in 1929, subsequently explored by social psychologists like Stanley Milgram in the 1960s. Milgram's famous "small-world experiment" asked people to send a letter to a stranger by passing it through acquaintances. The average number of steps was six, giving birth to the idea of "six degrees of separation."

However, it was **Six Degrees of Separation John Guare**that truly popularized the idea. In the play, the concept is not just a scientific curiosity; it is a source of both wonder and terror. As Ouisa says, "Six degrees of separation between me and everyone else on this planet. But to find the right six people." The idea suggests a universe of infinite possibility, but also a terrifying responsibility. We are all implicated in each other's stories.

In the decades since the play, the concept has been confirmed and refined by the internet. Social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn, as well as academic studies, have shown that the average social distance is even smaller than six degrees, often hovering around four or five. The phrase has become so embedded in our culture that we now take it for granted, forgetting that it was a play that first brought it to the mainstream.

Character Analysis: Who Are We Really?

Guare's characters are not heroes or villains; they are complex, flawed, and deeply human.

- Ouisa Kittredge: She is the emotional heart of the play. While Flan is quick to dismiss Paul and return to his business, Ouisa is genuinely affected by the encounter. She asks the difficult questions. She wonders what it would be like to be Paul, to be invisible, to have to invent a self to survive. Her final monologue is one of the most powerful in modern theatre, as she grapples with the meaning of the experience and its impact on her soul.
- Flan Kittredge: He is the pragmatist, the businessman. He is more concerned with appearances and damage control. His anger at Paul is not about the betrayal of trust, but about the public humiliation. He represents a world of wealth that is fundamentally hollow.
- Paul: He is the catalyst, the trickster figure. He is extraordinarily intelligent and perceptive, but he is also deeply damaged. He is not a simple villain; he is a victim of a society that has left him with no other way to connect. His homosexuality, discovered by the police, adds another layer of vulnerability and marginalization. He is, in Ouisa's words, a "person of color, a person of sex," who has to perform constantly to survive.

The Legacy and Impact of the Play

The legacy of *Six Degrees of Separation*is vast. It was adapted into a successful 1993 film directed by Fred Schepisi, starring Donald Sutherland, Stockard Channing, and Will Smith in a breakout dramatic role. The film brought Guare's dialogue and themes to an even wider audience. Stockard Channing was nominated for an Academy Award for her portrayal of Ouisa, a role she originated on stage.

Beyond film and theatre, the phrase "six degrees of separation" has become a permanent part of our cultural lexicon. It is used in fields from sociology to marketing, from epidemiology (tracking disease spread) to computer science (analyzing network structures). It spawned the game "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon," which playfully tests the theory by linking any actor to Kevin Bacon through shared film roles.

However, the play's most significant legacy is its critique of privilege and performance. In an era of curated social media profiles, identity politics, and deepfakes, Guare's analysis of how we present ourselves to the

world is more relevant than ever. The play asks us to consider: Are we all, to some degree, performing a version of ourselves? And if so, what lies beneath the performance?

Conclusion: The Eternal Relevance of John Guare's Vision

John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*remains a landmark of American theatre because it refuses to offer easy answers. It is a comedy of manners that becomes a tragedy of the soul. It is a detective story where the crime is not theft, but the theft of trust and belief. The play forces us to look in the mirror and ask who we are when the performance is over.

The concept of **Six Degrees of Separation John Guare**gave the world is both a promise and a threat. It promises a world of incredible connection, where the person sitting next to you might be only a few handshakes away from a head of state or a saint. But it also threatens to expose the fiction of our own lives, revealing that the distance between who we are and who we pretend to be can be measured in a single, audacious lie. As Ouisa says at the end of the play, "I am the only one who can stop myself from falling." In that statement, Guare captures the ultimate human truth: we are all, at heart, searching for the one hand that will catch us, no matter how many degrees of separation lie in between.

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