

Six Degrees of Separation
from the play "Six Degrees of Separation" written by John Guare

(Paul, a black man in his early twenties, has conned his way into the posh New York apartment of an art dealer and his wife, Louisa and Flan. They are examples of the politically correct and the socially concerned; he is an example of a con man par excellence, who has convinced them he is the son of Sidney Poitier, knows their children, and graduated from Harvard. They inquire about his thesis and how he became intrigued with its subject.)

Paul: Well...a substitute teacher out on Long Island was dropped from his job for fighting with a student. A few weeks later, the teacher returned to the classroom, shot the student unsuccessfully, held the class hostage and then shot himself. Successfully. This fact caught my eye: last sentence. Times. A neighbor described him as a nice boy. Always reading *Catcher in the Rye*.

The nitwit -- Chapman -- who shot John Lennon said he did it because he wanted to draw the attention of the world to *The Catcher in the Rye* and the reading of the book would be his defense. And young Hinckley, the whiz kid who shot Reagan and his press secretary, said if you want my defense all you have to do is read *Catcher in the Rye*. It seemed to be time to read it again.

Flan: I haven't read it in years. (Louisa shushes him.)

Paul: I borrowed a copy from a young friend of mine because I wanted to see what she had underlined and I read this book to find out why this touching, beautiful, sensitive story published in July 1951 had turned into this manifesto of hate.

I started reading. It's exactly as I remembered. Everybody's a phony. Page two: "My brother's in Hollywood being a prostitute." Page three: "What a phony his father was." Page nine: "People never notice anything."

Then on page 22 my hair stood up. Remember Holden Caulfield -- the definitive sensitive youth -- wearing his red hunter's cap. "A deer hunter hat? Like hell it is. I sort of closed one eye like I was taking aim at it. This is a people-shooting hat. I shoot people in this hat."

Hmmm, I said. This book is preparing people for bigger moments in their lives than I ever dreamed of. Then on page 89: "I'd rather push a guy out the window or chop his head off with an ax than sock him in the jaw...I hate fist fights...what scares me most is the other guy's face..."

I finished the book. It's a touching story, comic because the boy wants to do so much and can't do anything. Hates all phoniness and only lies to others. Wants everyone to like him, is only hateful, and he is completely self-involved. In other words, a pretty accurate picture of a male adolescent. And what alarms me about the book -- not the book so much as the aura about it -- is this: the book is primarily about paralysis. The boy can't function. And at the end, before he can run away and start a new life, it starts to rain and he folds.

Now there's nothing wrong in writing about emotional and intellectual paralysis. It may indeed, thanks to Chekhov and Samuel Beckett, be the great modern theme.

The extraordinary last lines of *Waiting For Godot* -- "Let's go." "Yes, let's go." Stage directions: they do not move.

But the aura around this book of Salinger's -- which perhaps should be read by everyone but young men -- is this: it mirrors like a fun house mirror and amplifies like a distorted speaker one of the great tragedies of our times -- the death of the imagination.

Because what else is paralysis?

The imagination has been so debased that imagination -- being imaginative -- rather than being the lynchpin of our existence now stands as a synonym for something outside ourselves like science fiction or some new use for tangerine slices on raw pork chops -- what an imaginative summer recipe -- and *Star Wars*! So imaginative! And *Star Trek* -- so imaginative! And *Lord of the Rings* -- all those dwarves -- so *imaginative* --

The imagination has moved out out the realm of being our link, our most personal link, with our inner lives and the world outside that world -- this world we share. What is schizophrenia but a horrifying state where what's in here doesn't match up with what's out there?

Why has imagination become a synonym for style?

I believe that the imagination is the passport we create to take us into the real world.

I believe the imagination is another phrase for what is most uniquely *us*.

Jung says the greatest sin is to be unconscious.

Our boy Holden says "What scares me most is the other guy's face -- it wouldn't be so bad if you

could both be blindfolded -- most of the time the faces we face are not the other guys' but our own faces. And it's the worst kind of yellowness to be so scared of yourself you put blindfolds on rather than deal with yourself..."

To face ourselves.

That's the hard thing.

The imagination.

That's God's gift to make the act of self-examination bearable.