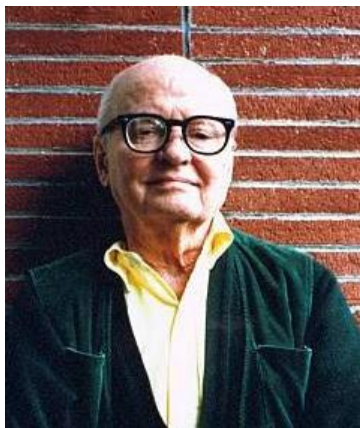


CHAPTER 1

THE THIRD LEVEL – By Jack Finney

About the Author :

Jack Finney (1911 – 1995) was an American author known for writing science fiction with everyday settings. His writing style is easy to understand, yet thought-provoking. His stories often mix reality with fantasy, making unusual situations feel believable.



KEY THEMES IN THE LESSON :

1. **Escapism**
→ People try to escape from stress and worries into a more peaceful world.
2. **Modern Day Living**
→ The fast-paced modern world makes people feel tired and restless.
3. **Reality vs Fantasy**
→ The story blurs the line between what is real and what is imagined.
4. **Hope & Imagination**
→ The human mind creates comfort through imagination.

BRIEF SUMMARY :

The story revolves around Charley, who believes that there is a third level at Grand Central Station which can take him back to the past, specifically to the year 1894. He describes this place as calm, peaceful, and very different from the stressful modern world he lives in.

At first, people around him, including his psychiatrist friend Sam, dismiss this as imagination or a result of stress. However, Charley strongly feels that this third level exists and represents an escape from the pressures of everyday life. Interestingly, towards the end, Sam himself seems to have discovered this third level and chooses to stay back in the past, suggesting that even the most rational minds seek escape.

The story does not clearly say whether the third level is real or imaginary, and that is what makes it interesting. It shows how people, when overwhelmed by life, often look for comfort in simpler times in the past. In a way, The Third level becomes less about time travel and more about the human desire for peace and happiness.

Some Interesting Photographs :

GRAND CENTRAL STATION – In New York City – America – is the world's largest train terminal with 44 Platforms and 67 rail tracks.

Outside :



Inside :



NCERT TEXT BOOK : THE THIRD LEVEL

Before you read :

Have you ever had any curious experience which others find hard to believe?

Read and Find Out : What does the third level refer to?

The third level refers to a mysterious level at Grand Central Station that Charley believes exists. It symbolizes an escape from the stress and anxieties of modern life and the human desire for comfort and simplicity.

THE presidents of the New York Central and the New York, New Haven and Hartford railroads will swear on a **stack** of timetables that there are only two. But I say there are three, because I've been on the third level of the Grand Central Station. Yes, I've taken the obvious step: I talked to a psychiatrist friend of mine, among others. I told him about the third level at Grand Central Station, and he said it was a waking-dream wish fulfillment. He said I was unhappy. That made my wife kind of mad, but he explained that he meant the modern world is full of insecurity, fear, war, worry and all the rest of it, and that I just want to escape. Well, who doesn't? Everybody I know wants to escape, but they don't wander down into any third level at Grand Central Station.

But that's the reason, he said, and my friends all agreed. Everything points to it, they claimed. My stamp collecting, for example; that's a 'temporary refuge from reality.' Well, maybe, but my grandfather didn't need any refuge from reality; things were pretty nice and peaceful in his day, from all I hear, and he started my collection. It's a nice collection too, blocks of four of practically Reprint 2026-27 every U.S. issue, first-day covers, and so on. President Roosevelt collected stamps too, you know.

Anyway, here's what happened at Grand Central. One night last summer I worked late at the office. I was in a hurry to get uptown to my apartment so I decided to take the subway from Grand Central because it's faster than the bus.

Now, I don't know why this should have happened to me. I'm just an ordinary guy named Charley, thirty-one years old, and I was wearing a tan gabardine suit and a straw hat with a fancy band; I passed a dozen men who looked just like me. And I wasn't trying to escape from anything; I just wanted to get home to Louisa, my wife.

I turned into Grand Central from Vanderbilt Avenue, and went down the steps to the first level, where you take trains like the Twentieth Century. Then I walked down another flight to the second level, where the suburban trains leave from, ducked into an arched doorway heading for the subway — and got lost. That's easy to do. I've been in and out of Grand Central hundreds of times, but I'm always bumping into new doorways and stairs and corridors. Once I got into a tunnel about a mile long and came out in the lobby of the Roosevelt Hotel. Another time I came up in an office building on Forty-sixth Street, three blocks away.

Sometimes I think Grand Central is growing like a tree, pushing out new corridors and staircases like roots. There's probably a long tunnel that nobody knows about **feeling its way under the city** right now, on its way to Times Square, and maybe another to Central Park. And maybe — because for so many people through the years 2 Vistas Reprint 2026-27 Grand Central has been an exit, a way of escape — maybe that's how the tunnel I got into... But I never told my psychiatrist friend about that idea.

Note : **feeling its way under the city** - Moving slowly and uncertainly, as if trying to find direction.

The corridor I was in began angling left and slanting downward and I thought that was wrong, but I kept on walking. All I could hear was **the empty sound of my own footsteps** and I didn't pass a soul. Then I heard that sort of hollow roar ahead that means open space and people talking. The tunnel turned sharp left; I went down a short flight of stairs and came out on the third level at Grand Central Station. For just a moment I thought I was back on the second level, but I saw the room was smaller, there were fewer ticket windows and train gates, and the information booth in the centre was wood and old-looking. And the man in the booth wore a green eyeshade and long black sleeve protectors. The lights were dim and sort of flickering. Then I saw why; they were open flame gaslights.

Note : **empty sound of my own footsteps** - The hollow, echoing sound made when walking in a quiet place.

There were brass spittoons on the floor, and across the station **a glint of light caught my eye**; a man was pulling a gold watch from his vest pocket. He **snapped open the cover**, glanced at his watch and frowned. He wore a derby hat, a black four-button suit with tiny lapels, and he had a big, black, handlebar mustache. Then I looked around and saw that everyone in the station was dressed like eighteen-ninety something; I never saw so The Third Level Reprint 2026-27 3 many beards, sideburns and fancy mustaches in my life. A woman walked in through the train gate; she wore **a dress with leg-of mutton sleeves** and skirts to the top of her high-buttoned shoes. Back of her, out on the tracks, I caught a glimpse of a locomotive, a very small Currier & Ives locomotive with a funnel-shaped stack. And then I knew.

Note :

- **a glint of light caught my eye** - A small flash of light that attracted attention.
- **snapped open the cover** - Opening something quickly and suddenly
- **a dress with leg-of-mutton sleeves** - A dress with sleeves that are wide at the top and narrow at the bottom (old-fashioned style)

To make sure, I walked over to a newsboy and glanced at the stack of papers at his feet. It was The World; and The World hasn't been published for years. The lead story said something about President Cleveland. I've found that front page since, in the Public Library files, and it was printed June 11, 1894.

I turned toward the ticket windows knowing that here — on the third level at Grand Central — I could buy tickets that would take Louisa and me anywhere in the United States we wanted to go. In the year 1894. And I wanted two tickets to Galesburg, Illinois.

Have you ever been there? It's a wonderful town still, with big old frame houses, huge lawns, and tremendous trees whose branches meet overhead and roof the streets. And in 1894, summer evenings were twice as long, and people sat out on their lawns, the men smoking cigars and talking quietly, the women waving palm leaf fans, with the fire-flies all around, in a peaceful world. To be back there with the First World War still twenty years off, and World War II over forty years in the future... I wanted two tickets for that.

The clerk figured the fare — he glanced at my fancy hatband, but he figured the fare — and I had enough for two coach tickets, one way. But when I counted out the money and looked up, the clerk was staring at me. He nodded at the bills. "That ain't money, mister," he said, "and if you're trying to skin me, you won't get very far," and he glanced at the cash drawer beside him. Of course the money was old-style bills, half again as big as the money we use nowadays, and different-looking. I turned away and got out fast. There's nothing nice about jail, even in 1894.

Read and Find Out :

Would Charley ever go back to the ticket counter on the third level to buy tickets to Galesburg for himself and his wife?

Yes, Charley would want to go back to the ticket counter on the third level to buy tickets to Galesburg for himself and his wife because Charley believes the third level is real and wants to escape to a peaceful place.

And that was that. I left the same way I came, I suppose. Next day, during lunch hour, I drew three hundred dollars out of the bank, nearly all we had, and bought old-style currency (that really worried my psychiatrist friend). You can buy old money at almost any coin dealer's, but you have to pay a premium. My three hundred dollars bought less than two hundred in old-style bills, but I didn't care; eggs were thirteen cents a dozen in 1894.

But I've never again found the corridor that leads to the third level at Grand Central Station, although I've tried often enough.

Louisa was pretty worried when I told her all this, and didn't want me to look for the third level any more, and after a while I stopped; I went back to my stamps. But now we're both looking, every weekend, because now we have proof that the third level is still there. My friend Sam Weiner disappeared! Nobody knew where, but I sort of suspected because Sam's a city boy, and I used to tell him about Galesburg — I went to school there — and he always said **he liked the sound of the place**. And that's where he is, all right. In 1894.

Note : he liked the sound of the place - He liked the idea or description of the place

Because one night, fussing with my stamp collection, I found — Well, do you know what a first-day cover is? When a new stamp is issued, stamp collectors buy some and use them to mail envelopes to themselves on the very first day of sale; and the postmark proves the date. The envelope is called a first-day cover. They're never opened; you just put blank paper in the envelope.

That night, among my oldest first-day covers, I found one that shouldn't have been there. But there it was. It was there because someone had mailed it to my grandfather at his home in Galesburg; that's what the address on the envelope said. And it had been there since July 18, 1894 — the postmark showed that — yet I didn't remember it at all. The stamp was a six-cent, dull brown, with a picture of President Garfield. Naturally, when the envelope came to Granddad in the mail, it went right into his collection and stayed there — till I took it out and opened it.

The paper inside wasn't blank. It read:

Charley <i>I got to wishing that you were right. Then I got to believing you were right. And, Charley, it's true; I found the third level! I've been here two weeks, and right now, down the street at the Daly's, someone is playing a piano, and they're all out on the front porch singing 'Seeing Nelly Home.' And I'm invited over for lemonade. Come on back, Charley and Louisa. Keep looking till you find the third level! It's worth it, believe me!</i>	941 Willard Street Galesburg, Illinois July 18, 1894
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The note is signed Sam.

At the stamp and coin store I go to, I found out that Sam bought eight hundred dollars' worth of old-style currency. That ought **to set him up** in a nice little hay, feed and grain business; he always said that's what he really wished he could do, and he certainly can't go back to his old business. Not in Galesburg, Illinois, in 1894. His old business? Why, Sam was my psychiatrist.

Note : **set him up** - To help someone start a comfortable life or business.

Vocabulary

- 1. Stack:** a pile of things placed one on top of another
There was a **stack** of books in the classroom waiting to be used.
- 2. Obvious:** easy to see or understand
It was **obvious** that he was tired after working all day.
- 3. Psychiatrist:** a doctor who treats mental health problems
She visited a **psychiatrist** to talk about her stress.
- 4. Fulfilment:** a feeling of satisfaction and purpose
Helping others gave her a sense of **fulfilment**.

5. Insecurity: lack of confidence or safety

Job loss created a sense of **insecurity** in the family.

6. Escape: to get away from a difficult situation

He wanted to **escape** from his daily struggles.

7. Wander: to move around without a clear direction

He would **wander** through the streets after work.

8. Claimed: said something is true or took something as one's own

She **claimed** that he would return the money soon.

9. Temporary: lasting for a short time

They moved into a **temporary** home after the flood.

10. Refuge: a place of safety

The community centre became a **refuge** for people during the storm.

11. Flight: a set of stairs between two levels

She climbed a **flight** of stairs to reach his classroom.

12. Ducked into: quickly entered to avoid something

She **ducked into** a shop to avoid the rain.

13. Arched: curved in shape

The bridge had an **arched** design.

14. Bumping: hitting something lightly

He kept **bumping** into people in the crowded bus.

15. Tunnel: an underground passage

They walked through a dark **tunnel** near the railway station.

16. Exit: a way out

He rushed towards the **exit** when the train arrived.

17. Angling: moving or directing at an angle

He was **angling** himself to see the stage better.

18. Slanting: leaning or going in a slope

The rain was falling in a **slanting** direction.

19. Hollow roar: a deep, empty sound

The train passed with a **hollow roar**.

20. Flickering: shining unsteadily

The light was **flickering** due to low electricity.

21. Spittoons: containers used for spitting

Old buildings sometimes still have **spittoons**.

22. A glint of: a small flash or sign of something

There was a **glint of** hope in his eyes.

23. Glanced: looked quickly

She **glanced** at the clock before leaving.

24. Frowned: showed worry or displeasure on the face

He **frowned** when he heard the bad news.

25. Tremendous: very great or strong

They showed **tremendous** courage during difficult times.

26. Old-style bills: older forms of money or payment

He kept some **old-style bills** safely in a box.

27. Suppose: to think or assume something

I **suppose** things will improve soon.

28. Suspected: thought something might be true without proof

She **suspected** that something was wrong.

29. Ought: should or must

We **ought** to help those in need.

Listen to the story.

Click on the link below to hear the story being read. Note the pronunciation of the words .

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJIP7BSzhBE>

NCERT - TEXT-BOOK Q&A :

Reading with Insight :

- 1. Do you think that the third level was a medium of escape for Charley? Why?**
- 2. What do you infer from Sam's letter to Charley?**
- 3. 'The modern world is full of insecurity, fear, war, worry and stress.' What are the ways in which we attempt to overcome them?**
- 4. Do you see an intersection of time and space in the story?**

5. **Apparent illogicality sometimes turns out to be a futuristic projection? Discuss.**

BOARD QUESTIONS PATTERN / MOST REPEATED QUESTIONS - These come again and again in different forms:

1. ☆ What does the third level refer to / symbolise?
2. ☆ Was it an escape from reality?
3. ☆ What do you infer from Sam's letter?
4. ☆ Role of imagination / fantasy
5. ☆ Intersection of time and space
6. ☆ Blend of reality and fantasy

QUESTION BANK FOR REVISION :

- ✓ MCQs
- ✓ Extracts
- ✓ Case-based
- ✓ Short + Long answers
- ✓ Higher-order questions

MCQs :

1. What does the phrase “waking dream wish fulfilment” most nearly suggest?

- a) A real dream seen during sleep
- b) A conscious imagination to escape reality
- c) A memory from the past
- d) A scientific explanation

2. Why does Charley describe Grand Central Station as “growing like a tree”?

- a) It is made of wood
- b) It keeps expanding in structure and complexity
- c) It has many trees around it
- d) It looks green and fresh

3. What is the deeper implication of Charley wanting to go to Galesburg, Illinois?

- a) He wants to meet his relatives
- b) He wants to travel for leisure
- c) He wants to escape to a peaceful, simpler life
- d) He is curious about history

4. What makes the third level seem believable to Charley?

- a) It is crowded like the real station
- b) It has modern facilities
- c) It has detailed and consistent features of the past
- d) It is suggested by his psychiatrist

5. Why is Sam's letter important in the story?

- a) It proves Charley is wrong
- b) It confirms the third level is imaginary
- c) It blends reality & fantasy
- d) It explains the station's structure

6. What does the contrast between the modern world and 1894 highlight?

- a) Technological progress
- b) Economic differences
- c) The human desire for peace and simplicity
- d) Historical accuracy

7. What role does the setting of Grand Central Station play in the story?

- a) It is only a background
- b) It acts as a symbol of confusion and escape
- c) It is a tourist attraction
- d) It represents wealth

Extract Based

Extract 1 :

"The Third Level at Grand Central Station was not on the same level as the other two. It was smaller, quieter, and seemed to belong to a different time. The people there were dressed in old-fashioned clothes, and everything appeared to be from the past. Charley realised that he had somehow reached the year 1894."

- i. What does the third level refer to?
- ii. How is the third level different from the other levels?
- iii. What does it reveal about Charley's state of mind?
- iv. What theme of the story is reflected in this extract?

Extract 2 :

"Then I got to the stamp and the postmark. It was a six-cent stamp with a picture of President Garfield. The postmark was Galesburg, Illinois, and the date was July 18, 1894. The letter was from Sam, my psychiatrist friend, who had always said that the third level was just a waking dream wish fulfilment. But now, he wrote that he had reached Galesburg in 1894 and was enjoying a peaceful life there."

- i. What does Sam's letter suggest?
- ii. Why is the letter significant?

Extract 3 :

"Grand Central is growing like a tree, pushing out new corridors and staircases like roots. There are about a hundred levels, and I've been on dozens of them. But I've never seen the third level before. It was smaller, quieter, and everything there seemed old-fashioned, as if I had stepped into another time."

- i. What makes the third level unusual?
- ii. What did Charley want to buy?

CASE BASED Qs :

1. Read the case and answer the questions:

"The modern world is full of insecurity, fear, war, worry and stress."

- a. In this context, how do people try to escape stress?
- b. Why does Charley say modern life is insecure?

2. Read the case and answer the questions:

Sam, Charley's psychiatrist friend, initially believes that the third level is only a waking dream wish fulfillment. However, later he writes a letter from Galesburg in 1894, suggesting that he himself has experienced it.

- a. Why did Sam earlier dismiss Charley's experience?
- b. What change does Sam's letter bring?
- c. What does this reveal about human nature?

Short Answer Qs :

- i. Would Charley ever go back to the ticket counter? Why?
- ii. What does the third level symbolise?
- iii. What did Charley find strange at the third level?

- iv. Why did Charley's psychiatrist friend call it a waking dream wish fulfilment?

Long Answer Qs :

- i. How does the story bring out the theme of escapism?
- ii. 'The Third Level' is a blend of reality and fantasy. Discuss.
- iii. Briefly describe Galesburg, Illinois and explain why Charley wanted to go there with his wife.

HIGHER ORDER QUESTIONS :

- 1. Do you think Charley's experience is real or imagined? Give reasons.
- 2. Why do you think Sam decided to stay in Galesburg?
- 3. How is the story relevant to today's world?
- 4. What does the story suggest about the human mind?