

THE THIRD LEVEL

**- Jack Finney
(1911-1995)**

INDEX

1. Prelude
2. About the Author
3. Background/Context
4. Theme, Sub-theme, Plot
5. Characters
6. Summary
7. Sequence & Key-Points
8. Vocabulary
9. Points to Ponder
10. Character Sketch
11. Assignments



THE THIRD LEVEL

- **Jack Finney**
(1911-1995)

PRELUDE

Do you believe in time travel??

IS IT POSSIBLE FOR US
TO VISIT OUR PAST!!!

THE THIRD LEVEL

- **Jack Finney**
(1911-1995)

PRELUDE

Do you sometimes take temporary
refuge in your hobby to avoid the
harsh world around you!!!

A waking dream wish fulfillment
(day-dreaming)

PRELUDE

The story is

an intersection between

Fantasy & Reality

an intersection between

Time & Space

The story deals with

Escapism & Time Travel

The Third Level

Present

Grand Central Station, New York



Past

Galesburg, Illinois in 1894



THE THIRD LEVEL

- **Jack Finney**
(1911-1995)



About the Author :

Jack Finney was an American novelist and a short-story writer. His best-known works are science fiction and thrillers. He attended Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. After living in New York City and working for an advertising agency there, he moved with his family to California in the early 1950s. Finney's first short story "The Widow's Walk", won a contest sponsored by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine in 1946. His first novel, *Five Against the House*, was published in 1954. It was made into a movie the following year.

THE THIRD LEVEL

Background/Context :

Jack Finney in this story conveys that the life of modern man is full of insecurity, stress and worries and he is unable to cope with these challenges of modern life. So he wants to escape and run away from the harsh realities of life. When he cannot cope with the harsh realities, he wants to escape into a fanciful world. He tries to find a level of existence that will provide him peace, happiness and tranquility. He dreams of a fantastic world which is devoid of any stress. The author has given the title 'Third Level' to this fantastic world which is yearned for by the modern man. The title 'Third Level' also refers to the reality that exists only in the mind of modern man. It does not exist in space and time. It is his mind that helps him escape the tensions and harsh realities of life. On the contrary, things were pretty nice and peaceful in the earlier times. People did not suffer from stress. They led a simple and carefree life full of peace and serenity. They did not entertain fanciful and unrealistic ideas. They were neither dreamers nor escapists. They led a contented life.

THE THIRD LEVEL

Theme : The story dwells on the theme of escapism as man desires to get rid of the modern world which is full of war, insecurity, fear, stress and anxiety. He is overwhelmed by the harsh realities of life.

Sub-Theme : Human tendency to visit his/her past

Plot : Protagonist's belief – third level as a medium of escape - Journey to Galesburg, a dream place - Role of the psychiatrist – modern man's illusion

The story emphasises psychological impact of modern life and the plight of modern man

THE THIRD LEVEL

CHARACTERS :

- ❑ **Charley** – Protagonist (a common young man, works at an office)
- ❑ **Louisa** – Charley' wife (loving and caring)
- ❑ **Sam** – A psychiatrist and Charley's friend
- ❑ **Charley's grandfather** – practised philately

THE THIRD LEVEL

SUMMARY

Charley was quite an ordinary man from New York. One evening he reached the Grand Central Railway Station, New York, after a long day's work in the office. This was what happened at the station: He was in a hurry to get home. His wife Louisa was waiting for him. Having found no train from the first level of the station, Charley went down to the second level. While waiting for a train on the second level, Charley found a door and tunnel down. Curious as he always was, Charley suspected it was a mysterious tunnel. Following the tunnel, he took steps down and reached the third level of the station. But, Grand Central has only two levels! How is this third level possible? Charley remained wondering. Wondering at the old fashioned train engines, at the hundred year old fashion, men with long mustache, women dressed in the old French style, a man pulling out his watch from pocket, gas lamps and spittoons...From a newspaper, he learnt the time – 1895! Charley knew one thing for sure – time traveling! He had got into similar tunnels in the past – under Roosevelt Hotel, under Times Square... In the past he had got into more such mysterious tunnels and caves but always a question remained without answer – why was he not able to go back to those places once again!

THE THIRD LEVEL

SUMMARY

Anyway, now, in the third level of the Grand Central Station, he had not much time to ask questions – Louisa was waiting at home. He went the ticket counter and asked for two tickets to Galesburg – the 1895 Galesburg or more clearly, a hundred years old Galesburg – where he was born. When he paid the cash at the counter, the clerk suspected him for tendering fake currency. Threatened, Charley ran out of the third level and reached home. Charlie narrates this incident to Sam Weiner, his friend who works as a psychiatrist. Sam concludes that the Third Level is nothing but a mere figment of Charlie's imagination. The miseries which the modern world; full of war, worry and terror, had to offer made Charlie hallucinate about the existence of the Third Level. During his lunch break the next day, Charley withdraws nearly all his savings and buys old-style currency to buy tickets to Galesburg of 1894. But he can never again find the entrance to the third level at Grand Central Station. However, Charley finds evidence that the third level actually exists when he discovers a letter dated July 18, 1894 addressed to his grandfather at Galesburg, Illinois, from his psychiatrist Sam Weiner who it seems was not skeptical of the third level as he had appeared.

SEQUENCE & KEY POINTS

Three levels at Grand Central Station

1

- the narrator feels that there are three levels

at the Grand Central Railway Station, New York

- In fact, there are only two levels
- the narrator tells his psychiatrist friend about the third level
- his psychiatrist friend tells him that it is a dream for wish fulfilment
- tells him that modern man is full of insecurity, fear, and worry
- he wants to escape

Narrator's hobby of stamp collection

- the psychiatrist thinks that it is a temporary refuge from reality
- the narrator disbelieves it
- says that his grandfather didn't need any refuge from reality
- led a peaceful life, yet he pursued philately
- no insecurity in those times

Charley loses his way at the station

2

- works late at the office one summer night
- wants to reach his apartment
- in a hurry to board a train to reach home he goes down to the second level
- crosses an arched doorway heading for the subway ; he gets lost
- He thinks the Grand Central is growing like a tree and pushes out new corridors and staircases like roots
- the narrator enters a corridor
- keeps walking
- hears the empty sound of his own footsteps
- he comes out on the third level at the Grand Central Station

- finds smaller rooms, fewer ticket windows and train gates, and open-flame gaslights
- sees brass spittoons on the floor
- everybody at the station was dressed in the 19th century dresses
- sees so many beards, sideburns and fancy mustache

SEQUENCE & KEY POINTS

- 3
- finds lead story about President Cleveland in Paper 'The World' dated June 11, 1894
 - goes to ticket window to buy two tickets for Galesburg, Illinois
 - he wants to go there with his wife Louisa
 - imagines the town in 1894
 - it is a wonderful town with big old frame houses and huge lawns
 - in 1894, summer evenings were long
 - people sat out on their lawns
 - men smoking cigars and talking quietly
 - it is a peaceful world
 - His currency notes not accepted by the clerk
 - runs away to escape jail

Charley buys old currency to get tickets

- takes out three hundred dollars from the bank
- buys old-style currency
- his psychiatrist friend becomes worried
- pays three hundred dollars to buy two hundred in old style bills
- still wants to go back to the third level to go to Galesburg, Illinois

- 4
- ## **Charley's another attempt to find third level**
- the narrator tries to find the corridor that leads to the third level, but fails
 - tells everything to his wife ; she gets worried
 - she wants him not to look for the third level anymore
 - he stops search for the third level
 - goes back to his hobby of stamp collections
 - gets a proof that the third level is there ; his friend Sam Weiner had disappeared
 - both husband and wife look for the third level on every weekend

- narrator used to tell Sam about Galesburg
- narrator went to school there
- the narrator believes that his friend Sam is in Galesburg, in the year 1894

What is a first day cover ?

- stamp collectors buy some new stamps and affix them on an envelope
- mail the envelope to themselves on the very first day of sale
- the post mark gives proof of the date
- the envelope is called a first day cover

SEQUENCE & KEY POINTS

Narrator finds a strange first day cover in his collection **5**

- someone had mailed a strange cover at his grandfather's address in Galesburg
- it was there since July 18, 1894
- the six cent stamp bears a picture of President Garfield
- the envelope contains a letter for Charley from his friend Sam
- Sam writes that the third level exists
- Sam advises Charley to keep looking for the third level

How did Sam disappear ?

- Sam bought eight hundred dollars worth of old style currency
- narrator informed that Sam had set up his business of hay, feed and grain at Galesburg in 1894
- Sam can't go back to his old business because psychiatrists had no business in Galesburg in 1894

VOCABULARY

<i>stack</i>	= pile
<i>Psychiatrist</i>	= a doctor who studies and treats mental disorders
<i>obvious</i>	= clear
<i>refuge</i>	= shelter, protection from danger
<i>uptown</i>	= in or to the parts of a town or city that are away from the centre
<i>subway</i>	= an underground railway / railroad system in a city
<i>tan</i>	= yellowish brown in colour
<i>gabardine</i>	= a closely woven fabric
<i>suburban</i>	= an area that is outside the centre of the city
<i>ducked into</i>	= bent down to get in
<i>bumping</i>	= meeting by chance
<i>corridor</i>	= a long narrow passage in a building
<i>glint</i>	= a sudden flash of light
<i>mapped open</i>	= opened suddenly with a sharp sound
<i>glanced</i>	= looked quickly
<i>spittoons</i>	= vessels for spitting into
<i>lapels</i>	= front parts of the top of a coat that are joined to the collar and are folded back
<i>derby</i>	= a bowler hat
<i>sideburns</i>	= hair that grows down the side of a man's face in front of his ears
<i>premium</i>	= at a higher than normal price
<i>fussing with</i>	= to pay too much attention to things

THE THIRD LEVEL

POINTS TO PONDER

In the First Level :
Trains like the Twentieth Century



THE THIRD LEVEL

POINTS TO PONDER

In the SECOND LEVEL :

Suburban trains departed from there, after that Charley ducked into an arched doorway heading for the subway — and got lost.



In THE THIRD LEVEL ...

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.

There were brass spittoons, 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... everyone in the station was dressed like eighteen-ninety-something; I never saw so many beards, sideburns and fancy mustaches in my life. A woman wore a dress with leg-of mutton sleeves and skirts to the top of her high-buttoned shoes...I caught a glimpse of a locomotive, a very small Currier & Ives locomotive with a funnel-shaped stack.



THE THIRD LEVEL

POINTS TO PONDER

- But I say there are three, because I've *been* on the third level of the Grand Central Station.
- ...and he said it was a waking dream wish fulfillment.
- the modern world is full of insecurity, fear, war, worry and all the rest of it, and that I just want to escape.
- 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 time.
- 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.
- ...because for so many people through the years Grand Central *has been an exit, a way of escape* — maybe that's how the tunnel I got into...

THE THIRD LEVEL

POINTS TO PONDER

- Sometimes I think Grand Central is growing like a tree, pushing out new corridors and staircases like roots.
- 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. 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.
- “That ain't money, mister,” he said, “and if you're trying to skin me, you won't get very far,” ... There's nothing nice about jail, even in 1894.
- My friend Sam Weiner disappeared! Nobody knew where, but I sort of suspected because Sam's a city boy,...
- That night, among my oldest first-day covers, I found one that shouldn't have been there... And it had been there since July 18, 1894 — the postmark showed 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; ...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.

THE THIRD LEVEL

POINTS TO PONDER

SIGNIFICANCE OF SAM'S LETTER TO CHARLEY

941 Willard Street
Galesburg, Illinois
July 18, 1894

Charley

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!

THE THIRD LEVEL

Character Portrayal

Character Sketch of Charley :

The protagonist of the story, Charley is a true representative of modern man. He is a victim of stress, insecurity and fear and wants to run away from reality. He is an escapist and wants to escape from the world of harsh realities. He is fond of stamp collection, a hobby, which he takes up to make his leisure hours more productive and fulfilling experience. But his psychiatrist friend calls it a temporary refuge from reality. He yearns to lead a good simple life of his grandfather's time, when things were pretty nice and peaceful. He quests for the fabulous ordinariness of a bygone age that was free from modern razzle-dazzle, sophistication and material comforts but exudes peace and tranquility. He wants to go to Galesburg, Illinois, in the year 1894 when the First World War was twenty years off and the Second World War still forty years ahead.

THE THIRD LEVEL

Character Portrayal

Character Sketch of Louisa :

Louisa is Charley's wife. She is loving and caring towards her husband. However, she is a simple lady and it is not difficult to take her in. She refuses to accept the psychiatrist's observation that her husband is unhappy. She takes this comment as a personal attack and feels 'kind of mad'. On being told the modern world is full of insecurity, fear, etc. she feels satisfied with the psychiatrist explanation. When Charley talks to her about his predicament regarding the third level, she gets alarmed and advises him not to look for the third level anymore. Her husband's exchanging the new currency with the old one is a cause of concern for her and she tells Charley emphatically to stop looking for it. When Charley tells her about Sam's disappearance, she joins him in looking for the third level every weekend.

THE THIRD LEVEL

Character Portrayal

Character Sketch of Sam Charley's Psychiatrist friend:

Sam is a psychiatrist by profession. He is a typical city boy. When Charley shares his visiting the third level he tells him it is a waking dream wish fulfillment. He tells him that he is looking for ways to escape since he is not happy. But he immediately revises his statement that Charley is a victim of insecurities of modern life. He dubs the argument of narrator's hobby of stamp collection as a temporary refuge from reality. He does not believe in mixing up his profession with his friendship. He gets fascinated by Charley's description of Galesburg, Illinois, as a wonderful town with big old frame houses, huge lawns, tremendous trees lining the streets. He is also affected by the pulls and pressures of modern life that he thinks of escaping to the peaceful world of Galesburg of 1894. In the end, he discovers the third level of Grand Central and goes there. He writes a letter from there advising Charley and Louisa to keep finding the third level because it is worth. According to Charley, Sam must have set up his little hay feed and grain businesses as he can't go back to his old business as psychiatrists are redundant in Galesburg of 1894.

THE LAST LESSON

ASSIGNMENT : QUESTIONS TO TEST COMPREHENSION

Short Answer Questions (30-40 words)

1. What was Charley's problem? What did his psychiatrist friend say?
2. Why couldn't Sam go back to his old business in Galesburg of 1894?
3. What do you infer from Sam's letter to Charley?
4. What did Charley do to be sure that he was really on the third level.
5. What did Charley notice at the third level of the Grand Central Station?
6. How did Charley reach third level?

Long Answer Questions (100-125 words) :

1. Sam's letter to Charley is fine blend of fantasy and reality. Comment.
2. Did the third level really exist? Was it a medium of escape for Charley?
3. Do you see an intersection of time and space in the story?
4. 'The modern world is full of insecurity, fear, war, worry, stress.' Discuss in reference to the story 'The Third Level'.
5. 'The Third Level' is the eerie shadow land between desire, dreams and reality. Discuss.