

LESSON – 1

THE THIRD LEVEL

About the author

Jack Finney: *The Third Level* is named for a short story by Jack Finney (1911-1995) which appeared in a 1957 collection of the same name. In the story, the disenfranchised protagonist discovers a third level to Grand Central Station, from which he takes a train back in time to the year 1894. Realizing that the third level can transport one to any place as well as any time, he tries to get back to his old hometown: Galesburg, Illinois, the home of Knox College. Finney was graduated from Knox with the class of 1934 and went on to become a noted author of speculative fiction with several short story collections and novels like *The Body Snatchers* and *Time and Again*. The Knox College Archives has a collection of rare, out-of-print, and autographed copies of Finney's works.



INTRODUCTION

The Third Level by Jack Finney is an interesting story that is set after the world wars. Consequently, the life was full of fear, insecurity, war & worry. This story talks about the figments of imaginations that can be used to escape from reality. It takes readers back in the time of joy and peace. Charley, the protagonist wants to escape from the harsh realities of modern world and imagines the world of 19th century where the people were living peaceful life and they had ample time for themselves. The story weaves together psychological journey of the narrator into the past, present and progresses towards future.

GIST OF THE LESSON

- Grand Central Station of New York has two levels. But Charley, a thirty-one-year-old resident of New York, talks about a third level. He believes in the existence of this hypothetical third level and claims to have been there.
- Charley visits a psychiatrist friend to talk about this problem. The psychiatrist calls it a "waking dream wish fulfillment" and rationalizes Charley's experience by saying that the "modern world is full of insecurity, fear, worry, and war..." and everybody wants to escape a "temporary refuge from reality." According to him, even hobbies like stamp collection is a manifestation of this escape. Charley thinks about his grandfather who didn't need any refuge from reality. Charley's grandfather started his collection.
- The fast growing Grand Central station at times seems to be amazing to Charley. He had lost his way a couple of times earlier too while taking the subway.
- Once, he entered the lobby of the Roosevelt Hotel while the other time he emerged at an office building that was three blocks away. But this time when he loses his way, something unique happens. He visits the third level!
- Charley keeps walking in the quiet corridor, angling left and slanting downward, till he reaches an architecturally old station that is completely different from the two familiar levels.
- The antiquated small room with fewer ticket counters and train gates, a wooden information booth, flickering open flame gas lights and brass spittoons remind him of the architecture of the 1800s.
- He also finds that people are dressed in outmoded outfits. He notices that the date on the newspaper 'The World' is printed June 11, 1894. As he tenders money to the clerk at the counter to buy two tickets, he realizes that he needs to have old currency bills to do so.
- He had always wanted to travel to Galesburg with his wife, Louisa. In his mind, it is "a wonderful town still, with big old frame houses, huge lawns, and tremendous trees...."

It is a place with long and pleasant summer evenings and where people have time for each other.

- So, the next day during lunch, he exchanges three hundred dollars for old style bills amounting to some two hundred only.
- The loss doesn't bother him much as he believes that in Galesburg everything will be cheaper and that he can manage even with a small amount. But, he could never again find the corridor leading to the third level.
- His wife Louisa is worried after knowing all this and asks him not to look for the third level any further. Suddenly Charley realizes that his friend, Sam Weiner, is nowhere to be found, so he and his wife keep looking for him in the weekends.
- Philately is not just stamp collection but a broad term including the study of stamps, postal history and other related items.
- When a new stamp is issued, on the first day, people mail a blank paper to themselves and then retain that unopened letter with the date on the postmark. Such an envelope is known as a 'first day cover'. Charley has inherited his grandfather's collection of first day covers.
- One day while fidgeting (restlessness/move restlessly) with his stamp collection, Charley comes across a letter that was not there earlier. It bears the postmark on a faded six-cent stamp with a picture of the President Garfield.
- The envelope was sent on July 18, 1894 to Charley's grandfather in Galesburg and was addressed to Charley.
- The letter was written by Sam Weiner, who was Charley's psychiatrist! Sam has reached Galesburg and is having whole of a time there.
- He also invites Charley and Louisa to Galesburg. When Charley goes to the stamp and coin store, he is apprised of Sam's exchanging eight hundred dollars for the old currency bills.

THEME OF THE STORY

The story 'Third Level' clearly explores the science fiction genre (classification) of 'time travel'. Jack Finney, the recipient of the world fantasy award interweaves fantasy with the reality in the most futuristic projection of time travel. Charley wishes to be transported to the third level, the world of 1894 which is supposedly much happier and quieter place to be. It is one of the most concise and entertaining story about time travel. The question whether the third level exist in real or only in charley's mind can be inferred from Sam's letter. The story also dwells on the theme of escapism, not only as a psychological refuge from the grim realities of the present day world but also as a desire to stay with the past or to keep the past alive in the complexities of the present. In the story charley not only expresses desire to escape but also prepares and tries very hard, a desire which is not contested by the wife either. Sam is also happily escaped with no plans to resort to his old profession along with scores of other people who cross the grand central everyday... to escape seems to be an all pervasive feeling.

MESSAGE OF THE STORY

The modern world is full of insecurity, fear war, worry and all the rest of it and all people want to escape from them. They just want a little peace and relaxation from these situations.

TITLE OF THE STORY

Oppressed by the pulls and pressures of modern life, man yearns for an escape from all the tensions and worries. He looks for a level of existence that would yield peace and tranquility. Trying to delve deeper into life, he wanders whether it is possible for him to live on a different plane and he looks for this ideal world, hopping to come across it someday. It is this Utopian world that the author has chosen to call the third level.

Third level can also refer to a level of reality that exists in our mind only and not in space and time. It is this faculty of mind that makes virtual travel in time possible and opens innumerable ways to escape, defence mechanization and rationalization. Hence 'the Third Level' is an appropriate title.

Answer the following questions in 30 – 40 Words.

1. How do Charley's wife Louisa and his friend Sam react to the narrator's observation?

Ans. Charley the narrator states that there are three levels at Grand Central Station. His assertion is based on his personal observation. But his friend Sam said that Charley was unhappy and wanted to escape. His wife Louisa was shocked and worried. They both disbelieved him.

2. What do you learn about Galesburg, Illinois during 1894?

Ans. Galesburg has been described peaceful place that was not ravaged by the two world wars. It has old framed houses, huge lawns and splendid trees with expanded branches. The men would smoke cigar talk quietly. The women would be waving palm leaves **fAns.** They have ample time for themselves.

3. What do you know about the 'First Day Cover '?

Ans. When a new stamp is issued in any country, stamp collectors buy some and use them to mail envelopes at their address on the very first day of release. They put a blank paper in the envelopes. The postmark proves the date of issue. The envelope is called a first day cover. It remains unopened.

4. Do you think that the third level was a medium of escape for Charley? Why? How did Charley's psychiatrist friend interpret his unique experience?

Ans. Yes, the third level was a medium of escape for Charley from the unhappy modern - Grand Central Station. Charley did not agree with his psychiatrist friend when the latter called his experience of visiting the third level 'a waking-dream wish fulfillment.' His friend tried in-vain to make him realize that his hallucinations are a result of his strong desire to escape to the peaceful times of the 1890s.

Answer the following questions in 100 Words.

1. The story reveals refuge from reality to illusion. Do you think it is obvious to escape from reality of life?

Ans. Jack Finney portrays Charley's transition from reality to imaginary world through the story the Third Level. It seems probable as the author employs authenticity to the experience. Charley worked late night at the office and was in hurry to reach his apartment to be with his wife Louisa. He thinks of taking the subway since it seems faster than bus. Grand Central Station has been described mysterious and mushrooming with subways, staircases and corridors that leads to many ways and places. Moving through the tunnel Charley recounts his past experience that appears safe and quite normal. Modern world is full of insecurity, fear, war, worry and tension. He wants to escape from the harsh realities of modern world. His friend Sam also agrees with the escape theory. They claim that our hobbies also lead us to a temporary escape from reality. Finally, his Psychiatrist friend reaches the Third Level and suggests Charley and his wife Louisa to keep on searching till they get it. The story weaves psychological phenomenal yarn to make it obvious.

2. What does the third level refer to?

Answer. The Grand Central Station of New York has subways on two levels from where the commuters take trains to different destinations. No third level was ever built. However, the protagonist of the story, Charley, believes in the existence of a third level, operating in a timeframe of 1890s. The third level signifies an escape from the modern world that is "full of insecurity, fear, war, worry and all the rest of it...." The period of 1890s represents a peaceful life not possible in the present era. From this level, the protagonist wants to travel to Galesburg, Illinois, with his wife Louisa. For him, it is a part of reality while his psychiatrist friend calls it a "waking-dream wish fulfillment."

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

Ans. After reading the story we get to know that Charley was interested in travelling to Galesburg with his wife Louisa. However, he couldn't locate the third level again. The first time round, he found the third level by accident. When he reached the ticket-counter, he realised that the currency he had with him was not useful as it belonged to a different period. He went back to convert his three hundred dollars into the "old-style currency" that could enable him to buy two tickets to Galesburg. However, when he returned to the Grand Central, he could not find the corridor leading to the third level. He couldn't go back looking for the third level as his wife was too worried about him. Moreover, he himself had stopped looking for it after sometime.

4. What do you infer from Sam's letter to Charley?

Ans. The letter was addressed to Charley but mailed to his grandfather in Galesburg, Illinois. It was mailed in 1894 and now appears in his grandfather's collection. The letter was suddenly found among the first-day covers where it had never been seen earlier. Moreover, the contents of the letter are exactly what Charley thought about Galesburg of 1890s. Sam's letter to Charley is a mystery that blends together the worlds of reality and fantasy, and thus, needs further exploring. There are two perspectives from which one can look at the letter. At one level, it proves that Sam has reached Galesburg of 1984. However, if we look at a deeper level, we can infer that the letter is just another instance of his hallucination or dreams of escapism. It is possible that while Charley was looking at the old first-cover letter, he was carried away to a different world where the letter was sent to Charley by Sam. The letter reflects Sam's undeterred urge that forces him to keep looking for the third level.