

Chapter- 1

The Third Level

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Walter Braden "Jack" Finney was an American author. He was born on October 2, 1911, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA. Finney was given the name Jack Finney. After his father died when he was renamed Walter Braden Finney in honour of his father, he continued to be known as "Jack" throughout his life. He graduated in 1934 from Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. He married Marguerite Guest. They had two children, Kenneth and Marguerite. After living in New York City and working for an advertising agency there, he moved with his family to California in the early 1950s. He lived in Mill Valley, California. He died of pneumonia and emphysema on November 14, 1995, at 84 in Greenbrae, California. His best-known works are science fiction and thrillers, including *The Body Snatchers* and *Time and Again*.

INTRODUCTION

The *Third Level* by Jack Finney is about the harsh realities of war. War has irreversible consequences, thus leaving people in a state of insecurity. It is also about modern-day problems and how the commoner tends to escape reality by various means. In this story, Charley hallucinates and reaches the third level of the Grand Central Station, which only has two levels.

THEME

The story, *the third level*, is the most concise and entertaining story about time travel. Charley wishes to be transported to the third level, the world of 1894, which is supposedly a much happier and quieter place to be. Whether the third level exists in reality or only in Charley's mind can be inferred from Sam's letter. The story dwells on the theme of escapism, not only as a psychological refuge from the grim realities of the present-day world but as a desire to stay with the past or keep the past alive in the complexities of the present.

CHARACTERS

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 tranquillity. He wants to go to Galesburg, Illinois, in 1894, when the First World War was twenty years off and the Second World War still forty years ahead.

He is an imaginative person. Hence on the wings of his imagination, he takes a flight to the non-existent world – the third level at Central Station. But after finding it once, he and his wife fail to see it again. In short, Charley is the true representative of the modern man who is torn between the pulls and pressures of hectic modern life and wants to escape since he is not happy.

Louisa: Louisa is Charley's wife. She is loving and caring for 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'. 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 looking for the third level every weekend.

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 fulfilment. 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 the insecurities of modern life. He dubs the argument of the 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 beautiful town with big old frame houses, huge lawns, giant 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 it. 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 were redundant in Galesburg in 1894.

SUB – CONCEPTS

- Interweaving of Reality with fantasy

- Time intersection
- Escapism as a psychological refuge
- Concept of imagination
- Search for happiness in life
- Role of a friend in getting peace and happiness
- Desire to stay in the past for peace, security, serenity.

VOCABULARY

Stack- a pile of objects, typically one that is neatly arranged

Timetables- a schedule showing the departure and arrival times of trains, buses or aircraft

Waking dream- an involuntary dream occurring while a person is awake

Wander- walk; roam

Refuge- the state of being safe or sheltered from pursuit, danger or difficulty

Suburban- residential

Ducked- lower the head or body quickly

Arched- curved

Bumping- knock or run into something

Vest- a garment worn on the upper part of the body

Snapped- break suddenly and completely

Locomotive- a powered railway vehicle used for pulling trains

Clerk- administrator

Fussing- show unnecessary or excessive concern about something

SUMMARY

- Introduction to the day the writer talks about...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, no third level at the Grand Central Station.
- Charley talks to his psychiatrist friend about the third level.
- He explained that he meant the modern world is full of insecurity, fear, war, worry and all the rest of it and that he just wanted to escape.
- Philatelist is responsible for this state of Charley and thinks his grandfather started his stamp collection, but in those days, they had not seen the consequence of war, and there were peace, harmony and security.
- His habit to go home by bus. But that late-night shift made him choose the Subway to his apartment; he did this to save time.
- The protagonist was dressed in a tan gabardine suit and a straw hat with a fancy band. It was so ordinary that he could see other similar men at the station.
- The expansion of Grand Central was fast like a tree and with its roots.
- The secret long tunnel connected to the city, way to Times Square and maybe to central park.

- Through the years, Grand Central has been an exit, a way of escape –i.e. I got into.... (Tunnel) and never told my psychiatrist friend about the idea.
- When walking in the corridor, it began angling left and slanting downward, which he felt odd, and the only voice of his feet echoed; then he heard some sound and walked downstairs again only to reach the third level of the Grand Central.
- He thought he had somehow made his way back to the second level, but as he noticed, the room was smaller, there were fewer ticket windows and train gates, and the information booth in the centre was of wood and old looking.
- The man in the booth was also different, and the station was dim-lit, for there were open-flame gaslights.
- Charley was dressed in an old-fashioned style and noticed everyone was dressed like that of the nineteenth century; it was basically before deadly wars.
- He even saw a tiny Currier & Ives locomotive which made him sure about which time he is in.
- To confirm his information, he went to a newspaper boy and saw "THE WORLD" and made it certain that some headlines about the then President Cleveland on the front page were on June 11, 1894.
- Then he booked tickets for Galesburg, Illinois, for him and his wife and was aware that he could book tickets to travel anywhere in the United States.
- He describes the evening scene and how things were in 1984 before the two World Wars.
- Charley just had enough for the one-sided journey, then he took out the money, and the clerk informed, it was not acceptable legal tender, and by any chance if he tried to be wise, he won't be able to get away with it. He ran out because he didn't want to go to jail.
- The next day he went to withdraw his entire savings and got them converted into old money by paying some amount of premium. He could never find the way to the third level corridor again despite hard efforts.
- Sam, the psychiatrist, disappeared out of the blue. Charley suspected that he had gone to Galesburg. He finds himself in the time-space of 1894.
- One night Charley came across a first-day cover. It is an envelope (with a stamp on it) that stamp collectors mail to themselves on the first day of its sale to mark the date. They're just blank inside and are not meant to be opened.
- It was a surprise for Charley to receive grandfather's old first-day cover, and someone had mailed it to his father since July 18, 1894.
- The letter talked about how the writer wished his third level story was true until he started believing it to be true. He asks Charley and Louis never to stop searching for the third level and come back.
- The letter had been signed off as Sam.
- Charlie found out from the coin store that he used to visit that Sam had bought old currency worth eight hundred dollars, which was to be utilised in hay, feed and grain business, which what he always wished to do.
- He could not go back to his old business, certainly not in *Galesburg, Illinois*.
- The story ends at a mysterious note where Charlie is wondering that Sam is a psychiatrist.

DESCRIPTION OF THE THIRD LEVEL

- Small room, few ticket windows and train gates, wooden and old looking information booth.
- Men had beards, sideburns, fancy moustaches

- Women wore skirts, high buttoned shoes and leg of muttons sleeves.
- A man looking at a pocket watch
- Old style locomotive with the funnel-shaped stack
- Open gaslights being used
- Brass spittoons on the floor
- He wants to visit his home town, Galesburg
- Past is quiet and peaceful
- He tries to buy two tickets to Galesburg (one ticket for his wife, Louisa)
- The clerk grows suspicious as Charlie doesn't have old-style currency.
- Back to the present-day world

PEOPLE'S REACTION TO CHARLIE'S EXPERIENCE

- Presidents of NY railroads swear on the existence of two levels.
- Psychiatrist friend Sam refuses to believe
- Interprets it as an escape from insecurity, fear, war and worry of the modern world.
- Louisa too disbelieves Charlie

CHARLIE'S DETERMINATION TO FIND THE THIRD LEVEL

- Withdraws money buys old currency worth 300 dollars.
- Fails to find the Third Level
- Louisa and the psychiatrist worried
- Unexpected Ending
- Sam disappears
- Charlie finds a first-day cover, never seen before

NOTE FROM SAM DATED 18TH JULY 1894 FROM GALESBURG

- Sam asks Charlie and Louisa to come to Galesburg and enjoy a quiet and peaceful life
- Charlie discovers Sam had bought old currency worth 800 dollars
- Enough to help him start hay and grain business in 1894 at Galesburg

FIRST DAY COVER

- Stamp collectors buy stamps on the day of release
- Mail the envelopes with blank paper in it with the postmark of the date to themselves
- Covers remain unopened
- Charley inherited a stamp collection from his grandfather

MIND MAP

THE THIRD LEVEL

BY: JACK FINNEY



