

English Notes



Vistas Chapter-1

The third level

Author: Jack Finney

About the Author

Jack Finney was an American author best known for his works of **science fiction and fantasy**. His stories often blend **ordinary everyday settings with mysterious or supernatural elements**. In *The Third Level*, Finney combines **time travel, imagination, and psychological realism** to explore how people try to escape the pressures of modern life.

Detailed Summary

The Third Level is a fascinating story that mixes **fantasy, psychology, and mystery**. The narrator, **Charley**, is a young man who works in New York City and lives with his wife **Louisa**. Like many people in modern society, Charley feels that life is becoming increasingly stressful and complicated.

One day, while returning home from work through **Grand Central Terminal**, Charley accidentally wanders into an unfamiliar part of the station. Grand Central Station is known to have **two levels**, but Charley believes he has discovered a **third level** that does not officially exist.

When Charley enters this mysterious level, he notices that everything looks old-fashioned and different from the modern world. The station is **dimly lit with flickering gaslights instead of electric lights**, and there are **brass spittoons, wooden ticket counters, and antique furniture**. The people around him are dressed in **clothes typical of the late nineteenth century**. Men wear **derby hats and moustaches**, while women wear **long dresses with leg-of-mutton sleeves**.

As Charley observes his surroundings more closely, he realizes that he has somehow traveled back in time to the year **1894**. He sees an old-style **steam locomotive** and notices newspapers mentioning **Grover Cleveland**, who was the President of the United States during that period.

Charley becomes excited about the possibility of escaping the worries of modern life. He decides to buy two tickets to **Galesburg, Illinois**, a small and peaceful town. Charley believes that Galesburg in 1894 would be the perfect place to live a calm and happy life with his wife Louisa, far away from the stress, insecurity, and conflicts of the twentieth century.

However, when Charley tries to pay for the tickets, he faces a problem. The ticket clerk becomes suspicious because Charley is carrying **modern currency**, which looks strange and unfamiliar to people living in 1894. The clerk begins to question him, and Charley becomes frightened. He quickly leaves the place and returns to the modern world.

Later, Charley tells his experience to his friend **Sam**, who is a psychiatrist. Sam listens carefully but dismisses Charley's story as a **"waking-dream wish fulfillment."** According to Sam, the pressures and anxieties of modern life have caused Charley to imagine a peaceful world in the past. Sam explains that many people experience similar fantasies when they feel overwhelmed by reality.

Despite Sam's explanation, Charley continues to believe that the third level exists. He

becomes interested in **philately (stamp collecting)**, which allows him to connect with the past through old stamps and letters. One day, while examining his grandfather's stamp collection, Charley finds a **first-day cover**—an envelope with a stamp and postmark.

The envelope is dated **July 18, 1894**, and it is addressed to Charley. To his surprise, the letter inside is written by **Sam**. In the letter, Sam says that he has discovered the third level and successfully traveled back to **Galesburg in 1894**. He describes the town as peaceful and beautiful, just as Charley had imagined.

Sam writes that life in Galesburg is calm and enjoyable, and he invites Charley and Louisa to join him there. This revelation shocks Charley because Sam had always dismissed his story as imaginary.

The story ends on an **ambiguous note**. Readers are left wondering whether the third level really exists as a secret passage through time or whether it is simply a powerful symbol of the human desire to escape from the pressures of modern life.

Character Sketch

Charley

- The narrator and main character of the story.
- Imaginative and curious person who believes in the existence of the third level.
- Feels stressed by modern life and longs for peace and simplicity.
- Represents people who wish to escape the complexities of the modern world.
- His fascination with the past shows his desire for a calmer and more meaningful life.

Sam

- Charley's friend and a professional psychiatrist.
- Initially dismisses Charley's experience as psychological illusion.
- Believes that the third level is a result of Charley's desire to escape modern stress.
- Ironically, Sam himself eventually finds the third level and travels to the past.

Louisa

- Charley's supportive and understanding wife.
- She listens patiently to Charley's strange experiences.
- Represents practical thinking and emotional support in Charley's life.

Themes

Theme	Explanation
Escapism	The story shows how people try to escape from stressful realities through imagination or dreams.
Reality vs Imagination	The story blurs the boundary between what is real and what is imagined.
Nostalgia for the Past	The year 1894 symbolizes a peaceful and simpler era compared to modern life.
Stress of Modern Life	The pressures of modern society create anxiety and dissatisfaction.
Time Travel and Possibility	The mysterious third level suggests the possibility of hidden realities beyond normal perception.

Literary Devices

Device	Explanation
Imagery	Detailed descriptions of gaslights, old-fashioned clothes, and wooden counters create a vivid picture of 1894.
Irony	Sam, who dismisses Charley's story, later travels to 1894 himself.
Symbolism	The third level symbolizes a psychological escape from modern stress.
Metaphor	"Grand Central is growing like a tree" compares the station to a growing tree with branches.
Allusion	References to Grover Cleveland and historical events from the nineteenth century.

Title Justification

The title "**The Third Level**" is both literal and symbolic. Literally, it refers to a mysterious third level at **Grand Central Terminal** that seems to lead to the year 1894. Symbolically, the third level represents **a mental escape from the anxiety and stress of modern life**. For Charley, it is a doorway to a peaceful world where life moves slowly and people feel secure and happy.

Important Questions

One-Mark Questions

1. What is the third level at Grand Central Station?
2. Who is the narrator of the story?
3. What does Charley see when he enters the third level?
4. Why does Charley want to go to Galesburg, Illinois?
5. What does Sam think about Charley's experience?
6. What hobby does Charley develop?
7. What proof does Charley find about the third level?
8. In which year does Charley believe he traveled?
9. Who was the President mentioned in the newspapers of 1894?
10. What is a first-day cover?

Three-Mark Questions

1. Describe the appearance of the third level at Grand Central Station.
2. Why does Charley want to escape to Galesburg in 1894?
3. How does Sam explain Charley's experience?
4. What role does philately play in the story?
5. How does the story mix fantasy with psychological realism?
6. Why does Charley believe the third level really exists?
7. What does the discovery of Sam's letter suggest?

Five-Mark / Long Answer Questions

1. Describe Charley's experience when he discovers the third level.
2. How does the story highlight the stress and anxiety of modern life?

3. Explain the theme of escapism in *The Third Level*.
4. Do you think the third level really exists? Explain your opinion with reasons.
5. How does Jack Finney blur the line between reality and imagination in the story?
6. Explain the significance of Sam's letter in the story.
7. How does the story reflect people's longing for a simpler past?

Value-Based Question

Q: What message does the story convey about modern life?

The story suggests that modern life is often stressful and complicated, causing people to dream about escaping to a simpler past. While imagination and hobbies can provide comfort, people must also learn to face reality. The story reminds us that hope, dreams, and nostalgia can help us cope with life's difficulties, but balance between imagination and reality is important.

Extract-Based Questions (with Answers)

Extract 1

“The modern world is full of insecurity, fear, war, worry and all the rest of it.”

Questions

1. Who says these words?

Charley says these words while explaining why he wants to escape modern life.

2. What does this line reveal about the modern world?

It shows that modern life is full of stress, uncertainty, and anxiety due to wars, social problems, and competition.

3. Why does Charley feel the need to escape?

He feels overwhelmed by the worries and complexities of modern life and longs for a peaceful past.

4. What theme of the story is highlighted here?

The theme of **escapism** and dissatisfaction with modern life.

Extract 2

“Grand Central is growing like a tree pushing out new corridors and staircases like roots.”

Questions

1. What does the narrator compare Grand Central Station to?

He compares it to a growing tree.

2. Why does he make this comparison?

Because the station seems huge and complicated with many corridors and passageways.

3. Which literary device is used here?

A metaphor.

4. How does this comparison help the story?

It shows how easy it is to get lost in the station, making the discovery of the mysterious third level believable.

Extract 3

“I turned into Grand Central from Vanderbilt Avenue and went down the steps to the first level.”

Questions**1. Where is Charley going?**

He is entering **Grand Central Terminal**.

2. What unusual thing happens after this?

Instead of reaching the usual levels, he accidentally discovers the mysterious third level.

3. What is special about the third level?

It appears to belong to the year 1894.

4. What does the third level symbolize?

It symbolizes escape from the pressures of modern life.

Short Answer Questions (3–4 Marks)**1. Why did Charley want to go to Galesburg in 1894?**

Charley wanted to go to **Galesburg, Illinois** because he believed it was a peaceful and simple place where life was calm and enjoyable. Unlike modern cities filled with stress and insecurity, Galesburg represented a quiet town where people lived happily. Charley imagined living there with his wife Louisa, away from the worries of modern life.

2. How did Sam explain Charley’s experience?

Sam, who was a psychiatrist, explained Charley’s experience as a **“waking-dream wish fulfillment.”** According to him, Charley imagined the third level because he wanted to escape from the stress and anxiety of modern life. Sam believed that Charley’s mind created this illusion as a psychological response to his dissatisfaction with reality.

3. What role does philately play in the story?

Philately, or stamp collecting, plays an important role in the story. It represents Charley’s connection with the past. Through this hobby, he studies old stamps and letters from earlier times. The discovery of a **first-day cover dated 1894** in his stamp collection becomes crucial evidence suggesting that the third level might actually exist.

4. How does the story mix fantasy and reality?

The story combines fantasy through the idea of a mysterious third level that allows time travel. At the same time, it includes realistic explanations through Sam's psychological theory. The discovery of Sam's letter from 1894 makes the situation even more mysterious. This mixture of fantasy and reality makes the story intriguing and thought-provoking.

Long Answer Questions (5–6 Marks)

1. Describe Charley's discovery of the third level.

One day while returning home through **Grand Central Terminal**, Charley accidentally enters an unfamiliar part of the station. He finds himself in a place that looks completely different from the modern world. The lighting is dim, with gaslights instead of electric bulbs. There are brass spittoons, wooden counters, and old-fashioned ticket windows.

The people there are dressed in nineteenth-century clothing, and the newspapers mention **Grover Cleveland** as the President. Charley realizes that he has somehow reached the year 1894. Excited by the possibility of escaping modern life, he tries to buy tickets to **Galesburg, Illinois**, but the clerk becomes suspicious of his modern currency. Frightened, Charley leaves the station and returns to the present.

2. Explain the theme of escapism in the story.

The theme of escapism is central to *The Third Level*. Charley feels overwhelmed by the stress, insecurity, and problems of modern life. He dreams of escaping to a simpler and more peaceful past. The third level represents this desire to escape reality.

The year 1894 symbolizes a time when life was slower and less complicated. Charley believes that living in **Galesburg, Illinois** would allow him to avoid modern worries. The story shows that many people wish to escape their problems, but it also suggests that imagination and nostalgia cannot completely replace reality.

3. What is the significance of Sam's letter in the story?

Sam's letter is a crucial turning point in the story. Earlier, Sam dismissed Charley's story as a psychological illusion. However, the letter dated **July 18, 1894** proves that Sam himself has discovered the third level and traveled to the past.

In the letter, Sam describes life in **Galesburg, Illinois** as peaceful and enjoyable. He invites Charley and Louisa to join him there. This letter creates uncertainty and mystery, leaving readers unsure whether the third level is real or imaginary.