Chapter 1: The Third Level

Exercise 1.1 — Reading with Insight

Q1 Do you think that the third level was a medium of escape for Charley? Why?

SOLUTION

Yes, the third level at Grand Central Station functioned as a medium of escape for Charley, both literally and psychologically. Charley himself acknowledges the idea when his psychiatrist tells him it was a 'waking-dream wish fulfillment,' a product of his desire to escape the pressures of the modern world.

The modern world, as the psychiatrist explains, is 'full of insecurity, fear, war, worry and all the rest of it.' Charley, dissatisfied with this reality, is drawn to the peaceful, unhurried world of 1894 — specifically Galesburg, Illinois, with its big old frame houses, huge lawns, and long summer evenings. He even tries to buy tickets for himself and his wife Louisa to go there.

His stamp collecting also serves as a 'temporary refuge from reality,' as his friends point out. The third level is thus an extension of this escapist tendency — a fantastical exit from the anxieties of modern life into an idealized, simpler past. Even after failing to find the corridor again, both Charley and Louisa begin searching every weekend, suggesting the longing to escape remains strong. The third level, whether real or imagined, clearly represents Charley's desire to leave behind the pressures of the present and retreat into a comforting, peaceful past.

Answer: Yes — the third level is Charley's escape from the insecurity and stress of the modern world into an idealized, peaceful 1894.

Q2 What do you infer from Sam's letter to Charley?

SOLUTION

Sam's letter, written from 941 Willard Street, Galesburg, Illinois, and postmarked July 18, 1894, carries several significant inferences. First, it confirms that Sam did indeed find the third level — the very corridor whose existence he, as Charley's psychiatrist, had dismissed as a 'waking-dream wish fulfillment.' Sam writes: '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!'

Second, the letter reveals that Sam himself was not immune to the desire to escape. He always wanted to run a hay, feed and grain business — a simple, rural life far removed from his psychiatric practice in the city. The letter's cheerful tone (describing neighbours playing piano, singing, and inviting him for lemonade) shows he has found the peaceful contentment that Charley longed for.

Third, it serves as the story's crucial twist: the psychiatrist who labelled Charley's experience as irrational escapism has himself succumbed to the same impulse. This irony undermines any purely clinical reading of the story.

Finally, Sam's letter acts as 'proof' for Charley and Louisa that the third level is real, giving them

renewed motivation to keep searching. The letter blurs the line between reality and fantasy, leaving the reader to question whether the third level truly exists or whether the letter itself is part of the same elaborate wish fulfillment.

Answer: Sam's letter proves he found the third level and escaped to 1894 Galesburg — the very reality his psychiatrist self had dismissed — revealing his own yearning to escape modern life.

Q3 'The modern world is full of insecurity, fear, war, worry and stress.' What are the ways in which we attempt to overcome them?

SOLUTION

The psychiatrist's observation in the story rings universally true: modern life, with its relentless pace, geopolitical tensions, economic pressures, and social anxieties, generates enormous stress. People adopt many strategies — conscious and unconscious — to cope.

One common approach is pursuing hobbies and creative outlets. In the story, Charley collects stamps, which his friends describe as a 'temporary refuge from reality.' Similarly, people turn to music, painting, gardening, reading, or sport to create a mental space apart from everyday anxieties.

Another approach is travel and seeking new environments — physically removing oneself from a stressful context, even briefly. Charley's longing to go to Galesburg reflects this impulse taken to an extreme.

Social connection also helps: spending time with family and friends, building community, or simply sharing one's worries with others reduces the burden of stress. Practices such as meditation, yoga, and mindfulness are widely used to restore inner calm.

Nostalgia itself is a common coping mechanism — revisiting memories of simpler, happier times through old photographs, music, films, or places associated with the past. Literature and cinema provide vicarious escape into other worlds.

However, the story also cautions that escapism taken too far — retreating entirely from reality into a fantasy — can be counterproductive. The healthiest responses to modern stress combine genuine self-care with engagement: addressing problems rather than only fleeing them.

Answer: People cope through hobbies, travel, social bonds, meditation, nostalgia, and creative outlets — the story cautions, however, that pure escapism has its limits.

Q4 Do you see an intersection of time and space in the story?

SOLUTION

Yes, the story is built upon a striking intersection of time and space. The same physical location — Grand Central Station, a specific point in New York City — exists simultaneously in different time periods. Charley enters it in the present day (mid-twentieth century) but, by descending to the third level, finds himself in the year 1894. The station's space is shared across two eras;

which era a person inhabits depends on which corridor or staircase they take.

This intersection is reinforced by physical details. The dim gaslights, the brass spittoons, the wooden information booth, the green eyeshade of the attendant, and the passengers dressed in late-nineteenth-century clothing all belong to 1894, yet they exist within the same architectural shell as the modern station above.

The letter from Sam deepens this intersection: it is a nineteenth-century postmarked envelope that physically rests in Charley's twentieth-century stamp collection, carrying a message across time. The envelope bridges two moments that would otherwise be entirely separate.

The story thus treats time not as a linear, one-directional sequence, but as something layered — different eras occupying the same space at once. Grand Central becomes a node where the present and the past coexist, and where a person might slip from one temporal layer to another. This intersection is what gives the story its central wonder and its philosophical resonance about the human relationship with time.

Answer: Yes — Grand Central Station exists simultaneously in the present and in 1894; the same space holds different time periods, and Sam's letter physically bridges them.

Q5 Apparent illogicality sometimes turns out to be a futuristic projection? Discuss.

SOLUTION

This proposition invites us to consider how ideas dismissed as irrational or impossible may in fact anticipate possibilities that rational thought cannot yet accommodate. In the story, Charley's claim of having found the third level at Grand Central is immediately labelled irrational — a 'waking-dream wish fulfillment' — by his psychiatrist and friends. The idea of a hidden, temporally displaced platform seems logically absurd.

Yet the story ends by suggesting that what appeared illogical was true. Sam, the psychiatrist himself — the very voice of rational dismissal — found the third level, escaped to 1894, and wrote back to confirm it. The apparent illogicality turned out to be a real possibility that the rational framework of modern life was simply not equipped to handle.

This resonates with the history of science and technology. Ideas once dismissed as fantastical — powered flight, global instantaneous communication, space travel — were once regarded as irrational projections. The visionaries who proposed them were often ridiculed. Over time, these 'illogicalities' became futuristic projections, and eventually realities.

In literature, the genre of science fiction is built on this premise: taking an idea that violates current understanding and projecting it forward as a possibility. H.G. Wells's time travel, for example, was dismissed in its time but has since become a staple of scientific speculation and serious theoretical physics (concepts such as spacetime and wormholes).

The story thus asks us to hold our rational dismissals lightly. What seems like fantasy or illogicality may be an imagination reaching ahead of its time, pointing toward something the present world has not yet learned to see.

Answer: Ideas that seem irrational — like Charley's third level — may be imaginative projections of real possibilities; science, technology, and literature all show that today's absurdity can become tomorrow's reality.

Q6 Philately helps keep the past alive. Discuss other ways in which this is done. What do you think of the human tendency to constantly move between the past, the present and the future?

SOLUTION

Philately — stamp collecting — preserves history in a tangible form. Each stamp carries a date, a national image, a moment of political or cultural significance. Charley's grandfather's collection, begun in peaceful times, physically holds a slice of the past in the present. In the story, it is within this very collection that Sam's letter from 1894 surfaces.

Other means of keeping the past alive include museums and archives, which preserve artefacts, documents, and artworks so future generations can encounter them directly. Historical monuments and heritage sites make the past physically present. Literature, cinema, and oral traditions pass stories across generations, keeping memories, values, and events from fading. Photography and film capture moments that would otherwise be lost. Family traditions, festivals, rituals, and cuisine carry forward cultural memory in living, embodied form. Genealogy research and oral history projects recover personal and communal pasts.

The human tendency to move between past, present, and future is both a strength and a vulnerability. Looking back allows us to learn from experience, find identity and continuity, and draw comfort from familiar, well-understood times. Looking forward motivates ambition, planning, and hope. The present is where action and life actually occur.

The danger arises when one dimension overwhelms the others: nostalgia that becomes escapism (as with Charley) traps a person in an imagined past and prevents engagement with present realities. Excessive anxiety about the future paralyses action. A healthy balance — drawing on the past for wisdom, engaging fully with the present, and planning thoughtfully for the future — is the ideal. The story gently warns against the seduction of pure nostalgia while also acknowledging that the longing is deeply and universally human.

Answer: Museums, oral traditions, cinema, literature, and family rituals all preserve the past; the human oscillation between past, present, and future is natural but becomes problematic when nostalgia tips into escapism.

Q7 You have read 'Adventure' by Jayant Narlikar in Hornbill Class XI. Compare the interweaving of fantasy and reality in the two stories.

SOLUTION

Both 'The Third Level' by Jack Finney and 'Adventure' by Jayant Narlikar weave fantasy and reality together, but they do so through different mechanisms and to different thematic ends.

In 'The Third Level,' the boundary between fantasy and reality is deliberately kept ambiguous.

Charley's account of the third-level platform at Grand Central Station is narrated in the first person, with realistic, grounded detail — the gaslights, the dress of the passengers, the newspaper dated June 11, 1894. Yet it is equally plausible that the whole experience is a hallucination. The psychiatrist calls it a 'waking-dream,' and even Charley cannot find the corridor again. The story never resolves this ambiguity; it lets both readings coexist. What tilts the balance toward the fantastic being real is Sam's letter — a physical artefact from 1894 found in a twentieth-century stamp collection. Fantasy and reality interpenetrate so completely that the story's power lies precisely in that irresolution.

In 'Adventure,' the fantasy is grounded in a scientific framework — the theory of catastrophism and the idea of a parallel world in which the Battle of Panipat had a different outcome. Professor Gaitonde moves between the world he knows and a parallel historical reality, but he returns, and the experience is explained through scientific theory. The fantasy is rationalised; it has a systematic basis rather than an emotional or psychological one.

Both stories use their respective fantastic elements to comment on human reality: 'The Third Level' explores the psychology of escapism and the longing for a simpler past, while 'Adventure' explores determinism, history, and the nature of reality. In 'The Third Level,' the fantasy is sustained and seductive; in 'Adventure,' it is ultimately explained and resolved. Together they show two distinct approaches — lyrical-ambiguous versus scientific-systematic — to the interweaving of fantasy and reality.

Answer: 'The Third Level' sustains ambiguity between fantasy and reality through emotional longing; 'Adventure' rationalises its parallel-world fantasy through scientific theory — both use the fantastic to interrogate human experience, but by different methods.