

# [The together the pieces from their happy pre-war](https://assignbuster.com/the-together-the-pieces-from-their-happy-pre-war/)

The Seven Year Itch shows how the aftermath of World War II had anunanticipated affect on the nuclear family and put immense pressure on thepreviously stable family structure. Desperate to claw together the pieces fromtheir happy pre-war life, man and woman must work in a forced harmony in orderto restore this matrimony and re-establish gender roles for the good of thefamily. For Americans, this shift in family life had come from the fact they” had fought for a dream, but the defence of the dream had altered it”(Byars1991, p.

56), and instead of war winning the nation’s security, it jeopardisedit. This crumbling ideal of married life meant both man and wife became fearfulof the outsider, and lead a relationship “ fraught with conflict and mistrust, withsoldiers returning to wives and sweethearts who had strayed either to other menor to jobs outside the home” (Pomerance 2005, p. 90) Through Richard’s story wesee how this snapping point seven years later results in these insecuritiestranslating into flippant actions, such as seeking comfort from another womanand rejecting his role as a father in this “ tidal wave of modern unhappiness”(Byars 1991, p. 83). Thecharacter of Tom is an embodiment of this fear of the outsider, as Richardsuspects him of frolicking with his wife, Helen, whilst she is on vacation. Thispost-war concern proposes “ a more fundamental question about masculine identity– about what it meant to be a man” (Chopra-Gant 2005, p. 96), as Richard seeshis only way of asserting his masculine dominance by resorting to violence ashe attacks Tom.

This is due to man being “ consumed by the concern to appearmale, important, superior”(De Beauvoir, 2015 p. 39), especially when Tom hasstepped over the threshold into Richard’s own home, where Richard must defendhis territory as head of the house. This behaviour is a direct indication tomale combat during the war, and how the men that once fought together againsttheir common enemy are now fighting against each other as they struggle to fit intothe mould society has created for them as man, husband, and father.   Anotheranxiety looming over 1950s family life was the introduction to more advancedtechnology, particularly within the domestic realm as “ technology replaces theneed for a female homemaker in the kitchen” (Cohan 1997, p. 272). Her rolebegins to be designated to sparkly new machines as America saw a rise inhousehold’s owning fridges, freezers, toasters, blenders and even dishwashers, which frees up her time and shows a society that for once is moving forwards with the woman as her workload eases.

However, the outcome of this is a greater stress on the breadwinner of the family, as hemust stay in this “ marriage that bound a man to a corporate job”(Pomerance2005, p. 51) and provide his wife with these new machines to keep their marriagein smooth operation.  Theending to The Seven Year Itch seesmarital harmony restored as Richard abandons The Girl in his duplex as hereturns to his wife. Although we do not see their happy reunion, we can assumethat their married life will get back on tracks as the itch is remedied, forthe moment.

Female characters like Helen serves as a shining emblem for fidelityand convenience as their purpose “ is to maintain the integrity of the family, they provide the possibility for the solution”(Byars 1991, p. 83) and the filmshows an appropriate outcome that upholds the sanctity of marriage. The Girl isleft waving out of the window of the Sherman family house, voiceless. Lawrenceargues that “ the films of the fifties demonstrate an institutional desire torecuperate the threat of the woman’s voice”(Lawrence 1991, p. 6) as we neglectto think beyond her current predicament and how she remains no more than aby-product of men’s desire to deviate from The American Dream, only to be usedas a temporary cure while they resolve their marital itches.   Female Liberation Thenarrative of The Seven Year Itch exploresthe repercussions of what man will do when he is placed in the female position– that is within “ domestic containment”(Cohan 1997, p. 62).

While Helen, likemany other wives of businessmen across America, vacate to the coast each year, formen, this sickness resurfaces as a reaction to association with the femaleposition. During this time “ association with her or her attributes may resultin feminization of the male”(Pomerance 2005, p. 97), and he becomesdisillusioned with his current duties as father and husband. This itch that is at the core of the film, was first bought to public attention by Betty Friedan as “ the problem with noname”(Friedan 1963, p. 9), where she explored how the home operated as a” comfortable trap”(Friedan 1963, p. vi) where husband and wife operated within, brushing aside their symptom of complacency. The gender role reversal seenwithin The Seven Year Itch wouldstrike a cord with all “ men in grey flannel suits”(Cohan 1997, p. 65) for “ thescreen is both surface and passageway, mirror and obstacle” (Mayne 1992, p.

31)as it succeeds in exploring how this “ problem with no name” exists beyond thatof just a female issue, and frees the woman as sole prisoner within the familyhome.    Inorder to re-establish the strength of family structure to its pre-waridealistic state, women must adhere to expectations that undermine the advancesthey have made thus far. This very notion challenges the female liberationoccurring at the time as women accepted that “ in order to help a man appearmore masculine, she must assume a role of utter helplessness while she iswith him”(Pomerance 2005, p. 54). The Girl is a perfect embodiment of thesequalities, and therefore a perfect remedy for a man who aches to feel like aman again. She effortlessly takes on the damsel in distress role, when sherequires a man to help her get her big toe out the faucet, or when she is indire need of an air conditioning unit.

This suggests that a big change in achieving1950’s idealism was that in order to steady the gender flux, both man and womanmust play-act with each other, as we see “ a concept of gender as a performativeidentity”(Chopra-Gant 2005, p. 97).  Thisstrengthens the social argument that the screen becomes a mirror for itsaudiences, as the expectation to perform according to their role applies toboth sides of the screen. Monroe, as The Girl, clings to an alternative levelof performance as she is less of acharacter and must perform beyond this, as a “ vivid cultural symbol”(Leaming1998, p. 127): a symbol of sexuality, innocence, beauty, and the ‘ new woman’. Thismeans “ on-screen, Monroe must never be allowed to die, to prove that Americaand little girls last forever”(Burchill 1984, p. 151), and that there will now alwaysbe a desire for The Girl, the escape, within the male American Dream.   Ina greater exploration of The Girl’s image, it is apparent she becomes a deviceto take control of emerging female sexuality.

Her baby faced, silky voicedcharacter laces her sexuality with innocence, as “ audiences were thrilled andrelieved to discover that it was all right to laugh at sex”(Leaming 1998, p. 77), and that this ‘ new woman’ might not be such a terrible threat to traditionafter all. In actuality, she has greater control over her body and circumstancethan the pre-war woman, and her liberal attitude to sex is aided by theintroduction of birth control.

The Girl does not adhere to tradition and paysno regard to the notion of fidelity; she is a new, dazzling ornament thatbecomes the twinkle in a man’s eye, while his wife is preoccupied with herhousewifery duties. Audiences cannot know the real threat The Girl may have onthe perfect family they are fighting so hard to rekindle, and so she is neverallowed to become a threat. Instead, marriage and loyalty triumph as audiencescan delight knowing that The Girl has just enough sex appeal to be an amusing creaturecontained within the realm of film, but not enough to jeopardise her marriedlife in reality.   Masculinity Crisis The Seven Year Itch is primarily a film about one man’s midlifecrisis and the extent this emotional burden has on the head of the family. Atthe centre of every midlife crisis is the fear of ageing, and Richard believesThe Girl is the perfect ointment to relieve his old age itch despite the factthat the loud crick in his neck whenever he looks at The Girl “ is a continualreminder of his middle-aged body sagging under the burden of breadwinner”(Cohan1997, p. 64). This only heightens his feelings of a decline into old age, whichis worsened by the stress of his inescapable duties that come with being afather and husband, “ nonetheless, men reportedly clung to the ideal of beingthe sole breadwinner and decision maker”(Pomerance 2005, p. 47) as it is allthat they know, and to be devoid of these duties would rid him of anyimportance.

This “ unattainable blonde and ageing lothario”(Cohan 1997, p. 64)set up is one that eases his current predicament as women like The Girl mademen feel big, and for a while they forget about feeling old. The expectationfor men to always appear old and mature under the patriarchal structure, andfor women to always remain youthful and radiant creates these very binarygender roles, and a great dependence on one another that founded a stablefamily structure. The shift in this idealism later occurring in the 1950’s(more specifically seven years after matrimony) explores what happens once thedust has settled: after being sent off to war and forced to grow up, andrushing into a married life upon their return, why there was a dissatisfactionwith what they fought for.  Richard’sridiculous constructed fantasies and imagined infidelity are a result of theconfusion between the expression of a “ hard masculinity”(Cohan 1997, p.

xii) anda “ soft masculinity”(Cohan 1997, p. xii) as a man, lover, husband andbusinessman. He is constantly fraught about how he should be when he is withThe Girl (where he often adopts a hard masculinity within his mind and sees itfail when trying to recreate it within reality), in comparison to how he shouldbe with his wife Helen, with a soft masculinity, a gentle masculinity. Thisissue derives from the frontline when men required “ a hard masculinity as thestandard when defending the nation’s boundaries”(Cohan 1997, p. xii) and thenstruggling to maintain an appropriate level of masculinity for home and worklife. This apparent confusion occasionally translates into violence, when inone of Richard’s fantasies he slaps a nurse across the face while she attemptsto cavort with him.

De Beauvoirdescribes this type of behaviour within the bedroom as “ the terrain forasserting his aggressive superiority”(De Beauvoir 2015, p. 39) where he feelshis most “ fiercely male”(De Beauvoir 2015, p. 41) in his domesticated life awayfrom the frontline. This type of violence, that we too see example of in hisfight with Tom, is also a rejection of appearing weak and female, as “ beingmanly not meant not being womanly”(Cohan 1997, p. 103), and so the fine linebetween hard and soft, appropriate and inappropriate, is a blurred one whentrying to maintain the image of ultimate masculinity.  While we do not imagine Richard would bephysically violent with his wife or son, we do sense a certain hostilitytowards them in moments such as when he slips on his son’s roller-skate that isleft around the house and exclaims under his breath. This embittered attitudesuggests a new stress upon the nuclear family that is a result of a lax instructure and rise in tension between man and wife that sees a change withinfamily dynamics due to the social changes occurring in the 1950’s home where” women were being re-domesticated and masculinity realigned” (Pomerance 2005, p. 20).