

The together the  
pieces from their  
happy pre-war



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The *Seven Year Itch* shows how the aftermath of World War II had an unanticipated affect on the nuclear family and put immense pressure on the previously stable family structure. Desperate to claw together the pieces from their happy pre-war life, man and woman must work in a forced harmony in order to restore this matrimony and re-establish gender roles for the good of the family. 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" (Byars 1991, p.

56), and instead of war winning the nation's security, it jeopardised it. This crumbling ideal of married life meant both man and wife became fearful of the outsider, and lead a relationship "fraught with conflict and mistrust, with soldiers returning to wives and sweethearts who had strayed either to other men or to jobs outside the home" (Pomerance 2005, p. 90) Through Richard's story we see how this snapping point seven years later results in these insecurities translating into flippant actions, such as seeking comfort from another woman and rejecting his role as a father in this "tidal wave of modern unhappiness" (Byars 1991, p. 83). The character of Tom is an embodiment of this fear of the outsider, as Richard suspects him of frolicking with his wife, Helen, whilst she is on vacation. This post-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 sees his only way of asserting his masculine dominance by resorting to violence as he attacks Tom.

This is due to man being "consumed by the concern to appear male, important, superior" (De Beauvoir, 2015 p. 39), especially when Tom

has stepped over the threshold into Richard's own home, where Richard must defend his territory as head of the house. This behaviour is a direct indication to male combat during the war, and how the men that once fought together against their common enemy are now fighting against each other as they struggle to fit into the mould society has created for them as man, husband, and father. Another anxiety looming over 1950s family life was the introduction to more advanced technology, particularly within the domestic realm as "technology replaces the need for a female homemaker in the kitchen" (Cohan 1997, p. 272). Her role begins to be designated to sparkly new machines as America saw a rise in household'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 he must stay in this "marriage that bound a man to a corporate job" (Pomerance 2005, p. 51) and provide his wife with these new machines to keep their marriage in smooth operation. The ending to *The Seven Year Itch* sees marital harmony restored as Richard abandons *The Girl* in his duplex as he returns to his wife. Although we do not see their happy reunion, we can assume that their married life will get back on tracks as the itch is remedied, for the moment.

Female characters like Helen serves as a shining emblem for fidelity and 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 film shows an appropriate outcome that upholds the sanctity of marriage. *The Girl* is left

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waving out of the window of the Sherman family house, voiceless.

Lawrence argues that “ the films of the fifties demonstrate an institutional desire to recuperate the threat of the woman’s voice”(Lawrence 1991, p. 6) as we neglect to think beyond her current predicament and how she remains no more than a by-product of men’s desire to deviate from The American Dream, only to be used as a temporary cure while they resolve their marital itches. Female Liberation The narrative of *The Seven Year Itch* explores the 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, like many other wives of businessmen across America, vacate to the coast each year, for men, this sickness resurfaces as a reaction to association with the female position. During this time “ association with her or her attributes may result in feminization of the male”(Pomerance 2005, p. 97), and he becomes disillusioned with his current duties as father and husband. This itch that is at the core of the film, was first brought to public attention by Betty Friedan as “ the problem with no name”(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 seen within *The Seven Year Itch* would strike a cord with all “ men in grey flannel suits”(Cohan 1997, p. 65) for “ the screen 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 that of just a female issue, and frees the woman as sole prisoner within the family home. In order to re-establish the strength of family

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structure to its pre-war idealistic state, women must adhere to expectations that undermine the advances they have made thus far. This very notion challenges the female liberation occurring at the time as women accepted that “in order to help a man appear more masculine, she must assume a role of utter helplessness while she is with him” (Pomerance 2005, p. 54). The Girl is a perfect embodiment of these qualities, and therefore a perfect remedy for a man who aches to feel like a man again. She effortlessly takes on the damsel in distress role, when she requires a man to help her get her big toe out the faucet, or when she is in dire need of an air conditioning unit.

This suggests that a big change in achieving 1950's idealism was that in order to steady the gender flux, both man and woman must play-act with each other, as we see “a concept of gender as a performative identity” (Chopra-Gant 2005, p. 97). This strengthens the social argument that the screen becomes a mirror for its audiences, as the expectation to perform according to their role applies to both sides of the screen. Monroe, as The Girl, clings to an alternative level of performance as she is less of a character and must perform beyond this, as a “vivid cultural symbol” (Leaming 1998, p. 127): a symbol of sexuality, innocence, beauty, and the ‘new woman’. This means “on-screen, Monroe must never be allowed to die, to prove that America and little girls last forever” (Burchill 1984, p. 151), and that there will now always be a desire for The Girl, the escape, within the male American Dream. In a greater exploration of The Girl's image, it is apparent she becomes a device to take control of emerging female sexuality.

Her baby faced, silky voiced character laces her sexuality with innocence, as “audiences were thrilled and relieved 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 tradition after all. In actuality, she has greater control over her body and circumstance than the pre-war woman, and her liberal attitude to sex is aided by the introduction of birth control.

The Girl does not adhere to tradition and pays no regard to the notion of fidelity; she is a new, dazzling ornament that becomes the twinkle in a man’s eye, while his wife is preoccupied with her housewifery duties. Audiences cannot know the real threat The Girl may have on the perfect family they are fighting so hard to rekindle, and so she is never allowed to become a threat. Instead, marriage and loyalty triumph as audiences can delight knowing that The Girl has just enough sex appeal to be an amusing creature contained within the realm of film, but not enough to jeopardise her married life in reality. Masculinity Crisis The Seven Year Itch is primarily a film about one man’s midlife crisis and the extent this emotional burden has on the head of the family. At the centre of every midlife crisis is the fear of ageing, and Richard believes The Girl is the perfect ointment to relieve his old age itch despite the fact that the loud crick in his neck whenever he looks at The Girl “is a continual reminder of his middle-aged body sagging under the burden of breadwinner” (Cohan 1997, p. 64). This only heightens his feelings of a decline into old age, which is worsened by the stress of his inescapable duties that come with being a father and husband, “nonetheless, men reportedly clung to the ideal of being the sole breadwinner and decision

maker”(Pomerance 2005, p. 47) as it is all that they know, and to be devoid of these duties would rid him of any importance.

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

xii) and a “ soft masculinity”(Cohan 1997, p. xii) as a man, lover, husband and businessman. He is constantly fraught about how he should be when he is with The Girl (where he often adopts a hard masculinity within his mind and sees it fail when trying to recreate it within reality), in comparison to how he should be with his wife Helen, with a soft masculinity, a gentle masculinity. This issue derives from the frontline when men required “ a hard masculinity as the standard when defending the nation's boundaries”(Cohan 1997, p. xii) and then struggling to maintain an appropriate level of masculinity for home and worklife. This apparent confusion occasionally translates into violence,

when in one of Richard's fantasies he slaps a nurse across the face while she attempts to cavort with him.

De Beauvoir describes this type of behaviour within the bedroom as "the terrain for asserting his aggressive superiority" (De Beauvoir 2015, p. 39) where he feels his most "fiercely male" (De Beauvoir 2015, p. 41) in his domesticated life away from the frontline. This type of violence, that we too see an example of in his fight with Tom, is also a rejection of appearing weak and female, as "being manly not meant not being womanly" (Cohan 1997, p. 103), and so the fine line between hard and soft, appropriate and inappropriate, is a blurred one when trying to maintain the image of ultimate masculinity. While we do not imagine Richard would be physically violent with his wife or son, we do sense a certain hostility towards them in moments such as when he slips on his son's roller-skate that is left around the house and exclaims under his breath. This embittered attitude suggests a new stress upon the nuclear family that is a result of a lax structure and rise in tension between man and wife that sees a change within family 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).