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Things fall apart

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Dr. Husband

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Section 3

Things Fall Apart

Upon reading Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, another great piece of literature comes to mind. To me there seems to be a large connection between *American Pastoral* and several lines in the first stanza of William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming". Yeats wrote:

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity."

Yeats' words eerily seem to echo what happens in the story of the Swede: his dream, his family, and his life. It also lends quite a bit to the explanation of the Swede's fall.

The Swede's fall and the ruining of his beloved American pastoral embody how "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold". The Swede's family and his dreams fall apart. The American pastoral becomes the American berserk. The pastoral takes place in the country, away from the crime, temptations, and corruption of society. The Swede and his family live in Rimrock, New Jersey in an old house with colonial homes and farms as neighbors. Mrs. Dawn Swede raises prize cattle. The daughter, Merry, loves the outdoors and is involved with 4-H. However, the Swede's dream of the perfect family and perfect life end when Merry bombs a post office and

then goes into hiding. The dream ends when Dawn has an affair with neighbor Bill Orcutt, while the Swede has an affair with Mrs. Sheila Salzman, the wife of Merry's psychiatrist.

The Swede is the centre of the story but, with all of the things he must deal with in life, even he the great and mighty Swede cannot hold. Merry causes much of the tragedy in the Swede's life and also causes his undoing. Merry reminds the Swede of all that he tried to avoid in his golden life. While the Swede longs for oneness and sameness, Merry is "the daughter who transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, the desperation of the counterpastoral-into the indigenous America berserk" (86). The Swede is like his own literary idol, the kid from Tomkinsville. Both are baseball stars, blessed with amazing success as well as tragedy, truly heart-breaking. This is madness and bias of life. The Swede has more pain than he knows how to bear and he becomes paralyzed.

It is quite evident that "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" and the "blood-dimmed tide is loosed". Merry's own anarchy begins when she traverses to New York for her anti-Vietnam beliefs and antics. It continues when she bombs the local post office and blows apart not only the building, but the lives of many involved, including her family. Clearly, the "blood-dimmed tide is loosed" through Merry's actions, specifically the violent ones. This anarchy and blood-shedding continues when Merry goes on the run from her family and the FBI, and later bombs more buildings and kills four more people. The Swede and his wife experience their own anarchy. Both parents find other lovers as they attempt to get through their now seemingly disordered and chaotic lives. The town of Newark itself experiences anarchy and a very close brush with the "blood-dimmed tide" when riots break out in the 1960s.

“The ceremony of innocence is drowned” ensues after the anarchy and blood-dimmed tide take over. The Swede loses his own innocence/naiveté about America and life after Merry’s terrorist act. Merry loses her innocence, as well as her childhood, upon blowing up the post office, killing people, and becoming a fugitive. It can also be argued that Merry begins to lose her innocence when she observes the burning monk on the television as a younger child, or even when she begins to travel to New York unaccompanied for anti-Vietnam purposes. The Swede cannot protect his beloved daughter Merry from being raped or beaten, and this continues the loss of his innocence. The rape haunts the Swede more than the deaths and bombings. He realizes he cannot do everything and be everything, because in order to help other people they have to want to be helped or saved. Merry does not want that from the Swede. It seems neither does his wife, Dawn. Dawn does not want the Swede to save her; he is just one more reminder of Merry and the horror of that previous life. The Swede loses his innocence regarding the American Dream, his family, and himself. He cannot escape the pain and is not immune to it. It becomes his life.

Towards the beginning of Zuckerman’s tale, the Swede seems to be a person with very strong convictions. He is our protagonist and hero. He was wealthy, had served in the Marines, and married Miss New Jersey 1949. Though not always very self-aware, he is a good man, honorable, loving, a hard and fair worker. The Swede is accurately described by Zuckerman/Roth in the beginning when he says, “His aloofness, his seeming passivity...made him appear, if not divine, a distinguished cut above the more primordial humanity of just about everybody else” (5). He stands firm with his factory when the riots break out. He is a liberal opposed to the Vietnam War and he is involved with the battle of civil rights. The Swede personifies the post-war American Dream. However, his life and world become topsy-turvy and

in that “The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity”. The Swede tries so hard and so long to maintain his convictions, but he continually loses them as the story progresses. Even though he is the great Swede, he cannot escape all the violence, the rape, the destruction.

One of the Swede’s antagonists, his brother Jerry, seems to be very full of “passionate intensity”. Jerry believes that Merry’s purpose was to shake the foundation of the Swede’s belief system, and says, “That’s what she’s been blasting away at—that façade. All your fucking norms. Take a good look at what she did to your norms” (275). Jerry barely shows any compassion or empathy for his brother. Merry, too, is full of that passionate intensity. She angrily argues with her father about going to New York alone, about poverty, injustice, and war. She becomes so full of that passionate intensity that she bombs buildings and kills people. She takes lives. After meeting with Merry, after the political acts of terrorism, the Swede too begins to become “the worst” as his passionate intensity regarding Merry continues to mount. He is angry with the people around him (Dawn, Sheila Salzman, Bill Orcutt, Rita Cohen, himself) but not with Merry exactly. It seems he does all he can to place his anger elsewhere.

As seen throughout the verses of Yeats’ “The Second Coming” the fall of the Swede is a very important part of the story. The Swede bought into a system that ultimately failed him because he didn’t live by it completely. He had a love for America and the American dream. He becomes part of the WASP world, and tries to be an ordinary American guy. However, the Swede fell as did the American postwar dream, “the old system that made order doesn’t work anymore. All that was left was his fear and astonishment” (422). The Swede broke the rules in many ways. He was Jewish and married an Irish Catholic girl. He didn’t raise Merry in the Jewish faith, let alone any specific religion. He allowed her to experiment with Catholicism but

only to a point. He left his community (something very important to the Jewish people) to live in the country. The Swede aspired to the American way of life and it didn't completely pan out for him. In this way, his love for the American dream aids in his fall. However, he doesn't ever completely quit his love for America. He never comes out and says he hates the country. He never withdraws from society, the factory, the world. He may live with a mask on but he never renounces his country. Nor does he flee to another country. I think that helps the Swede survive.

It seems that the Swede is building this perfect, American pastoral/American dream house of cards. Suddenly, someone opens a window and the whole house, dream, idea collapses. Not only that, but the cards are blown out the window. So, the Swede "stoically...suppresses his horror. He learns to live behind a mask. A lifetime experiment in endurance. A performance over a ruin. Swede Levov lives a double life" (81).

The Swede deals with such situations as best he can, but he is only human. He falls; however, one of the lasting visions of the Swede should not be that he fell but that he gets back up. People choose to respond to tragedies in different ways. Dawn attempts to completely replace Merry. She thinks the "catastrophe is over and so she is going to bury the past and start anew—face, house, husband, all new" and attempt to get back into that missing innocence (366). The Swede continues to live a dual life. His life is not the same, but he does remarry and has more kids, and seems to move on and away from his previous life. Though he keeps the thought of Merry with him always. He must live his dual life for the sake of some kind of normalcy, for himself and his new family, and "for the sake of *their* naïve wholeness" (81). It seems this is the only way for the Swede to go though, "He was supposed to do this forever. However much he might crave to get out, he was supposed to remain stopped dead in the moment in that box.

Otherwise the world would explode” (338). The Swede experiences the explosion at the end of the story during the dinner party. Everything has fallen apart, and anything left intact is about to fall apart. The explosion occurs where the words end on the last page. The Swede and Dawn separate, and the Swede creates a new life. He has to in order to survive.

With these things in mind, I don't know if you can completely explain the Swede's fall. One can offer suggestions, different reasons for the fall. One can take all those mini-explanations and try to piece together a bigger picture of the Swede's fall and how it happened and why it happened. The Swede gets the “worst lesson that life can teach—that it makes no sense” (81). However, I think that is as close as you can get. The best summary of the Swede's story and fall seems to be in the words of Roth/Zuckerman himself: “It's the tragedy of the man not set up for tragedy- that is everyman's tragedy” (86). I don't think the Swede's fall is completely understandable or explainable.

Work Cited

Roth, Philip. *American Pastoral*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.