**Seymour, Did You Know**

“Did the Swede know? Did he care? Did it occur to him that if disaster could strike down the Kid from Tomkinsville, it could come and strike the great Swede down too? Or was a book about a sweet star savagely and unjustly punished – a book about a greatly gifted innocent whose worst fault is a tendency to keep his right shoulder down and swing up but whom the thundering heavens destroy nonetheless – simply a book between those ‘Thinker’ bookends up on his shelf?”

The Swede did not know. But he would learn – and how.

This, I think, is the essence of American Pastoral. We are all familiar with the flawed hero of Greek tragedy, in which a singular flaw is the inevitable undoing of an otherwise virtuous protagonist. But here, as in life, no tragic flaw is required for the tragic, slo-mo disintegration of a good man, rendered for our enjoyment in microscopic psychological detail. Note that disaster befell the Kid from Tomkinsville not because of his tendency to his right shoulder down and swing up, but because of a post-game shower accident. I believe that the Swede’s fall is similarly arbitrary.

Most reviewers have a different view, reading the novel as a morality play cautioning against some Swedish shortcoming. The identified fatal flaw, however, varies from one reviewer to the next. Perhaps because the world of the novel is almost as complex and contradictory as reality, it seems that the supposed moral of the story depends more on the beliefs and biases of the reader than on the actual text. The causes for Merry’s being Merry, in particular, appears to be a Rorscharch-type confirmation bias test.

Many academics who reside in the ideological swamp from which sprang pre-Jain Merry, for instance, places the blame squarely and exclusively on the Swede for supposed emotional unavailability/falseness/dishonesty, for political impurity, or for patriarchal condescension.

Less radical views include that the Swede is punished for trying to be un-Jewish, offering his child nothing firm to be or believe in, and causing her to career wildly from extreme to extreme in search of herself. This view has much to commend it. A Swede is not a Jew; not by a long shot. The Swede is described as being “without wit or irony,” the very essence of Jewishness as we are known and loved. Compare Levov, Lou.

Nevertheless, and despite the fact that the Swede’s life is certainly at some level an analogy for twentieth century America (with Merry as the baby boomer generation), I believe that the main point of this novel (and there are many) is that you cannot get away from the shit. Not even if you marry Miss New Jersey and settle in Old Rimrock.

This is by some margin the best novel I have read. The great American novel has been written. This is it.