

ENGL120D Paper 3: Three Endings

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Word Count: 996

E.L. Doctorow wrote *The Book of Daniel* as a commentary on the executions of the Rosenberg couple, so there is a wealth of paper topics that would be interlaced with the Cold War. That said, I've chosen to explore what meanings lie behind the three endings of the book, largely by tying each to its own strand that runs through the entire book. By summarizing these three means I'll come up with a single meaning of the book that goes beyond the historical connection to the Cold War.

The first of these three strands is the "past". It is the time Daniel and his sister Susan had with their biological parents as children, the arrests of their parents, and ultimate executions of their parents. The second of these three strands is the "present". This is the time where Daniel and Susan are adults. Daniel is a graduate student who ultimately gets a Ph.D. Susan is increasingly sick and ultimately kills herself. The final strand I label is the "dissertation". This strand is where all the actual direct references to wars come in, and is where the subjects Daniel takes up in the book (shown by the list on page 16) come from. This strand is close to the dissertation Daniel is writing throughout most of the present strand of this book.

The first ending titled "The House" concludes the "past" strand. The notes of the schoolyard in this ending refer to Daniel's still-raw feelings for the days the FBI began the tragedy (299) and the comfortable life he led beforehand. Both the new family who now own the house and the school seeming smaller are evidence of the time that has passed (299). This ending shows Daniel's yearning to have what he may call the golden days back before he fully settles into his future.

The second ending titled "The Funeral" concludes the "present" strand. Though this ending begins with the funeral of Daniel's parents it ends with Susan's funeral (300-301). This brings this ending from matching the "past" strand to matching the "present" strand. Daniel and Susan sitting close in the big limo is evidence of sadness and the close relationship they'll eventually form as the only remaining living members of their immediate family (300). The section for the parents' funeral ends with Daniel stating that if only he could love his little sister for the rest of their lives he'd be fine (300). We go right from there to the scene of Susan's funeral. Susan commits suicide as a failure of analysis (301), meaning that since her depression started shortly after the execution of their parents she ultimately failed to live with their executions. Daniel asks many Jewish men to say prayers for Susan largely to get the gravesite filled up to the extent that it was with his parents' funeral, then as they also say prayers for his parents he can finally cry since he has reconciled himself of their deaths during Susan's funeral (302).

The third ending titled "The Library" concludes the "dissertation" strand. Initially Daniel attempts to go back to subjects to be taken up (302). But instead the library is figuratively shut down, not much different from the realities of the Cold War, especially using the term "liberated" (302). Further, using the term liberated seems to refer to Daniel having finally come to grips with what his life has become and where it needs to go. Pair this ending to the knowledge that he received his Ph.D and we realize that through his discourse and investigation of his past and present he's discerned what he truly wants to spend his life doing. Going back to the similarities between the closing of the library and the Cold War we see just how

much this seems to be the perfect closing to the strand of this book that touched on the dissertation Daniel was writing on the Cold War, not just the logical closing of the overall story.

The two funerals were blended together in the text to show that ultimately Daniel will be ok moving forward in life. Daniel's parents were guilty, but not of treason, more of failing to raise Susan. This is yet another reason for blending the funerals as one funeral leads into the other, and for showing Daniel's childhood home. Showing his childhood home and school also let's Daniel take one final look at his past before turning his attention to his future. The end is laid out as three endings to provide an artificial framework to organize the aforementioned strands and to spotlight these underlying meanings. The dissertation strand ends last, so that shows how Daniel's exploration into his legacy and family history is interlaced with his academic interests. The final taste we have of this book is Daniel attempting to end with showing us the wrap-up to his subjects to be taken up, showing that he wanted to end with a systematic closing. I can't be sure if E.L. Doctorow intended this pattern to show up or not, but I realize that it certainly helps the reader to make sense of a book that may otherwise sound like a stream of unorganized thoughts.

To conclude I just have to say that any meanings for this book beyond those tied to commentary on the Cold War will come from the individual, and sometimes unique, reading someone does of the text. I purposely wanted to say something separate of the war to let the book expand beyond war commentary, but there are inevitably readings of the book connected to other non-war topics as well. Also, reading the book while keeping any single one of these strands in mind should

enable you to read the associated ending and have a clean picture of one story out of *The Book of Daniel*. My reading came largely from reading the “past” and “present” strands without leaving a whole lot of room to expand on the content of the “dissertation” strand.