

# "Jealousy Envy, Envious Jealousy": Muriel Spark's *The Finishing School*

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**Abstract** In her last novel, *The Finishing School*, Muriel Spark focuses on the emotions of envy and jealousy, presenting them in the literary and erotic contexts. Set in an itinerant institution called College Sunrise, the story revolves around the tragicomic relationship between the school's owner, Rowland Mahler, who teaches creative writing classes but at the same time experiences writer's block while working on his own novel, and his 17-year-old student called Chris Wiley, who finds it extremely easy to produce brilliant fiction despite his very young age and disregard for any theory of writing. Rowland's envious feelings about Chris as a writer are accompanied by the jealousy that stems from the sexual interest the young student arouses in his teacher. This paper examines the envy/jealousy-based relationship between the novel's two central characters as presented both on the professional and interpersonal level (Rowland and Chris as writers and lovers) in relation to the author's exposure of the mean traits of human nature, criticism of social institutions, employment of irony, and exploration of metafictional problems.

**Keywords** Muriel Spark, Envy, Jealousy, Creative Writing, Creative Process

## 1. Introduction

Muriel Spark's *The Finishing School*, published in 2004, has, in general, met with unfavourable, if not hostile, reception. Critics, finding the book to be crude and tedious [1, p. 22], write that it "reads more like a parody of a Muriel Spark novel than the real thing" [2] and call it "an embarrassment" [3].<sup>1</sup> These charges are refuted by John Lanchester, who, referring to the term coined by Edward Said, interprets the book as a manifestation of "lateness" in Spark's fiction, explaining that works written at the end of an author's literary career "combine an absolute control and

mastery with a kind of sketchiness, a speedy glossing-over of the aspects with which the artist can no longer be bothered" [5, p. 193].

*The Finishing School* is set in an itinerant, liberal and somewhat shady English-speaking institution called College Sunrise, right now stationed in Ouchy, near Lausanne, where wealthy and snobbish parents send their teenage children to get "the finishing touch" before their university studies, marriages or careers. The plot revolves around the tragicomic relationship between the school's owner, Rowland Mahler, and his 17-year-old student called Chris Wiley.

Rowland holds a doctoral degree in literature and specializes in creative writing classes, but his greatest ambition, driven by the success of a play that he wrote as a very young man, is to become a writer. Ever since, however, his offers of new plays have been successively turned down. Currently, Rowland is working on a novel but, despite having extensive theoretical knowledge, he experiences writer's block. Meanwhile, and to his horror, Mahler discovers that Wiley finds it extremely easy to produce brilliant fiction although he is only in his teens and does not have a slightest respect for the theory of the writing process. Chris's first piece of fiction is a historical novel about Mary Queen of Scots and her secretary David Rizzio. Having read its first two chapters (the book is still work in progress), Rowland experiences an intense feeling of envy at his student's achievement, which brings him to the verge of mental and physical collapse.

At the same time, the narrative hints at the possibility that Rowland's obsession with Chris might also stem from the sexual interest the young student arouses in his teacher, since Rowland's wife, Nina Parker, as well as other characters, allow for the possibility that he might be a repressed homosexual. In this way, the professional relationship between the novel's protagonists as writers is supplemented by the erotic one, as it is suggested they are in love with each other.

Happily enough, and in a comedy-like manner, the tensions between Rowland and Chris are unexpectedly resolved at the end of the novel when the reader learns that

<sup>1</sup> For bibliographical data on the reviews of the novel and relevant website links see [4].

both of them succeed in having their novels published with the same company, get engaged in “a Same-Sex Affirmation Ceremony” [6, p. 155] and start running the finishing school business together, with as much—or as little—success as before.

## 2. Methodology

This paper offers a close-reading analysis of the novel’s treatment of envy and jealousy, presented both on the professional and interpersonal level (Rowland and Chris as writers and lovers), in reference to the discussion of these emotions as found in Barrows [7] and Parrot [8], and, more generally, in relation to Spark’s life and fiction. Accordingly, although I agree with the opinion of those readers for whom the book is in many respects disappointing, I also find it interesting to have a closer look at Spark’s last novel, for, in a sense, it sums up her literary achievement by returning to a number of problems that lie at the core of her writing and making use of her favorite techniques. The Sparking quality of *The Finishing School* manifests itself, for instance, in the author’s merciless exposure of the mean traits of human nature<sup>2</sup> (the destructive feelings of jealousy and envy), relentless criticism of social classes and institutions<sup>3</sup> (the rich and education), skillful exploration of the metafictional theme<sup>4</sup> (the nature of the creative process) and inventive incorporation of biographical elements<sup>5</sup> (the relationship between the novel’s protagonists). By bringing these issues to her readers’ attention, Spark relies on her proverbial employment of irony, satire and humor.<sup>6</sup>

## 3. Discussion and Conclusions

*The Finishing School* offers two definitions of envy and jealousy, and it is hardly surprising that in one of them Spark,

as a Catholic writer, quotes from the catechism of the Roman Catholic Church:

What is jealousy? Jealousy is to say, what you have got is mine, it is mine, it is mine? Not quite. It is to say, I hate you because you have got what I have not got and desire. I want to be me, myself, but in your position, with your opportunities, your fascination, your looks, your abilities, your spiritual good. [6, p. 56-57]

According to the catechism of the Roman Catholic faith, into which Rowland had been born, six sins against the Holy Spirit are specified. The fourth is “Envy of Another’s Spiritual Good,” and that was the sin from which Rowland suffered. [6, p. 80]

While, for obvious reasons, it is impossible to question the precision of the catechism definition of envy, the definition of jealousy quoted above is altogether inaccurate, for psychologists define it as “emotional feelings and behaviors that arise when a valued relationship is threatened by a rival.” For jealousy to occur, there must be three people involved: “the jealous person, the person with whom the jealous person desires a relationship (the ‘partner’) and the person who threatens to take the place of the jealous person in a relationship with the partner (‘the rival’).” In contrast, envy “refers to emotional feelings and behaviors that are directed at a person who possesses what the envious person desires but lacks”. Therefore, envy “need involve only two characters: the envious person and the person envied.” [8, p. 391]. What Spark means by “jealousy” is, in fact, envy, the definition of which roughly corresponds to the catechism one. The author occasionally suggests there might be a difference between jealousy and envy by using such phrases as “jealous envy, envious jealousy” [6, p.10] or “jealousy, envy, rivalry, or whatever it was that had got into his mind” [6, p. 65]. She also uses the word “jealousy” in its proper meaning while relating to Queen Mary’s relationship with her husband, as well as Nina’s relationship with her lover, Israel Brown. For the most part, however, she employs these two concepts interchangeably, with strong preference for terms “jealousy” and “jealous” (they are used as many as 36 times) over terms “envy” and “envious” (they are used 4 times only). This seems to stem from the fact that in the English language the two words function as synonyms in everyday speech.<sup>7</sup> Since Spark does not make the distinction between envy and jealousy, the explanation given above will prove useful in my subsequent discussion of *The Finishing School*, when manifestations of these emotions are illustrated with quotations from the novel.

While psychologists agree that there might some positive side to envy, they also stress that in most cases it manifests itself in feelings that jeopardizes the emotional stability of an individual and poses a threat to his surroundings. A

2 The sinners of Spark’s fiction are predominantly those who have a tendency to manipulate and blackmail others, which stems from their lack of moral integrity, combined with unswerving and unjustified faith in themselves. Characters of this type are virtually to be found in all of her novels and many of her short stories.

3 In this respect, *The Finishing School* is reminiscent of Spark’s masterpiece *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Apart from education, Spark is also highly critical of the publishing industry (e.g. *A Far Cry from Kensington*), the media and the world of arts (e.g. *The Public Image and Reality and Dreams*) or institutionalized religion (e.g. *The Abbess of Crewe and The Takeover*). She saves no social stratum, either, whether it be the working class (e.g. *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*) or the upper class and aristocracy (e.g. *The Takeover, Territorial Rights, Symposium and Aiding and Abetting*).

4 The metafictional theme features especially large in such novels as *The Comforters* and *Loitering with Intent*.

5 Biographical elements in Spark’s writing are most fully identified by Stannard [9]. As far as the theme of envy in *The Finishing School* is concerned, it may have been inspired by Spark’s love affair with Derek Stanford—a poet and critic who apparently grew envious of Spark’s success as a writer, which contributed to the collapse of their strained relationship. In her letters, Spark saw Stanford’s “betrayal” as motivated by the feeling of envy triggered by her professional success. For the author, “envy of spiritual good was the desire to appropriate another’s spiritual wealth, the desire, perhaps, for failure in another, the wishing to hurt or embarrass” [9, p. 504].

6 For an in-depth discussion of Spark’s usage of irony and satire see Walczuk [10]. Humour in Spark’s novels is, for instance, identified by Barreca [11], Gunn [12], and Sumera [13].

7 Apart from the reason specified above, Parrot also mentions the fact that the situations which are conducive to jealousy may be also conducive to envy (although not the other way round) and that “both emotions arise from threats to a person’s self-evaluation brought about by comparing poorly with someone else” [8, p. 391].

distinction should be made between the so-called “emulator envy,” which results from acceptance of one’s shortcomings and manifests itself in the reassuring wish to imitate the envied person, and the so-called “malicious envy,” which is essentially destructive and leads to low self-esteem, resentment and depression, combined with the urge to harm the envied person or to see him harmed, if not dead [7, p. 5-6; 8, p. 392).

It is the “malicious envy” that Rowland Mahler falls victim to after discovering that Chris Wiley’s writing is much better than his own. Having experienced “a faint twinge” of envy [6, p. 4] while browsing through the manuscript of Chris’s novel, Rowland eventually develops an abiding hatred for his student, which has a detrimental effect predominantly on himself, both as a man and as a writer. In the narratorial comment following the Catholic definition of envy, we learn that he has become living proof of the truth that sometimes the sin works worst on the sinner himself: “‘Suffered’ is the right word, as it often is in cases where the perpetrators are in the clutches of their own distortions. With Rowland, his obsessive jealousy of Chris was his greatest misfortune. And jealousy is an affliction of the spirit which, unlike some sins of the flesh, gives no one any pleasure” [6, p.80].

This theological truth coincides with the psychological one, since by presenting how envy affects Rowland’s mental and physical health, Spark also points out the psychosomatic nature of this emotion. The first symptom is Rowland’s ill-wishing for Chris, which he cannot cope with:

‘An awfully nice boy,’ Rowland said. In his tone was a touch of regret, as if Chris had been an awfully nice dog that however, for some overwhelming reason, had to be taken to the vet to be put down.” [6, p. 51]

Many times, now, Rowland thought of how it would be if Chris were dead. It wouldn’t do. It wouldn’t be enough. There would always remain the fact that Chris had lived, had been writing a novel while still at school, had prevented Rowland from writing his novel. [6, p. 81]

Added to this is his growing depression, which puts him off food and drains him of all energy [6, p. 83]. Worst of all, however, envy has a paralysing effect on his creative abilities, for it is the main cause of his artistic impasse rather than its effect.

Spark’s “balanced regard for matter and spirit,”<sup>8</sup> which manifests itself both in the physical and metaphysical dimension of Rowland’s emotion, is also related to the object of his envy, namely Chris’s talent for writing. It is worth stressing the biblical connotations of the word “talent” here, because the concept of artistic creation as a gift, which runs

recurrent in Spark’s writing,<sup>9</sup> is also pivotal to *The Finishing School*. As an academic specializing in literature, Mahler has all professional knowledge at hand, in contrast to Chris, who has none, and yet it is only the latter that does amazingly well in *belles lettres*. The novel’s central irony is structured on the gap between theorizing about literature and producing it, which a course in creative writing (itself an oxymoronic concept) is supposed to bridge but never does. This point is made clear by Nina, who says, “How can you give a creative writing course . . . while trying to write creatively yourself?” [6, p. 43]. That is why when Rowland asks “Where did Chris get his talent?” [6, p. 4], he has to accept that there is no answer—you either “have it” or you do not.

The *Finishing Schools* suggests that writing is a spontaneous process and that a literary work as if runs its own course, with the author not being able to predict its final outcome:

‘What is the story? How does it develop? Historical novels—they have to develop. How . . . ?’

‘No idea, Rowland. I can’t foresee the future. All I know is the story will happen.’ [6, p. 9]

This is not to say that by making it impossible for Chris to know how the story will progress, Spark adheres to Barthes’s postmodern concept of the “the death of the author,” in which “the modern scripter is born simultaneously with the text” [17, p. 170] and has no control over his creation, as it is produced by language itself. On the contrary, Chris, like Spark,<sup>10</sup> believes it is him who “pulls the strings” and directs his characters’ lives: “‘I’m in full control,’ Chris said. ‘I never thought they could have another life but what I provide on the typed page. . . . Nobody in my book so far could cross the road unless I make them do it’” [6, p. 49].<sup>11</sup> Chris’s youthful, if somewhat arrogant, confidence in his creative powers is contrasted to Rowland’s frustration over the fact that his carefully planned literary project has reached a deadlock.

One example of the professional tension between Rowland, who slavishly adheres to the rules of literary creation, and Chris, who insists on his own *licentia poetica*, is the scene in which they talk about the foundation text of Western literary theory<sup>12</sup>:

A novel has a beginning, a middle and an end. So said Aristotle and so [Rowland] had advised his creative writing class. A beginning, a middle and an end. Chris

9 This concept is most fully articulated in *The Comforters* and *Loitering with Intent*. Spark conceived of writing as a mystery and a vocation. See especially her essays “The Poet’s House” (p. 66-70) and “The Writing Life” (p. 77-80) in [14].

10 In her interview with Mary Holland, Spark observed, “I don’t understand about writers who tell you that the characters take over, develop a will of their own. I know the whole time that I’m making them up and I have to go on making up what they do . . .” [18, p. 10]. The author probably referred to her conversation with Iris Murdoch, herself a great admirer of Spark’s writing. When Murdoch confessed that her characters seemed to take over her novels, Spark replied, “Well, mine don’t. Mine do exactly what I tell them to” [9, p. 456].

11 This belief is also held by Fleur Talbot from *Loitering with Intent*.

12 Spark claimed to have been greatly influenced by Aristotle’s *Poetics* in her writing. See [19], p. 247.

8 This phrase, which was used by Spark in her essay “The Religion of an Agnostic: A Sacramental View of the World in the Writings of Proust,” illustrates her religious and artistic conviction that the spiritual and physical realities constitute an inseparable whole [14, p. 186-90]. For a discussion of Spark’s treatment of these apparently dualistic entities see, for instance, Edgecombe [15], Kemp [16, p. 35-36, 59-60], and Stannard [9, p. 158-59].

had said, ‘Do you need to begin at the beginning and end at the end? Can’t a writer begin in the middle?’

‘That has been tried quite often,’ Rowland replied, ‘but it tends toward confusion.’

Chris didn’t seem to care about this aspect. He seemed to have a built-in sense of narrative architecture and balance.

‘Too much individualism,’ thought Rowland. ‘He is impeding me. I wish he could peacefully die in his sleep.’ [6, p. 55]

Ironically enough, although Chris knows nothing about Aristotle, his historical novel unwittingly testifies to the famous Aristotelian distinction between history and poetry, with the philosopher’s preference for the latter.<sup>13</sup> By giving free rein to his imagination and supplementing fact with fiction, Wiley transcends the limitations of the historical perspective and in this way expresses a universal rather than a particular truth, i.e. the truth of envy and jealousy. Therefore, his purely intuitive grasp of Aristotle is more profound than that of Rowland, for whom it is predominantly the formalist aspect of the philosopher’s work that matters.

Rowland wants to belittle his opponent’s achievement by insisting that Chris has simply “stolen” his characters from history, but, as Nina rightly observes, this is not true:

‘He didn’t create Mary Queen of Scots and her little musician. They’re taken out of history, aren’t they? They’re ready-made.’

‘I don’t think so, Rowland,’ said Nina. ‘From the bit we’ve read, his Mary Queen of Scots, his Darnley and Rizzio, are his.’ [6, p. 50]

In fact, it is Rowland, and not Chris, who “appropriates” the facts of life and is entirely dependent on them for his literary creation: at first, his book is to be about his nemesis (“the callow teenager who felt he could write a novel, himself,” [6, p. 19]); then he changes the story so as to depict life at Sunrise College, entitling it *The School Observed*. This makes Mahler another version of *pisseur de copie* — a disparaging phrase for an unimaginative writer Spark uses in her novel *A Far Cry from Kensington*.

As can be seen from the above discussion, *The Finishing School* makes use of ironical reversal of power relationships both in the world of education and the world of letters, in which the teacher is a kind of father-like figure to a student, and the older writer is a kind of mentor to a debutante to be admired, if not envied. Playing truant from Rowland’s creative writing classes, Chris also “plays truant” from his conception of the novel, in this way undermining his headmaster’s scholarly and artistic authority. Rowland is perfectly aware of the problem. In a conversation with his

wife he says, “His way of going on with his book makes my No. 3 creative writing lecture look silly” [6, p. 50], and, upon Nina’s advice, considers revising his theoretical text. Therefore, his relationship with Chris is not a case of a disciple surpassing his master but a master learning from his disciple. It is Spark speaking tongue-in-cheek when she suggests that Rowland’s class does impart some useful knowledge to his students, as illustrated by the career of the most conscientious attendant of the course, now a professional columnist for *Tatler*, who has recently produced a brilliant essay about “how to make a goldfish pond” [6, p. 66].

Strange though it may seem, it is also Rowland’s envy towards Chris that motivates the latter to progress with his book. When his teacher goes away on a religious retreat, the teenager experiences writer’s block and, in order to overcome his artistic impasse, visits Rowland in the monastery, begging him to come back: “I can’t work without you, Rowland. I need whatever it is you radiate” [6, p. 93]. Chris’s subsequent confession that he has to complete his novel “in peace” [6, p. 93] hints at his own anxiety, which can be attributed to his young age, since it is in adolescence that “envy is likely to be acute, for the adolescent has to cope with insecurity and uncertainty about the future and about his (or her) own developing identity” [7, p. 35-36]. Despite the admiration that his novel enjoys in the society of Sunrise College, standing on the threshold of his literary career, Chris is likely to feel apprehensive about his future as a writer. As it transpires, his fears are not groundless, for towards the end of the novel his manuscript is rejected by one of the publishers.<sup>14</sup> Bearing this in mind, Chris is in desperate need of Mahler’s presence and attention, because they give him an opportunity to see his “better self” as reflected in Rowland’s envious but also admiring gaze. Just like teenagers “use their clothes and looks to project envy into their peers, and will hope to appear enviably cool” [7, p. 37], Chris, who is on first-name terms with his teacher, flaunts his book before Rowland’s eyes, constantly boasting of its swift progress.

To stop at this point, however, is to ignore another layer of Spark’s novel. While talking to Nina about Rowland, Chris says, “I need his jealousy. His intense jealousy. I can’t work without it” [6, p. 101]. Does Spark, like at the beginning of the novel, confuse jealousy with envy or does she use it in its proper meaning? Nina’s reaction hints at the second possibility, for she feels “apprehensive about what he would say next, suspecting that it was something she couldn’t handle” [6, p. 101]. When Nina subsequently suggests that

13 “For the historian and the poet differ not by speaking in metrical verse or without meter . . . Rather, they differ in this, that the one speaks of things that have happened, but the other of the sort of things that might happen. For this reason too, poetry is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history, since poetry speaks more of things that are universal, and history of things that are particular” [20, p. 32].

14 Chris’s endeavours to have his book published exemplify Spark’s satirical presentation of the publishing institutions. The two publishers presented in the novel are not really concerned with the artistic value of Wiley’s novel—in fact, they have not even read it. What really arouses their interest is the sensational aspect of the novel and the fact that it has been written by a very young author [6, p. 84], both of which seem to guarantee its commercial success. Therefore, neither Monty Fergusson’s comment that the book “is actually a lot of shit” [6, p. 124] and Grace Fornby’s opinion that it is “a perfectly good story” [6, p. 131] is of any critical relevance. Similarly, Rowland’s debut as a novelist is due to his intimate relationship with Fornby rather than his artistic achievement.

Wiley should leave Sunrise College, she may not only be concerned about Rowland's writer's block as effected by his being envious of Chris but also about the threat that his presence poses to her relationship with her husband. If Rowland is "an unconscious gay" [6, p. 86], his confession "I know I'm obsessed with Chris, but I want my obsession" [6, p. 48] can be read as an act of "coming out" and affirming his repressed sexual orientation.

Early in the novel, Chris says that Rowland is "the yolk of an egg" and that "[t]he white part's not enough" [6, p. 28]. Again, while this comment may relate to the professional aspect of their relationship (wherever there is an outstanding achievement, there is also envy provoked by it), it may as well connote the erotic one, since Wiley's additional remark, "The yolk, for better or for worse . . ." [6, p. 28], echoes the words of the wedding vow. Thus, the anxiety he is plagued by due to his teacher's absence can also be seen as symptomatic of his developing sexuality, which is related to his adolescence: a stage in life when not only professional work but also "sexual relationships, until this point the prerogative of adults, may now be attainable and yet may take time to attain" [7, p. 36].<sup>15</sup> It should also be remembered that although jealousy is most typically related to already existing relationships, it may, too, occur in relationships which haven't been formed yet but which are highly desirable [8, p. 392].

Further evidence for the line of argument presented above is to be found in the failure of Rowland's marriage to Nina, in which love plays no part at all:

She had married Rowland largely because of her esteem for scholarship. His thesis on the German poet, Rilke, had clinched the deal so far as her consent to marry him was concerned. The fact of his academic achievements stimulated her sex life. He, on the other hand, was in love, basically, with her practical dependability. It had been her idea to run a finishing school. [6, p. 42]

It comes as no surprise then that, considering the possibility that her husband is not "straight" and probably disappointed with his performance otherwise than academic, Nina starts a love affair with Dr. Brown. Although Rowland soon discovers that his wife is cheating on him, his reaction is anything but a reaction one might expect of a jealous husband:

'Listen, Rowland,' she said. 'I've been talking to Israel Brown.'  
'And you're having an affair with him,' he said suddenly very bored, very weary  
'And you don't care.'  
'No, frankly, I don't.' [6, p. 89-90].

Even though both Rowland and Chris court a number of women at Sunrise College, their love affairs are a

manifestation of a power game played between jealous lovers who want to take revenge for being "unfaithful" to each other rather than a proof of their heterosexuality. This is, for instance, implied in Rowland's attempt at seducing Célestine, the school's cook who is Chris's midnight mistress, as well as his "close friendship" with the publisher Grace Fornby, whose real nature is "obvious to Chris all through the publisher's stay" [6, p. 142]. To counteract Mahler's "betrayal," Wiley makes love to Dr. Barclay-Good, the female professor of history who visits Sunrise College to lecture on Scotland in the 16th century.

Rowland and Chris alike might also be motivated by the wish to testify to the stereotypical idea of masculinity that is expected of them, but, inevitably, their emotions and actions give them away. Rowland's "urge to tip a bucket of green paint over Chris's red hair" [6, p. 65] does not only imply his envy (the green colour) but also his jealousy (red hair as a symbol of sexual attractiveness). Just like he cannot "obliterate" Chris's book [6, p. 65], he cannot resist being attracted to him. That is why when Rowland sees Chris parading on the catwalk with a beautiful girl by his side during a school fashion show, he feels "infuriated . . . clutching his throat as if to control a scream" [6, p. 78].

In order to cope with his obsession, upon Israel's advice, Rowland decides to go on a retreat in order to find "peace of mind" [6, p. 34]. His choice of a Catholic monastery is not accidental, since as a Catholic himself, Mahler is a "double sinner" in envy and jealousy. His meditations and prayers are meant to exorcise both his evil emotions over his student as a better writer<sup>16</sup> and his sinful, "unnatural" passion for Chris.<sup>17</sup> Yet, as Rowland returns to Sunrise College, so do his old feelings.

The same holds true for Wiley. His apparent self-confidence, arrogance, and public image of "coolness" that he projects on students and teachers at Sunrise College are melodramatically undermined in the scene, in which, evidently possessed by jealousy over Rowland's affair with Fornby, he enters his teacher's bathroom and nearly electrocutes him to death by throwing an electric heater into the water while he is having a bath.

Therefore, Chris's choice of the subject for his book is not random, for as a story "of jealousy and passion" [6, p. 84], it functions as a foil to the story presented in *The Finishing School*. Lord Darnley's killing David Rizzio—a man with "great talent for music, for courtiership" [6, p. 83] and, apparently, Queen Mary's lover—as well as Queen Elisabeth's decision to have her political opponent executed, are a hyperbolic reflection of the stormy relationship between Chris and Rowland. This parallel is brought out by Dr. Barclay-Good's lecture on the 16<sup>th</sup> century history of Scotland, when she says, "Jealousy, green jealousy, that was

<sup>16</sup> In the Christian tradition envy is commonly attributed to Satan, who himself feels envious of God's creativity and power. The writer-God analogy implied in *The Finishing School* is to be found in Spark's other works as well, especially in *The Comforters* and *Loitering with Intent*.

<sup>17</sup> In contrast to Nina, who believes that Rowland's problem is psychological [6, p. 56, 86], Israel, himself a keen observer, insists on its spiritual aspect [6, p. 86, 136].

<sup>15</sup> Chris's psychoerotic immaturity is suggested by the fact that, despite feeling attracted to Rowland, he forms a number of sexual relations with females from Sunrise College.

the motivation of the Age . . .” [6, p. 107], and when she identifies the ulterior motive behind Queen Elisabeth’s actions:

And the subsequent execution of the Queen of Scots by the edict of Elizabeth? – It was hardly fear of treason. Mary was a prisoner. She could intrigue by word and pen, but she had no power. The secret, I feel, is jealousy. When James VI of Scotland, I of England, the son of Mary Queen of Scots was born, it is chronicled that Elizabeth exclaimed, “The Queen of Scotland is delivered of a fair child and I am but barren stock.” [6, p. 107]

Apart from lending topicality to the feeling of envy, the reference to Queen Elisabeth offers a metafictional clue to the story of Sunrise College, since it is possible to see the creative process presented in the novel in terms of the gestation metaphor. Accordingly, Chris’s fictional work resembles a baby “growing fat” [6, p. 82] in the “womb” of its creator, whereas Rowland is like “barren stock” because he cannot “conceive” in artistic terms and, consequently, wishes to kill Chris or see him dead.

As Wiley is pondering the finale of his novel, two endings come to his mind. In the first one, Queen Mary is awaiting her execution; in the second one, Jacopo Rizzio is received with honours by his townspeople, having avenged his brother David’s death. On his publisher’s advice, Chris decides to “do both” 6, p. 132], in this way incorporating elements of both tragedy and comedy in his story. In this respect, *Who Killed Darnley?* is, again, like *The Finishing School*, in which the dark aspect of Rowland’s relationship with his student is redeemed by their professional and sexual union. This “All’s well that ends well” type of conclusion, in turn, reminds the reader of the happy endings of the late plays by Shakespeare— one of Spark’s favourite writers.<sup>18</sup> To quote from an anonymous review of the novel,

The spirit of comedy dissolves jealousy. *The Finishing School* has echoes of not only Spark’s earlier novels, but of the late plays of Shakespeare, these careless tragi-comedies where emotions that in other plays lead to death and horror are resolved as if by magic, but really by the whim of the author, and all ends in sunlight. [22]

Thus, in her farewell to the world of fiction, Spark, in a Prospero-like manner, arranges for her characters’ happy future life, having first punished them for their sins.

As a tragicomedy, *The Finishing School* not only explores the dark emotions of envy and jealousy but also celebrates the light of creation and youth, as represented by the rich, good-looking and carefree students of Sunrise College. Paradoxically enough, Chris Wiley is in many respects an *alter ego* of the aging author, who, despite being in her

eighties and approaching death, hopes to “write young”<sup>19</sup> and celebrates life in full swing.

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18 Spark read lots of Shakespeare during her stay in Africa [9, p. 52]. She also acknowledged his influence on her own writing in her interview with John Mortimer [21, p. 222].

19 I have borrowed this phrase from Spark’s online diary, in which she says, “Perhaps I write young. I hope I do” [22, Day One, 6 June, 1996, 2:01 a.m.].

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