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John Kemp's Epistolary Fantasy

Failed Escapism in Philip Larkin's *Jill*

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Presentation Overview

1. Introduction—Critical Trends, Critical Context, and Thesis
2. High Fantasy Escape vs Escapism
3. Epistolary Literature and Kemp's Epistolary Fantasy
4. Comical *Kunstlerroman* of Kemp as an Epistolary Fantasy Writer
5. Conclusion—Recovering Nihilism as Failed Escapism

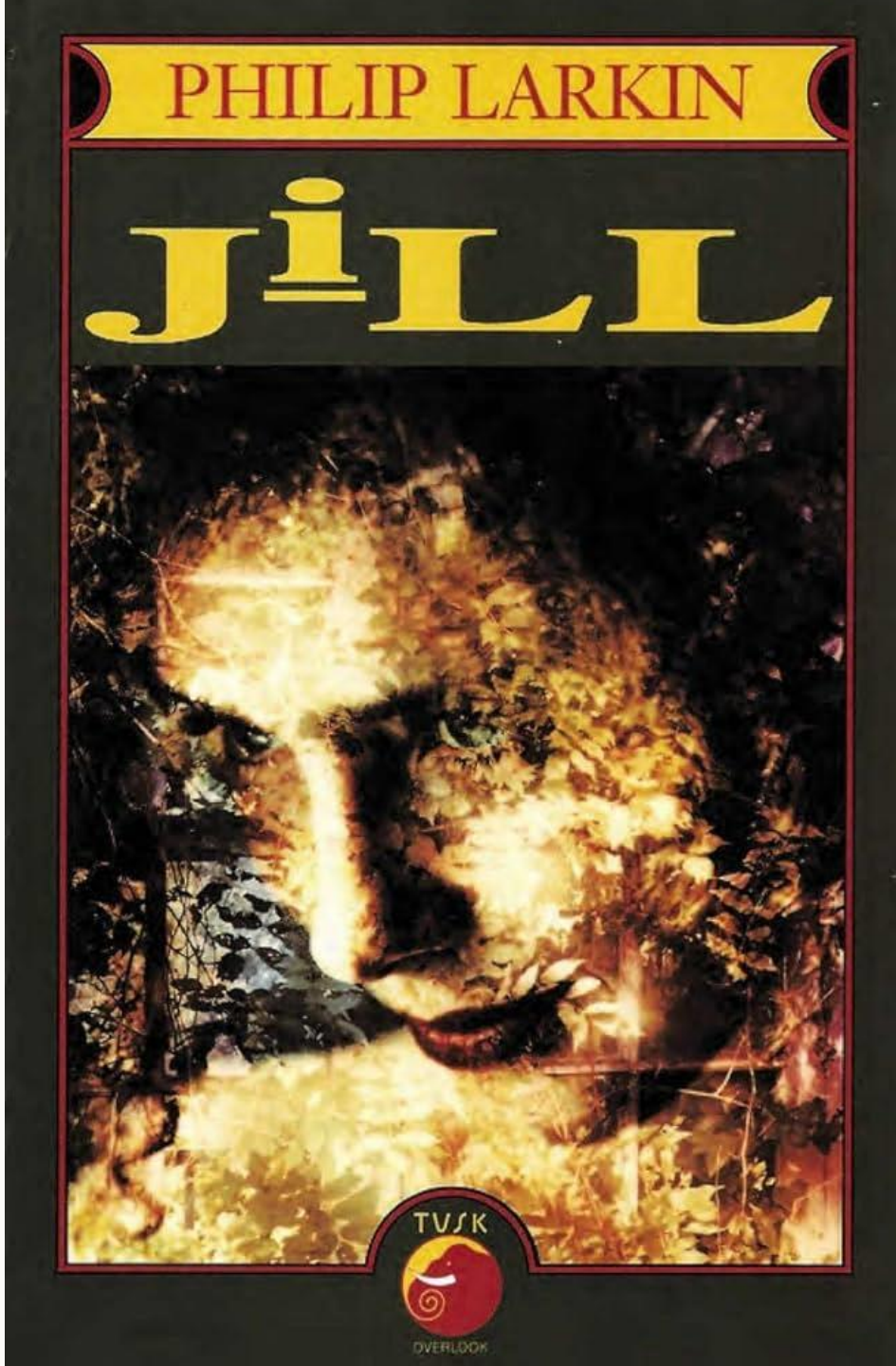
Introduction

Introduction

Dominant Critical Views

- *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947) intermediary juvenilia

- Critical dismissal

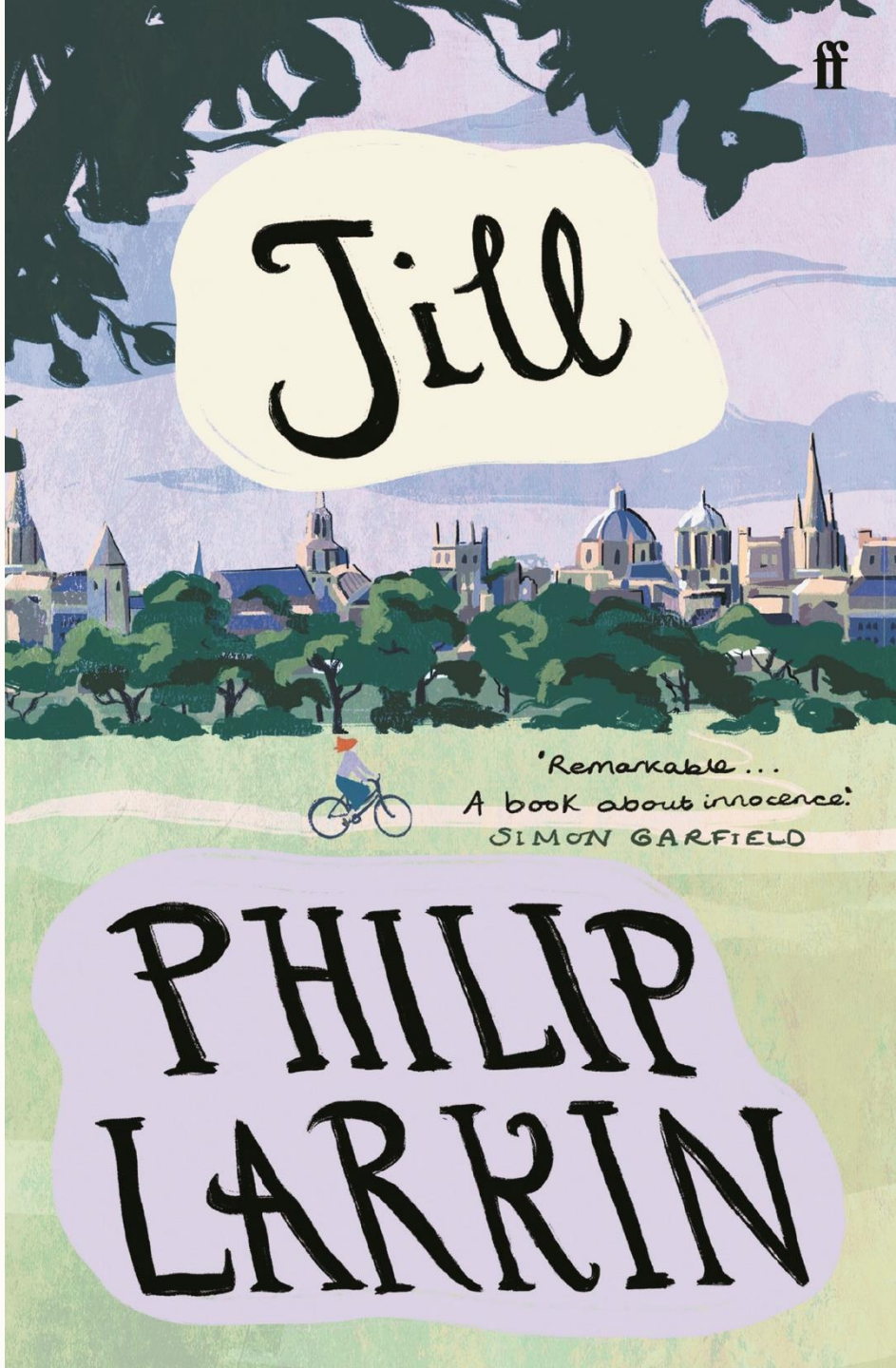


Introduction

Other Measured Analyses

- Context of juvenilia
- Autobiographical elements
- Influence of D. H. Lawrence

- Representative scholars:
  - Richard Bradford
  - Andrew Motion
  - James Underwood

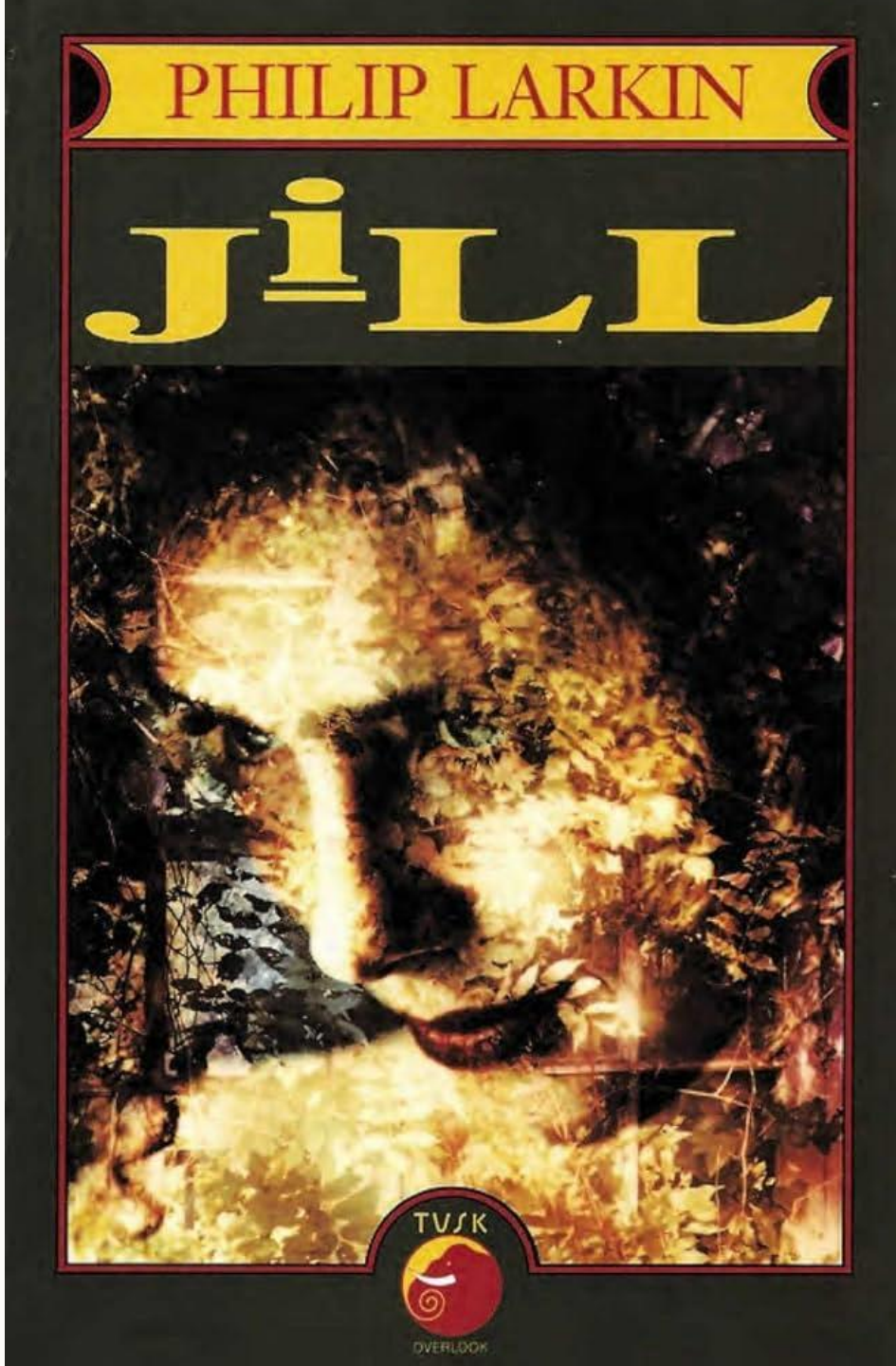


Introduction

Common Thematic Considerations

- Class and alienation
  - James Booth, Stephen Cooper, Andrew Motion, and James Underwood

- Gender representation and sexuality
  - Richard Bradford, Terry Castle, Jin-Sung Choi, Victoria Longino, Andrew Motion, and James Underwood



Introduction

Critical Context and Focus

- Less explored theme: metafictional and fantasy elements
- Unexplored theme: metafictional representation of failed escapist fantasy writing
- Focus: epistolary fantasy and failed escapism

Introduction

Critical Context and Thesis

- ***Critical Context:*** J. R. R. Tolkien's formulation of high fantasy literature

- ***Interpretive Thesis:*** John's writing of letters to a fictitious figure Jill (first his sister and then a friend), developing a short story, and then creating fictitious letters and diaries written by this Jill figure represent a limited fantasy sub-creation that brings no consolation but, rather, results in physical violence, illness, and existential crisis.

High Fantasy Escape vs Escapism

High Fantasy Escape vs Escapism

Tolkien on escape:

“I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which 'Escape' is now so often used. Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?”

–Tolkien, “On Fairy-stories” (p. 69)

High Fantasy Escape vs Escapism

- Tolkien often viewed as advocating “escapism”
- Escapism and escapist
- Escape for Tolkien
- Analyze Kemp’s fantasy escape in terms of Tolkien’s definition of fantasy escape

Epistolary Literature and Kemp's Epistolary Fantasy

Epistolary Literature

- Series of fictional letters
- Ancient Greek and Roman literature
- 18th and 19th century epistolary novel
- Experiment with narrative voice

Kemp's Epistolary Fantasy

- Larkin considered cutting out this epistolary element
  - 8 November 1943 letter to Kingsley Amis on revisions of *Jill*:
    - "The only bits which please me are the schoolgirl bits: the diary and the short story that he writes, but I fancy they will have to be cut out. A little twerp like John Kemp couldn't possibly think of anything so subtly perverse." (Thwaite 82-83)

Comical *Kunstlerroman* of Kemp as an Epistolary Fantasy Writer

John Kemp's Pathetic Self-Esteem and Nearly Invisible Identity

- An ignored, bashful, and timid stranger in his own rooms

- Timidity in the face of such insult and inconsiderate behavior:

  "He was acutely conscious of being referred to in the third person, but it expressed his mood. While being trapped in their laughter, he only wanted to drag himself stiffly away and hide." (p. 32)

Kemp's Fantasizing the Real

- Vicarious re-imagining of Warner and his friends' reminiscences:

> "It seemed to him that in their schooldays they had won more than he would ever win during the whole of his life. At first ill-treated, they had lived to be oppressors whose savagest desire could be gratified at once, which was surely the height of ambition. As the picture **grew in his mind**, he **ornamented it with little marginal additions**, until in the end the thing was as **unreal as a highly-coloured picture of an ancient battle**, but **he had no inkling of its untruth**, and he looked on them with curious respect." (p. 57)

Kemp's Fantasizing the Real

- Mother Fantasy of Mrs. Warner:

  "He himself ate, but did not talk, sitting not dumb with fright, but naturally silent as if watching an actress on the stage. Her least action was a pleasure to watch" (p. 94)

- Do the Clothes Make the Man?
  - Models Mr. Crouch
  - Impersonating Christopher
  - Reflection in the hat shop window
  - New clothes signifying a desired identity
  - Bow tie fiasco with Elizabeth Downing

Kemp's Escapist Fantasy Letters

- Broken fantasy of belonging leaves him bitter and disillusioned
- Writing the fictional letters as act of retribution
- Letters recast his own life in an alternate reality where he is clever and in command
- This escapism encourages avoidance and denial

Jill as Kemp's Pygmalion Myth Realized

- Jill figure morphs from fictional sister to fantasy teenaged girl
- Act of writing Jill morphs into conjuring someone else
- Gillian is the physical manifestation of the fictional Jill.
- Kemp becomes a voyeur artist gazing at his Pygmalion creation
- Kemp continues to maintain and indulge the fantasy—failed escapism

Jill as Kemp's Pygmalion Myth Realized

- The climatic kiss and corresponding punch in the mouth:

  "John stood back. In the weak light his face was quite expressionless. Everything seemed at that moment clear and restful. As Jill came level, he took her quietly in his arms and kissed her. Elizabeth gasped something." (p. 239)

- Kemp as a failed metafictional figure of mere escapism

- Kemp continues to indulge failed escapist fantasy during his recovery

- Metafictional failed fantasy

Conclusion

Recovering Nihilism as Failed Escapism

Conclusion—Recovering Nihilism as Failed Escapism

- No consolation: physical violence and illness
- High fantasy brings personal consolation by reaffirming such permanent things as virtue, love, honor, self-sacrifice, and nobility
- Kemp's escapism indulged childish lust and brings a renewed existential angst
- Such a philosophical recovery from this escape is antithetical to Tolkien's notion of consolation—thus failed escapism

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