

## Citation metadata

Author: Rick Wallach  
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## Main content

Article Preview :

Cormac McCarthy's dalliance with the theater has been long and problematical. Unlike his acclaimed novels, his dramatic works have been limited successes, at best, or outright failures. A 1977 teleplay, *The Gardener's Son*, ran briefly on PBS. Its publication in book form twenty years later revealed that several cumbersome framing devices, especially a *deus ex machina* called "The Timekeeper," had been dropped from the shooting script. Production of a later stage play, *The Stonemason* (1994), was twice derailed, once by politicized infighting among the cast (Arnold 1995) and in both cases by unrealistic staging requirements (Josyph 1998). (1) A cliché-ridden 1970s environmentalist screenplay, *Whales and Men*, remains mercifully unproduced. (2)

Nevertheless, the theater has always fascinated McCarthy, and his use of theatrical metaphors as tropes in his fiction proves far more successful than his dramatic writing *per se*. Although allusions to matters theatrical appear often in *Blood Meridian*, (3) these tropes are most elaborately deployed in the Border Trilogy novels *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*. Ironically, the Trilogy began life as a screenplay for a hypothetical film version of *Cities*. (4) McCarthy worked backwards from what would become the final installment of the Trilogy, and over the better part of a decade elaborated its pretexts into the series of novels we have now.

The metaphor of theater is essential to the structural and thematic unity of the Border Trilogy. In effect, the Border Trilogy interrogates theater as one among the several forms of narrative that it questions, but at the same time, the theatrical trope appears to represent the unity of all of those forms. From the play for which John Grady Cole's aspiring actress mother abandons him, to the elaborately staged dream ritual a stranger describes to the aged Billy Parham in the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*, references to performance, theater, and ritual undergird the stylistically disparate narratives of the Trilogy. Each novel depends upon theatrical tropes to launch its protagonists on their adventures or adjust their trajectories. References to role-playing invoke essential questions of personal and spiritual authenticity; the metanarrative of the Trilogy proper juxtaposes references to choreography, puppetry, scripting, and stage management so as to foreground questions about fate or destiny and, ultimately, about narrative itself. Set pieces of theatrical scenes or staged spectacles abound in all three novels, including plays, operas, puppet shows, dogpit fights, carnivals, concerts, and horse auctions. These scenes are in turn linked by *synechdochal* metaphors, repetition of diegetic epicycles, or by similarities in passages of monologue or dialogue, to a series of ritual scenes that also feature significant audience or spectator components.

Such linkages of dramatic and ceremonial motifs in turn parody high-modernist theories of the origins of drama from sacrificial rituals advanced by Sir James Frazier in *The Golden Bough* (5) and Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*. (6) Following Nietzsche and Frazier (however liberally), a convention of modernist fiction assumes that aesthetic power derives from literature reproduction of...

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Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy dramatizes the power of dreams and waking visions to reveal aspects or dimensions of reality that by their very nature seem resistant to language. The Trilogy accomplishes this through its numerous depictions of character dreams and visionary events, but also through unconventional stylistic and narrational features implying that what the reader is encountering in the text is a kind of dreamlike otherworld, translated by its oracular narrator into a more familiar idiom, the "spoken word." McCarthy's thematic interest in the dreamer-storyteller analogy The Border Trilogy book. Read 322 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Beginning with All the Pretty Horses and continuing through The... "She rode with her hat pulled down in the front and fastened under her chin with a drawtie and as she rode her black hair twisted and blew about her shoulders and the lightning fell silently through the black clouds behind her and she rode all seeming unaware down through the low hills while the first spits of rain blew on the wind. and onto the upper pasturelands and past the pale and reedy lakes riding erect and stately until the rain caught her up and shrouded her figure away in that wild summer landscape: real horse, real rider, real land and sky and yet a dream withal."