

**The Romantic Dogs (1994)**  
**By Roberto Bolaño (Chile, Mexico, Spain)**

**Prompt**

In the following poem Roberto Bolaño describes the point of view of a young man-- in the final lines implicitly comparing it to a more mature perspective on life. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Bolaño uses such elements as imagery, metaphor, and tone to convey the poet's complex outlook on the process of maturation.

"The Romantic Dogs"

Back then, I'd reached the age of twenty  
and I was crazy.  
I'd lost a country  
but won a dream.  
As long as I had that dream  
nothing else mattered.  
Not working, not praying  
not studying in morning light  
alongside the romantic dogs.  
And the dream lived in the void of my spirit.  
A wooden bedroom,  
cloaked in half-light,  
deep in the lungs of the tropics.  
And sometimes I'd retreat inside myself  
and visit the dream: a statue eternalized  
in liquid thoughts,  
a white worm writhing  
in love.  
A runaway love.  
A dream within another dream.  
And the nightmare telling me: you will grow up.  
You'll leave behind the images of pain and of the labyrinth  
and you'll forget.  
But back then, growing up would have been a crime.  
I'm here, I said, with the romantic dogs  
and here I'm going to stay.

**Essay 1**

In Roberto Bolaño's "The Romantic Dogs" he discusses the process of growing up as he now sees it in his older age. Through his use of two metaphors and tone, he conveys his youthful feelings from the perspective of his matured self. The reader can clearly see how Bolaño's romantic ideals eventually died as he grew up and how he wanted to keep it from happening.

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Bolaño begins by introducing his dream – a metaphor that is used throughout the piece to symbolize his desire to stay young forever. He states that “As long as I had that dream / nothing else mattered” a common view held by young adults. When you’re young, you think you can do anything, the ideal that Bolaño is trying to show his audience. His next two lines use the word “not” three times in succession to show that he was not doing much in his youthful days. This conveys another ideal of the young adult – wanting to do nothing all the time. The amount of “not”s catches the reader’s eye and creates a sense of laziness. Bolaño basically lives in his dream which is located “in the void of the spirit.” He then goes on to describe the characteristics of the dream, every image possessing a negative connotation. When he compares his dream to a “white worm writhing in love,” it creates an image of a death that is to come, possibly already coming on. This could be proved by one of his next lines that says, “The nightmare tells me you will grow up.” A nightmare is the opposite of a dream, the contrast being used in this piece to show that the dream Bolaño’s possesses is unrealistic.

He also puts an interesting perspective on the poem by using the metaphor of romantic dogs. Clearly not a true entity, Bolaño uses this artificial image to show the audience his romantic ideals. Like a stray dog who has no duty in life, he wishes to live carefree and without having to answer to authority. He wants to evoke feelings and thoughts of romantic youth throughout his poem and the use of the romantic dogs assists him in this. He said that he was “with the romantic dogs and here I’m going to stay,” showing his rebellion against the process of maturation.

## Essay 2

From the perspective of age, one’s youth often seems both distant and dreamlike, insofar as the process of becoming, seen from the vantage of arrival, takes on a seeming inevitability – as if one had to be a certain way, had to engage the world in the manner in which one did. This is why, for example, one looks back nostalgically on the past as a sort of necessary preface to the present. Such hazy remembrances, however, inevitably contain within them a note of regret, a sense of opportunities not taken, choices that were never made. Roberto Bolaño looks back with such mixed emotions to the attitudes of his imaginatively transformed poetic subject, remembering the past with a certain fondness, but also with more than a hint of irony.

The obvious motif in the poem is the abstract image “dream,” occurring (in some permutation or another) in six separate instances in a 26 line poem. That he uses this as his structuring device suggests a couple of things, namely that there was more of the ideal than reality in the poet’s former attitude and that, seen from the perspective of maturity, the poet’s former idealism is as indistinct as the ideals themselves.

Consider the former sense of the re-occurrence of the dream image. By “[losing] a country” (3), the poet “[wins] a dream” (4), suggestive of the way in which exile (seen either literally, as Bolaño’s Chile after the Pinochet coup d’état, or figuratively, as estrangement from the world around him) frees the seeker to forge new paths, unmoored by the workaday realities of custom and environment. Such a life is truly to live as a “romantic [dog]” (9), rootless and free to pursue one’s ends, able to embody life lived in the moment, indeed, even to reside in the “lungs of the tropics” (13), as though he were not only experiences life but were embedded deep

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within its fabric. The dream, then, fills “the void of [his] spirit” (10), though the fact that the abstract dream cannot literally fill anything hints at the *ultimately* unsatisfying nature of such an existence. While one is young, however, one *does* gain sustenance from dreams, living as if there is no tomorrow, one’s thoughts as “liquid” (16) as the possibilities that seem to stretch into infinity.

But such dreams, of course, do not last forever, containing within them the seeds of their own demise. This is the “white worm writing / in love” (17-18), an image suggestive in its movement of both the vitality of idealism, but also the way in which doubts are betrayed, for a worm has a distinctly negative connotation, particularly when paired with the adjective “runaway” (19) to describe such “love” (18) in the next line. Dreams can coalesce into nightmares, as the poet understands (though perhaps not consciously as he was experiencing it) that “You will grow up” (21), that “You’ll forget” (23) that which made the dream so satisfying in the first place, that allowed them to fill the existential void.

Ultimately, one does have to mature, for the dreams of youth become mere follies in old age if they are never more substantial than hazy ideals, yet, one can still recall (if not distinctly) the impetus behind one’s former dreams and (certainly) the experience of having lived them. Seen from this perspective, there is something attractive in the idea of sustaining life through imaginative transformation, existing always on the cusp of possibility. As one ages, however, paths narrow and personality congeals into its ultimate form. Such maturation is, on the one hand, a “crime” (24) against youth, but it is impossible to remain young forever, a fact Bolaño recognizes with his final ironic “Here I’m going to stay” (26). Only the young could imagine such a permanent and perpetual rebellion against nature; the elder poet understands all too well the seductive folly of such a pursuit.

### Essay 3

20<sup>th</sup> Century poetry and literature has changed in both topic and style over time. In previous years most works of art were referring to oppression and psychological principles. Latter day Roberto Bolaño struggles as a poet in the modern day world to suit society’s standards of what is correct and proper. One prime example of Bolaño’s said struggle being, “The Romantic Dogs” written in 1994. Through this piece Bolaño’s sophisticated style of writing and rhetoric is emphasized as he expresses internal thoughts and worries of the poet’s psyche.

There has always been a set standards of respectable occupations in modern day society. Lawyers, doctors, and architects have always been favorable jobs over singers, dancers, or artists of any type. People do not respect professions such as these because they use skills not utilized by technology or arithmetic, but instead use a person’s creativity and imagination. Now, creativity is seen as vital in many jobs but only for certain aspects, not the job itself. Poets thus feel rejected by society, belittled and looked down upon, for doing what they love. For example, as Bolaño says at age 20, “lost a country but won a dream.” All poets are isolated, in some form, from society, they are illogical for doing such unprofessional acts, they are separated just as Bolaño describes himself and the country, he is isolated and alone with his love of art, but he has won a “dream.” This dream, being the free will to do as he pleases, to make various kinds of art and be creative without being looked down upon. Bolaño struggles between what he himself wants to do what society’s norms tell him he should do.

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Furthermore, art is disrespected for what it stands for. Art provides a sense of free will the ability to create mysterious and wonderful things. Due to the fact that it has no set purpose or meaning dignifies it as a rebellious act toward society because it isn't destructive and cannot be explained simply. Even though to Bolaño the thoughts came out like "liquid," so natural and pure. Society determines what is considered proper, as a person grows, they mature, lose their foolish ways creativity and acting silly. But artists gather these emotions and ideas and use them for their pieces of work, so they are therefor considered immature. Because many poets do not maintain stern expressions and do not hide their open minded principles, they are considered young and naïve. Roberto Bolaño realizes the world is cruel in this way, but he sees the artist's world as "romantic." Like when he states "I'm here with, I said, with the romantic dogs and here I'm going to stay." Bolaño admires his own positive and romantic view of the world through his making of art. He loves his profession even if it is considered wrong in society, he himself is fulfilled and happy with his work, so he refuses to change his ways.

Life puts pressure on many people and influences them to certain things whether it's acting or feeling a certain way, but some are different. Bolaño recognizes how problematic it is to be an artist, how he feels indifferent and isolated. Perhaps, all people should do what they want to do instead of what they are told, so they may stay in bliss with the "romantic dogs" as well.