

## [The Golden Age by Joan London](#)

### Introduction

Even though this hasn't been one of the more popular choices on the VCE text list, Joan London's *The Golden Age* is a personal favourite of mine for a number of reasons. This is a novel about the experiences of children recovering from polio inside a convalescent home in Perth. With a sympathetic and warm approach, London tells the tragic yet brave stories of these children, as well as the stories of their parents and carers.

The novel essentially revolves around Frank Gold, a Hungarian Jew and a war refugee, and London blends his mature voice with the innocence of a coming-of-age narrative, all set against the backdrop of World War II.

As you're reading the book, watch out for her literary or poetic language, and keep track of the story's overall mood. These will be important considerations for text study, particularly if you are to write a creative response on this text for your SAC. With this in mind, I've included writing exercises throughout this blog post for you to practise writing creatively on this text.

If you are writing analytically on this text, either for your SAC or for your exam, you may still complete the exercises—each one should still be insightful for your writing in some way. Also, feel free to check out [this video](#) I wrote; it breaks down an analytical prompt for this text.

### Historical Context

This novel is set in Perth during the early 1940s, which gives rise to a couple of interesting historical elements all intersecting in the book.

Crucially, the events of the novel take place for the most part while **World War II** is raging in Europe. This is important for understanding the backstory of the Gold family: they are Hungarian Jews who have escaped their war-torn home of Budapest to seek safety in Australia. In particular, we know that at some stage, Meyer had been taken away to a labour camp, and that Frank had had to hide himself in an attic.

Their Hungarian heritage, however, is something that distances them from other Australians, and they never really get a good chance to settle in, always feeling like they just weren't on the same wavelength as the locals. In many ways, the story of the Golds is underpinned by tragedy—not only are they war refugees, but young Frank then contracts poliomyelitis (known to us just as polio), which forces the family to reassess all the plans they had for him to settle into an ordinary, Australian life.

However, Frank was far from the only victim of polio at the time—the entire nation was rocked by a **wave of polio**, with major outbreaks during the 1930s-40s. This was quite a nerve-racking, and causing great fear for our country and its active, outdoors-y culture. The prospects of death, paralysis and permanent disability were understandably terrifying. About 70,000 people were affected, and almost half of them eventually died as a result. Almost every Australian at the time knew or knew of someone who had polio.

**Task:** You are Ida, composing a letter to Julia Marai after Frank's diagnosis. Convey succinctly (in 250 words or less) what you think and how you feel.

## Key Themes & Implications

I like to think that a lot of the themes in this book exist in diametric or opposing pairs. For instance, London gives Frank a voice that is wise beyond his years, yet uses it to tell a tender story of first love. She also plays on the paradox that while some characters have become isolated due to the unfortunate events that have befallen them, these very events end up becoming the thing that unite them.

Essentially, London plays with a lot of these thematic tensions, showing us that life isn't really ever black and white, but there are whole lot of grey areas in every day life.

Central to the novel are ideas of **innocence** or **childhood**. These ideas are really explored in the friendship between Frank and Elsa, who are both on the cusp of adolescence. While they are set up as young lovers in the eyes of readers, we know that they are far too young to truly have romantic feelings for each other. In actual fact, their interactions are permeated by a sense of innocence.

However, these interactions are also punctuated by a **sense of maturity**, a desire for more. This is evident to the extent where nurses are getting hesitant about leaving them alone with each other (even though their parents still trust them entirely). In actual fact, these parents serve as an important point of contrast. Some manage to recapture the magic of youth even as adults—consider Ida reigniting her love for the piano, or Meyer jumping on opportunities to start anew. In this sense, innocence and maturity are a pair of themes that are interestingly not always found where one might expect.

Another key thematic element of the novel is **tragedy** or **adversity**, which are relevant to a far wider gamut of characters. Considering the story's geographical and historical setting, it seems evident that these ideas will play a major role in the story. A particularly poignant example lies in Sullivan, who contracts polio right on the cusp of adulthood, and readers can't help but feel a sense of loss for what might have been.

However, on the other end of this spectrum is the **strength** required to cope with their suffering. While Sullivan had his indefatigable sense of humour, other characters have developed different mechanisms to stay strong in the face of adversity. In some cases, you might say that they've **transcended** or risen above their tragedies, and become stronger for it.

Finally, London also tackles the idea of **isolation**, which can be seen as a consequence of tragedy—characters become isolated because they lose their ability to relate to others, and others feel unable to relate to them. Symbolically, the Golden Age hospital is surrounded by four roads and therefore cut off from the world, almost as if quarantined. However, the **solidarity** and **unity** of patients inside becomes a great source of strength—I'll leave it to you to think about what London was trying to say with this!

**Task:** Selecting one of the above themes, write a poem from the POV of an imaginary spectator in the novel, outlining how you perceive/experience these themes in other characters. Use all five senses (how you see it, hear it, smell it, taste it, and touch/feel it)

## Profiles of Major Characters

I haven't written too extensively about characters for a range of reasons: on one hand, it's important for you to form your own interpretations about what they're like and why they do the things they do, but on the other hand, I wanted to leave you with some key points to consider and/or some essential points about their characters to incorporate into your writing. This will allow you to hopefully feel like you're capturing them accurately when writing your creatives, but without feeling restricted by an extensive set of traits that you have to invoke.

### Frank Gold

- the central character, he is cerebral, intelligent and mature (which we can tell from his narrative voice, or how he 'sounds')
- he is, however, still very young, wide-eyed, inquisitive in spite of the tragedies which have befallen him (consider how he sees his relationship with Elsa)
- also significant is the motif of his poetry; not only does it highlight his maturity, but it also acts as a way for him to voice or articulate his feelings and experiences in the hospital—you could try incorporating some poetry in your writing (either original poems or quoted from the novel)

### Elsa Briggs

- another central character who becomes quite attached to Frank (they are the two eldest children in the Golden Age)
- she is warm, caring and selfless, demonstrating an emotional maturity beyond her years (because of having to bear the metaphorical albatross of polio)
- a lot of what we know about Elsa comes from Frank's perspective (though we do get some insight from her own, and some from her mother's)—how does this shape the way we see her? Consider London's use of imagery, portraying her as an angelic figure.

### Ida & Meyer

- Frank's parents, Hungarian Jews, and war refugees who come to Australia to cleanse them of their pasts and to have a fresh start; some of this is purely by circumstance, but there are parts of their past that they willingly and actively eschew e.g. Ida's piano
- note that Hungary is a landlocked country in the midst of European hustle and bustle with easy access to other nations/cultures/peoples, but Australia is an island on the other side of the world—consider how this affects their sense of isolation

- on the other hand, they do form new connections with people here and in their own individual ways; Ida by reclaiming her pianist talents and Meyer by taking up a new job

**Task:** You are Elsa, Ida, or Meyer and you've just discovered Frank's poem book. What are your thoughts and feelings towards his writing? Consider the context of your chosen character's own experiences

### Profiles of (Some) Minor Characters

I'm sure you've heard it by now, but any piece of text-based writing (creative or analytical) can be strengthened by diversifying the range of characters that you write about. Even though you've already differentiated yourself from most VCE students by even doing this text at all (very few people choose it, so props to you!), some inclusion of more minor characters might help to distinguish yourself further. I've picked some that I think are interesting to talk about, but feel free to experiment with others as well!

#### Sullivan

- a young man who contracts a severe strand of polio right on the cusp of adulthood, thereby exemplifying the theme of tragedy—however, his sense of humour remains active in spite of his immobility, so perhaps he not only exemplifies this theme but subverts it as well
- London poses the complex question of whether or not he's actually unhappy or defeated as a result of polio; there's no clear answer, since there's many ways to interpret his humour (is it a sign of strength or is it a front for inner turmoils expressed through poetry?)
- in addition to his humour and poetry, his relationship with his family could also be an interesting point of discussion to address some of these questions

#### Ann Lee

- a young girl in the hospital who is quite close to Elsa (almost in a sisterly way)—how have they developed this relationship, and how does this relate to the theme of unity/companionship/human connection?
- notably, she wanted to rehabilitate herself after polio took away her ability to feed the brumbies in her desert town—think about how this might represent strength as well

#### Julia Marai & Hedwiga

- Ida's former piano teacher and her flatmate/partner who live at the top of an apartment block in Budapest; they shelter Frank in their attic under no obligation whatsoever, but purely out of the kindness and selflessness of their hearts
- again, there's this subversion of what it means to be isolated: on one hand, their apartment is so cut off from the rest of the world below, and they lead a largely self-sufficient life together, but

on the other hand, the fact that they're together means that they're not entirely isolated consider the power of human connection in this context as well

**Task:** Pick a minor character from this list and a character from the above list of major characters, and write about them meeting each other for the first time. Pick two that do not already interact closely within the novel e.g. Elsa meeting Sullivan

I hope this gives you some ideas or starting points about writing creatively on this text!