

**M**emoirs are stories in which writers reflect on their life experiences. In such stories, writers recall memorable moments, trips, accidents, first loves, family stories. Whatever the subject matter, memoirs have one thing in common—the story is told in the **first-person point of view**, using **I**. Memoirs are, however, not a record of a person’s life experiences. If writers recorded *every* experience in their lives, no matter how small or big, they would write memoirs several thousand pages long! Instead, they choose events, sometimes seemingly minor, but sometimes major, to illustrate experiences that have affected who they are and how they see the world.

Consider this question as you read the following excerpt from Isabel Allende’s autobiographical work, *Paula*: How do writers choose which memories to write about? Use **Response Notes** to note your reactions and any connections you make to the text.

from **Paula** by Isabel Allende

I place one hand over my heart, close my eyes, and concentrate. There is something dark inside. At first it is like the night air, transparent shadow, but soon it is transformed into impenetrable lead. I try to lie calmly and accept the blackness that fills my inner being as I am assaulted by images from the past. I see myself before a large mirror. I take one step backward, another, and with each step decades are erased and I grow smaller, until the glass returns the reflection of a seven-year-old girl. Me.

It has been raining for several days; I am leaping over puddles, my leather bag bouncing against my back. I am wearing a blue coat that is too large for me and a felt hat pulled down to my ears; my shoes are sodden. The huge wooden entry door, swollen by rain, is stuck; it takes all my weight to pull it open. In the garden of my grandfather’s house is a gigantic poplar with roots growing above the ground, a scrawny sentinel standing guard over property that appears abandoned—shutters hanging from their hinges, paint peeling from walls. Outdoors it is just getting dark, but inside it is already deepest night. All the lights are off except in the kitchen. I walk through the garage toward the light. The walls of the cavernous kitchen are spotted with grease, and large blackened saucepans and spoons hang from iron hooks. One or two fly-specked light bulbs cast a dull light on the scene. Something is bubbling in a pot and the kettle is whistling; the room smells of onion, and an enormous refrigerator purrs in a corner. Margara, a large woman, with strong Indian features and a thin braid wound around her head, is listening to a serial on the radio. My brothers are sitting at the table with cups of hot cocoa and

## Response Notes

*The writer creates a feeling of darkness and heaviness.*

buttered bread. Margara does not look up. “Go see your mother, she’s in bed again,” she scolds. I take off my coat and hat. “Don’t strew your things about; I’m not your slave, I don’t have to pick up after you.” She turns up the volume on the radio. I leave the kitchen and confront the darkness in the rest of the house. I feel for the light switch and a pale glow barely fills the hall with its several doors. A claw-footed table holds the marble bust of a pensive girl; there is a mirror with a heavy wood frame, but I don’t look because the Devil might be reflected in it. I shiver as I climb the stairs; currents of air swirl through an incomprehensible hole in the strange architecture. Clinging to the handrail, I reach the second floor. The climb seems interminable. I am aware of silence and shadows. I walk to the closed door at the end of the hall and tiptoe in without knocking. A stove furnishes the only illumination; the ceilings are covered with the accumulation of years of paraffin soot. There are two beds, a bunk, a sofa, tables and chairs—it is all I can do to make my way through the furniture. My mother, with Pelvina López-Pun asleep at her feet, is lying beneath a mountain of covers, her face half-hidden on the pillow: straight nose, high cheekbones, pallid skin, finely drawn eyebrows above closed eyes. “Is it you?” A small, cold hand reaches out for mine.

“Does it hurt a lot, Mama?”

“My head is bursting.”

“I’ll go get you a glass of warm milk and tell my brothers not to make any noise.”

“Don’t leave. Stay here with me. Put your hand on my forehead, that helps.”

...I’m hungry, I want to go down to the kitchen and drink my cocoa, but I must not leave my mother, and besides, I don’t have the courage to face Margara. My shoes are wet and my feet feel like ice. I stroke my mother’s poor head and concentrate: everything depends on me now. If I don’t move, and pray hard, I can make the pain go away. ❖

❖ Write a word that accurately describes the strongest impression, image, or reaction you had while reading about this incident. Write how that word helps to explain what you find most interesting in Allende’s story. Tell what effect the story has on you.

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- ✿ Share with others what you have written. Discuss what you think Allende is trying to say about herself in this scene. Record your best ideas below.

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Allende said, “I take one step backward, another, and with each step decades are erased and I grow smaller, until the glass returns the reflection of a seven-year-old girl.” Allende’s memoir can help you think about some of the experiences that have most influenced who you are today. Reflect on those experiences in order to practice **connecting through memories**. Begin thinking about memoirs you can write from your own life. To help you “step backward” in time, create a Memory Catalog of your meaningful experiences. Include important moments or events from your life that you think might be interesting topics for your writing.

- ✿ List topics under each of the headings in the chart below. Include words, phrases, or names that will remind you of specific experiences. Space is provided for you to create additional headings of your own.

### MEMORY CATALOG

A time I felt happy	A time I felt scared	A time I felt proud	A time I felt upset
An experience that taught me about myself	<hr/> <hr/>	<hr/> <hr/>	<hr/> <hr/>

How does a memoir serve as a way to reflect on life for both the writer and the reader?