STUDENT HANDOUT · UNIT III · MEMOIR

Session 8

Memory & the Memoir Impulse

Sunday, July 5, 2026 · 4:00–5:30 PM · The Community Room

Student handout · readings · in-class practice · discussion questions · homework · worksheet

The Art of Telling

A free creative-writing salon for residents of 2601

Led by James F. Mulhern · Silver Current Press

SILVER CURRENT PRESS

Read deeply. Think boldly.

Welcome to the Session 8 companion handout for *Memory & the Memoir Impulse*. This is your take-home guide for today's salon — it gathers the main points of the lesson, the reading for class, the in-class practice, the discussion questions with room to write your own thoughts, this week's homework, and the Memoir Impulse Worksheet for your private notebook. For the full session materials, reading companions, and course updates, visit companion.art-of-telling.com.

Main Points of the Lesson

Memoir is not autobiography. Autobiography is the chronicle of a life. Memoir is the shaping of a slice of life into literature.
Vivian Gornick's central truth: the situation is what happened; the story is what it means.
We write memoir not to remember, but to find out what we remember.
Memoir is committed to *the truth of memory*, which is not the same as the truth of fact.
Three principles for writing about real people: write as if they will read it; distinguish the person from the character; ask the writer's question, *what is this for?*

Reading for Class

- Frederick Douglass, opening chapter of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) — Project Gutenberg (public domain). Read the first chapter only.

Douglass's opening — *"I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it."* — is one of the founding moments of American memoir. The older voice and the younger experience speak together openly.

Critical Reception (after our discussion)

- Frederick Douglass — Narrative (Project Gutenberg) — the full text of Douglass's autobiography, with publisher's preface and historical context.

In-Class Practice

From the live site

In your notebook: free-write for ten minutes on a moment from your own life you have never written about. Then, in another ten minutes, write the same moment from the point of view of someone else who was there. We will discuss what each version revealed. No prior writing required.

stays in your notebook. The work of this session is the most personal in the whole course — nothing is collected, nothing is shared with the room unless you choose. We discuss what the writing taught you, not what you wrote.

Discussion Questions

Use the space below each question to write your own thoughts before or during our discussion. Nothing here is collected.

Q1. Why do we write memoir? What is the difference between remembering and finding out what we remember?

Q2. In Douglass's opening chapter, what does the writer let us see? What does the writer choose to withhold — and why?

Q3. Is there a moment from your own life you have always meant to write? What stops you?

Q4. How do you distinguish the person from the character on the page?

Homework

The read

Read the opening chapters of two memoirs: Mary Antin, the opening of *The Promised Land* — Project Gutenberg — and Booker T. Washington, the opening of *Up from Slavery* — Project Gutenberg. Both are public domain; read the opening only.

The optional exercise

Optional: sit for ten minutes with the Memoir Impulse Worksheet at the end of this handout and free-write a paragraph from what comes up. Nothing collected.

Before Next Sunday — Session 9

The Double Structure — What Happened, What It Means. We look at the hardest skill in memoir: the doubled voice — the younger self living through the experience, and the older self looking back at it. Antin lets the older voice in early and openly; Washington keeps it almost entirely withheld. We will compare both and try the move ourselves.

Memoir Impulse Worksheet

From the live site

Copy into a Word document. Use it as a prompt sheet for free writing. This stays in your private notebook — never collected, never read aloud unless you choose. The work of memoir is your own.

1. A moment from my life I have never written about: _____

2. Why have I not written it? _____

3. Who else was there? _____

4. What is this for? _____

5. One real person who would appear in this piece. How do I distinguish the person from the character? _____

Closing Note

Because there wasn't time to tell everything, the companion site — companion.art-of-telling.com — gathers session materials, reading companions, and course updates so residents can follow along and review after each Sunday.