

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Frederick Douglass** (1817? – 1895)

### *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*

The *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, rev. ed. 1892) is not nearly so well known as his first autobiography, *The Narrative...* (1845), or his second, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). It is 752 pages long. Its description of slavery are not so direct and powerful. And the descriptions of the later years are often rambling, interrupted by long excerpts from letters and earlier writings. "What we have," one critic has written, "is a verbose and somewhat hackneyed story of a life, written, "is a verbose and somewhat hackneyed story of a life, written by a man of achievement."<sup>1</sup>

Such a judgment may be too harsh, however, For one thing, the *Life and Times* contains some details about Douglass's early life which he had to omit from his first two autobiographies. Most important is the story of his escape, which is given in the first of the two selections below. It may not be as long and as exciting as the escapes in some other slave autobiographies, but it is still tense, and it shows how easy it might have been for a fugitive slave to be stopped.

Harsh judgments of *Life and Times* also fail to acknowledge the nature of this kind of autobiography. It was written by "a man of achievement." Less famous men and women simply did not have the materials. Douglass had known John Brown and been one of the first to hear Brown's plans for starting a guerrilla liberation movement. He had known Harriet Beecher Stowe. He had recruited black troops for the Union Army. After the Civil War he had been the nation's symbolic black leader and a minister to Haiti. *Life and Times* is for these reasons an important historical record and a good example of this kind of autobiography. Finally, as the second selection here illustrates, Douglass was well aware of the ways he was being used by the American whites (or "Caucasians") at a time when race prejudice was once again growing and becoming, in some ways, more patronizing and demeaning. He himself had been attacked during the late years of his life for marrying a white woman. In this justification for the last edition of his autobiography, he puts himself on the witness stand and relentlessly catalogues the ignorance and the prying "curiosity of my countrymen." He also has things to say about autobiography which every serious reader of it needs to consider.

1. Houston Baker, *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 44-45

### Reading

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave  
<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/Douglass/Autobiography/>