

# B.F. Skinner

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*The Following Text Excerpt from PERSONALITY, 3rd Ed., Jerry M. Burger*

When Burrhus Frederick Skinner was born in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania, in 1904, his father, a lawyer, announced the birth in the local paper as "The town has a new law firm: Wm. A. Skinner & Son." But all of his father's efforts to shape his son into the legal profession failed. After growing up in a "warm and stable" home, Skinner went to Hamilton College to study English. He planned a career as a professional writer, not a lawyer. This ambition was reinforced the summer before his senior year when an instructor introduced Skinner to the poet Robert Frost. Frost asked to see some of Skinner's work. Skinner sent three short stories, and several months later received a letter from Frost encouraging him to continue writing.

Skinner devoted the 2 years after his graduation to writing, first at home and later in Greenwich Village in New York. At the end of this time he realized he had produced nothing and was not likely to become a great novelist. "I was to remain interested in human behavior, but the literary method had failed me," he wrote. "I would turn to the scientific. The relevant science appeared to be psychology, though I had only the vaguest idea of what that meant" (Skinner, 1967, p. 395).



So Skinner went to Harvard to study psychology. He immersed himself in his studies, rising at six each morning to hit the books. After teaching at the University of Minnesota and Indiana University, Skinner returned to Harvard in 1948, where he remained the rest of his career. Literature's loss was psychology's gain. A survey of psychology historians taken at about the time of his death ranked Skinner as the most influential of all contemporary psychologists (Korn, Davis, & Davis, 1991).

Although his work in psychology earned him numerous professional awards and recognitions, Skinner never relinquished his interest in literature. In the 1940s he returned to fiction, writing a novel, *Walden Two*, about a utopian society based on the principles of reinforcement Skinner had found in his laboratory experiments. "It was pretty obviously a venture in self-therapy," Skinner wrote, sounding more psychoanalytic than behavioristic. "I was struggling to reconcile two aspects of my own behavior represented by [the characters] Burris and Frazier" (1967, p. 403).

Nonetheless, Skinner remained an adamant believer in the power of the environment and an unwavering critic of those who introduce nonobservable concepts to explain human behavior. "I do not believe that my life shows a type of personality a la Freud, an archetypal pattern a la

Jung, or a schedule of development a la Erikson," Skinner wrote nearly eight decades after his birth. "There have been a few abiding themes, but they can be traced to environmental sources rather than to traits of character. They became part of my life as I lived it; they were not there at the beginning to determine its course" (1983, p. 401).

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