The Mechanical Man: James Broadus Watson

By: Zach Herfel
The Birth of J.B. Watson

- James Broadus Watson was born on January 9th, 1878 near Greenville, South Carolina.
- Watson was the fourth child out of six.
- Parents:
  - Pickens Butler Watson
  - Emma Watson
Pickens Butler Watson

- Descended from independent landowners who settled the back country of South Carolina
  - Picken’s father gave each of his 10 children a parcel of land
- Ran away at age 16 to join the Confederate Army
- Married Emma Roe
- Banished from family and shunned by neighbors
- Pickens attempted to run a sawmill away from home
- Pickens worked during the week and then ate, slept, and drank whiskey on the weekends
Emma Watson

- Emma Watson was left to raise the children
- Devout Baptist
- Emma singled out J.B Watson out of all the other children for a special destiny
  - Watson was named after John Albert Broadus
Schooling

• Watson began school at age 6 at a one-room district school
• Attended a private academy at age 8
• Emma Watson realized that her expectations of her children were limited due to the small farming community
• In 1890, Emma Watson sold the farm
Greenville

- Emma Watson moved the family to Greenville
- Rapidly growing city
  - In transition from agricultural community to industrial center
  - Between 1870 and 1880, the population doubled
- During this time, Watson recalls “few pleasant memories from these years.”
Adolescent Years

- Watson was enrolled in 7th grade when he was 12 years old
- Described himself as lazy, somewhat insubordinate and never made a passing grade
- Watson was bullied and often the center of classroom jokes
- Took anger out by fighting with Blacks
Watson’s View of Religion

• Still remained a member of his mother church until his college years
• Join the First Baptist Church
• Grew to dislike all religions
• Upward mobile professionals during this time:
  o Grew up in rural areas and attended church
  o Embraced faith in material progress and believed mankind would be saved by achievements in technology and science
Furman University

- Schools in Greenville were an improvement but still lacked opportunity
- Watson, age 16, enrolled as a sub-freshman at Furman University
- Attended Furman for 5 years
- Worked as a assistant in the chemistry lab
- Watson did not stand out in college
- Watson credits Gordon B. Moore’s classes for drawing him to psychology
  - An extra year at Furman
- Decides to pursue Doctorate in Psychology and Philosophy
- Watson graduated with his Master of Arts degree in 1899
Post-Furman

- Moved away from home in 1899
- Principal at Batesburg Institute near Columbia
- Emma Watson became ill and never recovered
- Watson’s last tie to South Carolina was gone

- Letter to William Rainey Harper, the president of the University of Chicago
- Watson left for Chicago in the fall of 1900
- At this time psychology was one of the most promising professions
  - Only recognized for 8 years
The New Psychology

- The last quarter in the 19th century focused on the self-conscious
- G. Stanley Hall hoped to legitimize psychology
- Hall was one of the first to learn experimental psychology and methodology
- The “New Psychology” referred to an empirical approach to psychological investigation
- Hall introduced psychology into the academic world through pedagogy
- Established the first psychology lab in America and founded the American Journal of Psychology in 1886
- Psychology took off during the 1890's
- Hall claimed that psychology could be used in the classroom
- Psychologists still disagreed on “science”
University of Chicago

- Unsettled about his profession
- Experimental Psychology
  - Philosophy
  - Neurology
- Interest in animal or comparative psychology
- Watson did not enjoy working with human subjects
- Dissertation: Relationship between behavior in the white lab rat and the growth of its nervous system
- Animal psychology had its critics
University of Chicago

- Watson worked day and night on his experiments
- Watson had a breakdown one year before his doctoral work was completed
- In 1903, Watson obtained his Ph. D in Psychology
Beginning of Watson’s Career

- Applied for assistantship at Carnegie Institute
- Dewey and Angell encouraged Watson to stay in Chicago
- Fall of 1903 Watson gets instructorship
- Watson pushed for a separate psychology program
- Dewey left to teach at Columbia
- Angell joined the administration at the university
  - Angell backed Watson’s research
- Watson’s speech at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition
- The new generation of psychologists
Watson’s Relationships

• Watson was interested in young, impressionable women who were initially awed by him
• Vida Sutton
• Watson became involved with Mary Ickes
  o Similar childhood to Watson
• Watson and Harold Ickes despised each other
• Secretly wed on December 16, 1903
• Mary left college
  o Affair with Vida Sutton
• Watson and Mary were publicly wed in the fall of 1904
Baltimore

• Applied for a grant at Carnegie Institute
• Leave of absence
• Watson and Mary moved to Baltimore
  o Mary was pregnant with their first-born
  o Watson was unemployed
Back to Chicago

• Watson moved back to Chicago
  o Threw himself into his work
    • Regular teaching
    • Lab duties
    • Edited edition of the *Psychological Bulletin*
    • Organized western branch meeting for the APA

• Watson’s reputation grew from experimental work and as an organizer and administrator
Controversy

• Watson experimented with rats to compare whether normal rats responded differently than those who had senses systematically removed
• Criticism: cruel and unjustifiable
• Watson responded that criticism had no significance
• The mind is an adaptive organ
• Study the mind of animals and humans

• Studied seagulls in the summer of 1907 in the Florida Keys
Fatherhood

- Watson returned to Chicago in time for the birth of his son
- Watson was not bothered by crying
- Watson’s temperament as a father not very warm
- His daughter Mary was favored
Watson’s 1st Affair

- Vida Sutton returned to Chicago
- Watson and Sutton met regularly
- Mary’s brother, Harold Ickes, hired a private investigator
  - During the time Harold was having an affair
• 1908: Watson is open to offers from other universities
• In March Watson accepted an offer from Johns Hopkins
  o Doubled his salary
• Watson “tasted freedom” at Johns Hopkins and plunged into his work
James Mark Baldwin

- Baldwin was hired to create a philosophy and psychology program at Johns Hopkins.
- Involved with publishing of:
  - *Psychological Review*
  - *Psychological Index*
  - *Psychological Monographs*
  - *Psychological Bulletin*
- Baldwin was caught at a brothel.
Watson’s Golden Opportunity

- Watson took advantage of Baldwin’s incident
- Received responsibility for the psychology program
- Became editor of the *Psychological Bulletin*
- Watson still pushed for separate program
  - Competing universities had programs
  - Psychologists still struggled for acceptance in the scientific community
Watson’s Responsibilities

• Watson and Robert Yerks published the *Journal of Animal Behavior* in 1910

• Watson continued to take on more work only to complain
  o Departmental duties
  o Teaching
  o Conducting his own research
  o Planning for the psychological congress
  o Editing the *Journal of Animal Behavior*
  o Co-editing the *Psychological Bulletin*
Back to Florida

- Watson traveled back to Florida to study migrating and nesting habits of a species of terns.
- The question: to what extent are fixed modes of responding inherited, and to what extent are organisms equipped with “plastic forms of activity” that require shaping by training or instruction?
Mainstream Psychology

- Watson was dissatisfied with mainstream psychology because of introspection
- The solution: define behavior as a biological problem well ignoring the conscious
The Modern Era

• Series of lectures at Columbia
  o “Psychology as a behaviorist views it”

• Claimed to be a behaviorist
  o Critic of current psychology
  o Separate approach

• The goal of psychology should be to predict and control behavior

• Watson believed the new behavioral psychology could be written in terms of:
  o Habit formation
  o Stimulus response
  o Habit integrations
Behaviorism

• Behaviorism was presented by Watson in 1913
• Met requirements as a science
• In 1914, Watson published *An Introduction to Comparative Psychology*

• At age 36, Watson became the president of the APA
  o Youngest nominee
Criticism of Behaviorism

• Dewey criticized that behaviorists ignore the social qualities of behavior

• E. B. Titchener stated that science was being exchanged with technology
  o Industrial era

• Defenses against criticism
  o Any nonpositivistic position was unverifiable and therefore unscientific
  o Positivism had no central doctrine that could be scientifically challenged
Conditioned Reflex

• Watson began to research conditioned reflexes
  o Solution to introspection
  o A method of gathering data and a tool to modify behavior

• Watson became interested in reliable and objective methods of studying and treating mental disorders
Emotional Responses

• Watson desired a behavioral theory of emotional response
  o Similar conditions used by Pavlov

• Watson researched reflexes and instincts in infants
  o Received 40 babies a month

• In 1916 Watson claimed to have found the key to emotional development
  o Fear
  o Rage
  o Love
Vocational Psychology

• The idea of using applied psychology for hiring and promoting employees had been introduced.
• Watson stated there was a lack of efficiency in selecting employees.
• Watson suggested performance tests.
World War I

- WWI was seen as an opportunity to advance democracy and begin social reconstruction at home
- Watson wanted to mobilize psychology
- Use of psychology tests to select and classify military personnel
- Woodrow Wilson created the National Research Council (NRC)
  - Included all branches in science and engineering
Watson’s Role in WWI

- Watson was made major in the Signal Corps
  - Methods to select and train aviators
- Conducted research with homing pigeons on bases in Louisiana and Texas
  - The wireless radio halted the research
- Watson also administered a questionnaire to British aviators
- Watson was almost court-martialed
- Discharged in 1918
Return to John Hopkins

- Watson published a new textbook: *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist*
- Watson defined psychology as human activity and conduct
- Psychology should be able to:
  - Predict human activity with reasonably certainty
  - “Formulate laws and principles whereby a man’s actions can be controlled by organized society”
Applied Psychology After WWI

• Watson received a grant from the United States Social Hygiene Board for researching education on venereal disease
• Also research effects of alcohol consumption
• Interested in creating a psychology role in education, social work, and mental health agencies
Emotional Development

• Watson believed that parents determined their child’s emotional development

• Experimental nursery and infant labs in regards to public school
  o Parents could be guided and warned about the way children were tending to develop
  o Teachers would be trained as well
  o School psychologists take over early grades

• Watson argued that most biological and psychological problems are centered around processes of development
Little Albert

- Emotional reactions are due to environmental causes which create habit formation
- Watson claimed an emotional reaction could be conditioned to respond to a chosen stimulus
- The results were widely accepted
- Watson made no attempt to recondition Little Albert
  - Phobia of fur coats

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hBfnXACsO1
Discussion Questions

• Was Watson’s experiment on Little Albert ethical?

• Is there another way that Watson could have tested his emotional reaction hypothesis on humans?

• How do you feel about experimental nurseries?
Watson’s 2nd Affair

- Watson’s assistant for the Little Albert experiment was Rosalie Rayner
- Watson was 42 when Rosalie came to study at Johns Hopkins
- In 1920, Watson and Mary break up after 10 years of “drifting”
Rosalie Rayner

- Rosalie’s family occupied a prominent place in the economic and political life in Maryland
  - Grandfather established the family fortune in railroads, mining, and shipbuilding
  - Rosalie’s uncle served on the United States Senate
Proceedings to Divorce

• Watson insisted that Mary and the kids go to Switzerland for a year until the divorce is final
• Mary made Watson pay
• Mary stole letters written by Watson to Rosalie
  o Used as leverage
• Mary got custody of the children, substantial property, and alimony settlement
The End of Watson’s Career

- Watson did not conceal the relationship
- Watson was asked to resign from Johns Hopkins
- In October 1920, Watson left Johns Hopkins
- Nationwide publicity erupted after the divorce suit went to trial
- No university wanted to risk the publicity by hiring Watson
A New Career

• William I. Thomas arranged an interview at J. Walter Thompson advertising company for Watson
• Also introduced Watson to friends at New School for Social Research
  o Watson was offered a job
• Watson was inclined to apply for the advertising position
Watson, Rosalie, and Mary

- The divorce was final between Watson and Mary on December 24, 1920.
- Watson and Rosalie were married on New Year’s Eve.
- Watson began his new career as an executive in the Thompson agency.
Advertising Research

• “The whole object of research is to keep everyone remarkably dissatisfied with what he has in order to keep the factory busy making new things”

• After 1910, advertisers relied less on appeals of reason and more on indirect forms of persuasion
Advertising

• “After all, it is the emotional factor in our lives that touches off and activates our social behavior whether it is buying a cannon, a sword or a plowshare- and love, fear and rage are the same Italy, Abyssinia and Canada.”

• Used emotional responses to sell products
  o Baby powder ad

• Watson used testimonials

• Watson sold sex appeal

• In 1924 Watson was made vice-president of the Thompson agency
Discussion Questions

• Should psychology play such a large role in advertising?

• Do you think advertising would have ended up using sex to sell items if Watson had not entered into the “psychology of appeal”? 
Watson’s Other Work

- From 1922 to 1926, Watson gave weekly lectures at The New School
- Watson wrote *The Psychological Care of Infant and Child*
  - Believed that mothers begin to destroy the child the moment it is born
  - Dedicated to the first mother who raises a happy child
  - Treat the child as an adult
  - “All of the weaknesses, reserves, fears, cautions, and inferiorities of our parents are stamped into us with sledge hammer blows."
Behaviorist’s Utopia

- Women were unfit for the workplace
- Women would be taught “domestic science”
- Watson’s dream where science became religion
Additional

• Rosalie died from pneumonia in 1935
  o Kids were sent to camp that night
• Watson worked left the J. Walter Thompson Company in 1935
• An advertising executive at the William Esty Company until 1945
• Watson passed peacefully at age 80 on September 24, 1958