

STAYING FOCUSED

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I would like to express my opinion, as a retired research scientist, on the true personality attributes of Mr. Sherlock Holmes. It is not my goal to get into the discussion regarding Jeremy Brett characterization of Sherlock Holmes. I think that he did a great job with what he intended to accomplish, that is, to portray Sherlock Holmes as a deeply troubled man with psychiatric problems, and possibly biologically derived bipolar disorder.

However, as much as I respect his ability to interpret Sherlock Holmes along these lines, I believe that he was completely incorrect in his basic premise. In my opinion, Sherlock Holmes acted like many otherwise normal, but highly motivated and intensely focused, scientists that I have known over the years. I think that the interpretive problem stems from the fact that most of the actors, directors, writers, and others who toil in the entertainment industry have absolutely no concept of how scientists behave and what their motivations are. This is very clearly evidenced by the way that they depict scientists in their motion pictures and television productions. Even science fiction, that branch of art that should present a more accurate depiction of scientists, has, in films and television at least, contributed to this image. Who are the science officers in the original *Star Trek*, in *Star Trek The Next Generation* and in *Deep Space Nine*? One is a pointy-eared Vulcan, another an android, and the third is a symbiont. And can we ever forget the idiotic Dr. Smith of *Lost in Space*, or the evil Dr. Nirvana in, I believe, *Captain Marvel* comics.

In other words, to the members of the world of theater and among the literati, scientists are strange and unworldly. Arthur Conan Doyle, on the other hand, did understand scientists. Thus, he was able to properly depict his scientific detective Sherlock Holmes and his overbearing explorer Professor Challenger.

A discussion of how scientists are different from other folks may help explain my opinion on how Sherlock Holmes character was constructed. I hope that appropriate analogies will be useful. In the first place, scientists are perfectly content to work on what interests them even if they could make a lot more money doing something else. If they are working on something interesting they might skip a meal or two getting experiments set up. When you talk to them, they may seem distracted as their mind is on other things. It almost always is. They may get up in the middle of the night to write down a thought that came to them about their work. Some (not ever me) have worked all night on a project, get their experiments set up, and then go home to sleep all day. When they are on vacation, you might not know that they are scientists except for the fact that they may not know who is today's popular singing star

or who won the Super Bowl. If it is outside of their field, such as astronomy to a chemist, they might not know if the earth circles the sun or not. There have been scientists who were world class athletes, or actors, clergy, womanizers, etc. But when they are involved in their work, do not interrupt them. They will get very angry and yell at you.

I would like to close this rambling discourse by talking about a scientist whom I knew during my stint in the pharmaceutical industry. What a guy. He was one of the innovators in the early days of electron microscopy. If he wanted to improve his instruments, he would lay on the floor, often in tandem with a plumber or electrician, and struggle and struggle night and day until the scope did what he wanted it to do. He never wore a tie, even in the 1950s when everyone did. He ate at very odd times, never with anyone else, always in the lab.

But when it was World Series time, everything stopped. He brought in a popcorn maker and a TV set, and heaven help anyone, including the big bosses, if they interrupted him during the game. Yet, if you visited him during his more relaxed hours or went to ask for help or advice he was very friendly and helpful. And his assistants all worshiped and respected him highly, and truly liked him for his kindness.

Not all scientists are outrageous in their behavior, but all have one or the other of these attributes that distinguish them. Thus, I maintain that the character given to Sherlock Holmes, his Bohemianism, absolute need of mental stimulation, his alternating moods of high energy and languor, and many other of his characteristics do not necessarily depict a person with deep emotional instability, just those of a typical research scientist.