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The Complicated Mind of Sherlock Holmes

Writing Process

By taking a Sherlock Holmes themed Writing Seminar II class, I was familiar with the theory of Sherlock Holmes having a mental disorder. For my final research paper, I decided to write about this theory and diagnose Holmes. I began by researching mental disorders and their symptoms. Once I had taken notes, I looked at the symptoms and compared them to Sherlock Holmes. I removed the disorders that did not relate to Holmes and narrowed the list down to Asperger's Syndrome, Bipolar Disorder, and Savant Syndrome. Next, I found specific examples from Sherlock Holmes pieces that exhibited Holmes demonstrating the symptoms of each mental disorder. The writing process took two full days followed by revising. I had the paper proof read and altered the organization of my paragraphs. Then the piece was complete!

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The Complicated Mind of Sherlock Holmes

Madeleine Ryan

“I’m not a psychopath, I’m a high-functioning sociopath. Do your research.” — *Sherlock Holmes*

Those who are familiar with Sherlock Holmes know that he is not just an average, vanilla character. He is different from typical humans in the way he thinks and acts. His unique thought processes, extreme behaviors, severe reactions, and abnormal mental capacities are seen through the literary works of Sir Arthur Doyle, popular Sherlock Holmes movies, and many television series. Holmes claims that he was a “high-functioning sociopath” which means he thinks he has an antisocial personality disorder with a minimal understanding of social norms. He is portrayed as being incorporated into society and is smarter than most average people (Lack). Many individuals have theorized that Sherlock Holmes most likely had a neurological disorder causing him to act differently from a normal person. Three disorders Sherlock Holmes could plausibly have were Asperger’s Syndrome, Bipolar Disorder, or Savant Syndrome. The symptoms of each disorder displayed by Holmes and his brother, Mycroft, make a case for each of these assessments.

One of the possible neurological disorders Sherlock Holmes could have had was Asperger’s Syndrome which is considered to be a category of autism. Autism is defined as causing people to “have noticeable difficulties with the self-referential understanding of their emotions, self-awareness and cognitive processes” (Bókkon 68). Autistic individuals have natural tendencies that differ from most people causing them to be socially awkward and to think differently. Ordinary individuals think linguistically while autistic individuals think “in pictures” (Grandin 14). The autism spectrum is a scale of various neurological

disorders who have many, if not all of the symptoms. The variety of disorders range from mild to severe. On the milder end of the spectrum lies Asperger's Syndrome. It causes people to appear perfectly capable of understanding language, but they speak in an irregular way ("What is Autism"). Those who have the syndrome tend to pay close attention to detail and are extremely focused on their own interests. They can have more social and academic success compared to others. Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome typically have greater difficulty in communicating and understanding feelings. They often isolate themselves socially because they have trouble reading facial expressions and body language. They also often desire the company of others and stick close to them ("Asperger's Syndrome – Symptoms").

Thinking in pictures is one symptom of Asperger's Syndrome demonstrated by Holmes throughout various stories and subsequent theatrical adaptations. When Holmes inspects any crime scene, he later visually remembers everything he saw. Temple Grandin, who lives with autism, explained in her article, "My Mind is a Web Browser: How People with Autism Think," that she thinks "in pictures that are like video tapes" (14). Grandin and Holmes think similarly. Their memories and thoughts are like "video tapes" in their heads. Along with his visual memories, Holmes can recall more information than the average person. This ability to pay closer attention to detail further supports the idea that Holmes had Asperger's Syndrome ("What is Autism"). Paying close attention to one's own interests is another symptom. Holmes demonstrated this through his extreme interest in the cases he worked to solve. This ability played a role in his success in solving cases that others could not.

Asperger's Syndrome can run in families. Holmes's brother, Mycroft, also evidences this neurological disorder. In his article "Asperger's in the Holmes' Family," Eric L. Altschuler explains the reason why Mycroft Holmes most likely had Asperger's Syndrome. Altschuler included a statement by Sherlock Holmes speaking about his brother:

He has the tidiest and most orderly brain, with the greatest capacity for storing facts, of any man living. The same great powers which I have turned to the detection of crime he has used for this particular business." ... The symptoms Sherlock Holmes is describing go exactly along with Asperger's Syndrome. The two brothers are both able to learn large amounts of information that pertains to

what they are passionate about, their careers. When speaking of Mycroft's brain, Sherlock Holmes says it has "the greatest capacity for storing facts. (2239 -2239)

This statement relates to the idea that Holmes thinks of his brain as an "attic." In her book chapter "Inside the Mind of Sherlock Holmes," Lynnette Porter refers to Holmes as having a "mind palace." Holmes thinks his brain is empty and has plenty of room for more information. Other people simply have a "brain attic" with less room for information, which makes him smarter (49). Holmes thinks and Mycroft had the same type of mind capacity and abilities, and they both have "mind palaces" which allows them to learn tons of information they are interested in—not unlike other people with Asperger's Syndrome.

It can be argued that Holmes did not have Asperger's Syndrome. One symptom is the desire for close relationships with others ("Asperger's Syndrome – Symptoms"). Holmes sometimes demonstrated the desire to be close to someone. However, he did not wish to have a relationship with a woman or make any friends, except for that of Dr. John Watson, his partner and biographer. They both relied on each other and rented rooms from Mrs. Hudson. In the Sherlock story titled "A Study in Pink," Mrs. Hudson makes an effort to care for Holmes and tries to talk with him, but Holmes tells her that he is busy and needs to focus on the case he is working on. Holmes does not show an interest in being close to her because he is always busy or deep in thought (Moffat 2010). One could argue that since Holmes does not desire any close relationships, besides that with Dr. Watson, he does not have Asperger's Syndrome.

Holmes also does not demonstrate any difficulty remembering information from conversations, such as dates ("What is Autism?"). When Holmes has conversations with people he almost always remembers exactly what had been said. Holmes usually remembers specific dates, sometimes even better than the average individual. Also, Mycroft and Sherlock do not show any evidence of language developmental delay (Altschuler 2238). In a language delay, people do not show schizoid and schizotypal personality disorders. They sometimes display schizoid tendencies, but are very engaged when they needed to be (2238).

Another neurological disorder that Holmes could feasibly have had was Bipolar Disorder, a condition that causes people to suffer from manic and depressive episodes. These episodes can last from one week to six months causing an individual to act and feel drastically different from their normal frame of mind.

Manic episodes, known as the “highs,” result in intense feelings of an elevated mood or extreme excitement. Manic episodes also can result in an accelerated rate of speech and a decreased need for sleep while still having plenty of energy. A person experiencing a manic episode can engage in business that is considered risky, including impulsive sexual encounters, ill-advised business decisions, and lavish spending. They are also easily agitated, irritable, easily distracted, and hyperactive. A person suffering from Bipolar Disorder also experiences depressive episodes, known as “lows,” which causes people to experience sadness and a loss of energy. They also lose interest in activities they normally enjoy, which is a symptom of a depressed individual. Difficulty remembering, concentrating, and making decisions are also common. Thoughts of suicide and death are common during depressive episodes as are drug and alcohol abuse.

Holmes shows several symptoms of a Bipolar Disorder. He experiences episodes of both a manic and depressive nature. In the *Sherlock* episode “A Study in Pink,” Watson observes Holmes working on solving a case for the first time during their relationship. When Holmes begins putting information together, he speaks at an abnormal speed and becomes very excited. The more information and clues he discovers, the more energetic and excited he becomes. This increase in energy and speaking rate both resemble symptoms of a manic episode (“Warning Signs and Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder”). When Watson and Holmes become acquainted in *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes explains to Watson that he occasionally endures weeks where he is completely silent, needs to relax, and wants to be left alone. During these miserable weeks, Holmes simply sits around relaxing in his home with little energy. These symptoms are all signs that resemble a depressive episode. Referring back to “A Study in Pink,” Holmes yells at everyone in the room around him to be silent while he is thinking about and putting together information related to solving the case. In that scene, Holmes demonstrates irritability and he is easily agitated (Moffat 2010). Often, when a case was not going in Holmes’s favor, sleep becomes optional, which is another symptom of Bipolar Disorder (“Warning Signs and Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder”). In *CBS’s Elementary* episode “While You Were Sleeping,” Holmes struggles to solve a murder case involving a coma patient. His strong desire to solve the case results in Holmes staying up all night thinking about finding a solution (Doherty 2012). Holmes is also portrayed as having a drug addiction in the pilot episode of *Elementary*. Watson is there to help Holmes re-enter everyday life after he is released from rehab for his addiction (Doherty 2012). Individuals

who suffer from Bipolar Disorder often abuse drugs or alcohol; in this case, Holmes abuses cocaine.

One could argue that Holmes does not suffer from Bipolar Disorder because people with Bipolar Disorder often lose interest in the activities they normally enjoy: but this is not the case for Holmes (“Warning Signs and Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder”). For Holmes, solving cases is what interests him. When Holmes is experiencing a depressive episode, he does not lose interest in solving the case: he actually focuses on it more until he is successful. Holmes does not lose interest in the activities he is interested in or consider suicide like some Bipolar Disorder victims do.

Savant Syndrome is also a possible answer for Sherlock Holmes’s unique thought processes and actions. According to Darold A. Treffert, “Savant Syndrome is a rare but spectacular condition in which persons with developmental disabilities, including but not limited to autism [...] have some spectacular ‘islands of genius’ that stand in jarring juxtaposition to overall limitations” (564). Treffert also explains that “it affects males four to six times more frequently than females” (565). Individuals with Savant Syndrome typically have exceptional memories in specific topics like mathematics, dates, music, art, or pseudo-verbal skills (Bókkon 68). Along with these skills, savants are able to recall memories in great detail far better than the average individual.

A major symptom of Savant Syndrome is to experience absolute pitch or synesthesia. Absolute pitch is when a person can identify a specific note pitch just by hearing the note. Synesthesia takes place when stimulation causes a reaction in a different part of the body. Savant Syndrome is more commonly found in those who also have a neurological disorder on the Autism Spectrum than in any other neurological group and among average people (68). Individuals who have Savant Syndrome are oftentimes extremely successful.

Holmes expressed multiple symptoms of the Savant Syndrome. He plausibly could have had other neurological disorders such as Asperger’s Syndrome or Bipolar Disorder as well. Savant Syndrome is often paired with other neurological disorders (Bókkon 69). People who experience Savant Syndrome are typically successful in their careers. Holmes was successful in his career as a detective. People turn to Holmes when they cannot solve a difficult case, and he solves each case with immense success. In “A Scandal in Bohemia,” Holmes searches for and finds letters and a picture that the king of Bohemia has been attempting to find for quite some time. Holmes finds them quickly. His success can be credited

to his gift of remembering dates and many other important facts that others do not recall. He remembers important dates from history or simply from the events he heard or encountered.

Many could argue that Holmes should not be diagnosed with Savant Syndrome. Those with Savant Syndrome are gifted in the categories of remembering dates, art, mathematics, music, or pseudo-verbal skills (Bókkon 68). Holmes is gifted in remembering dates, but he is not gifted in the other categories. Many could argue that since Holmes is not gifted in the other categories he is not an individual with Savant Syndrome. However, he is able to practice these abilities successfully, but not any better than the average person. He is simply able to tell when those skills should be used to solve his cases. Also, there is no proof that Holmes experienced synesthesia or absolute pitch.

After researching Asperger's Syndrome, Bipolar Disorder, and Savant Syndrome, I have come to the conclusion that Holmes' personality embodies parts of each neurological disorder. Beginning with Asperger's Syndrome, I think Holmes suffers from Asperger's Syndrome because he embodies almost all of the symptoms that go along with the neurological disorder. He is socially awkward and speaks in an irregular manner ("What is Autism"). Holmes also pays close attention to detail by "thinking in pictures." By thinking in pictures, he remembers things through the "video tapes" in his imagination (Grandin 14). Others could argue that Holmes does not demonstrate the desire to develop close relationships with others since he is only close to John Watson; however, I think otherwise. The fact that Holmes desires to be close with Watson and depends on him shows that he does indeed need to be close with others ("Asperger's Syndrome – Symptoms"). The quantity of relationships is not large, but I do not consider numbers necessary. Also, Asperger's Syndrome can be hereditary and this could be the case with Holmes's brother, Mycroft, who is described as demonstrating the symptoms of Asperger's Syndrome. Holmes admits their minds worked similarly (Altschuler 2238).

Along with Asperger's Syndrome, Holmes plausibly suffers from Bipolar Disorder. I think Holmes's case is minor, resulting in more commonly manic episodes than depressive ones. During the manic episodes, Holmes becomes excited, speaks abnormally quickly, and makes ill-advised decisions. One ill-advised decision Holmes made is in the *Sherlock* episode "A Study in Pink" was when he steals a pink suitcase from the crime scene. This was extremely wrong to do (Moffat 2010). Holmes is also easily irritated during episodes when he is deep

in thought about a case. During depressive episodes, people experience sadness and loss of energy (“Warning Signs and Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder”). Holmes does not experience a loss of energy, but he does experience sadness. His depressive episodes are triggered by a lack of success in a case. These episodes also cause Holmes to refuse to sleep, but he does not lose interest in his cases. He actually become more interested in solving the problem which is the opposite of the Bipolar Disorder Symptom. Another difference is that he does not consider suicide. One symptom he does show is drug abuse of cocaine (“Warning Signs and Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder”). I believe Holmes has a minor case of Bipolar Disorder with more manic than depressive episodes.

I believe that Holmes has a minimal case of Savant Syndrome. He does not have an exceptional memory in mathematics, music, art, or pseudo-verbal skills. But, he does have the gift of exceptional memory for remembering dates. Some may argue that since Holmes only has a gift in one category, he does not have Savant Syndrome. Individuals with Savant Syndrome are typically very successful, and so is Holmes. He is able to solve cases nobody else can, making him very valuable. Darold A. Treffert states, “Skills are usually singly skills, but multiple skills can occur as well” (564). Therefore, only having a gift in a single category, such as remembering dates, still counts towards having Savant Syndrome.

Holmes is unique compared to an average human, but he is not a “high-functioning sociopath.” Holmes most likely suffers from Asperger’s Syndrome, a minor case of Bipolar Disorder, and a hint of Savant Syndrome. Asperger’s Syndrome causes Holmes to think in pictures and desire a close companionship with Dr. Watson. Correspondingly, his brother Mycroft plausibly has Asperger’s thus supporting the premise that the condition could be hereditary. Bipolar Disorder results in Holmes’s manic and depressive episodes that encompass his extreme emotions and actions.

Finally, Holmes suffers slightly from Savant Syndrome which affords him the gift of remembering dates better than the majority of the population. The symptoms Holmes demonstrates can be seen in the Sherlock Holmes literary works written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes movies, and more recent television episodes. These neurological disorders make Sherlock Holmes the unique successful man he was and always will be.

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