



A Study in Sherlock: Our Fascination with Pathological Narcissism and the Narcissistic Personality

Barbara Romain

Department of Psychology

Touro College and University System

Abstract

This paper argues that it is Sherlock Holmes' characterization as a Narcissistic Personality which is largely responsible for his immense popularity. It maintains that Watson serves two functions: One function is that of being a constant source of narcissistic supply and the other is to mitigate and counteract what would otherwise be the negative effect of Holmes' narcissistic qualities. The paper uses close readings of the text to establish Holmes meets the criteria for a Narcissistic Personality. It also considers how Conan Doyle, based on the era in which he grew up and his own experiences of attending boarding school, knew to give such an accurate portrayal of pathological narcissism.

Keywords: close readings, Kernberg, grandiosity, uniqueness, admiration, narcissistic supply

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Much has been written on the interface between psychoanalysis and literature (e.g., Freud, 1907; Abella, 2016, Camden, 2009). This paper argues that it is Sherlock Holmes' characterization as a Narcissistic Personality which is largely responsible for his immense popularity: Yet, his narcissistic personality structure creates a duality: On the one hand, we are attracted by his narcissism which makes him the colorful and charismatic character that he is; on the other hand, we are put off by his narcissistic qualities but less so than we might ordinarily be, if not for Watson. Watson's main function is to establish Holmes' superiority and impressive achievements so that Holmes does not have to make use of an excess of self-promotion. Hence Watson serves to mitigate and counteract what would otherwise be the negative effect of Holmes' narcissistic qualities. This paper considers why narcissists are popular, and then establishes that, in fact, Holmes possesses a narcissistic character structure.

Scholars have explained Sherlock Holmes' remarkable popularity both at the time the stories appeared and even to this day in a number of ways, including Conan Doyle's writing style (Dirda, 2011) the detective story genre (Ginzburg, 1980; Holquist, 1971; Huhn, 1987) the use of clues (Jann, 1990) and to the fascination with crime and the field of forensic science (Harrington, 2007). Yet each of these explanations cannot account for Sherlock Holmes' astonishing appeal and popularity.

Only one scholar (Simmons, 2002) considers Conan Doyle and narcissism but she is not concerned with establishing Sherlock Holmes' personality structure. Instead, her work has a completely different focus: Simmons' thesis is that Conan Doyle's early childhood problems

resulted in his writing about a near-magical superiority which characterized British imperialism in the nineteenth century. She maintains there was a curse attached to British imperialism, the curse being destruction of British home life and that foreign contamination attacking the purity of England is apparent in the Sherlock Holmes stories. The current paper, on the other hand, argues that Sherlock Holmes' has a Narcissistic Personality, which in conjunction with Watson's role, are the primary factors responsible for his tremendous appeal. We use the method of close reading of the text to support this argument.

Why Narcissists are so popular

'Narcissistic' is a term that has been both widely used, overused, and misused. It was even overused when Kernberg (1975) published his seminal work *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*. There he states, "'Narcissistic' is a descriptive term that has been both abused and overused" (p. 16). Kernberg goes on to describe the Narcissistic Personality as follows:

These patients present an unusual degree of self-reference in their interactions with other people, a great need to be loved and admired by others, a curious apparent contradiction between a very inflated concept of themselves and an inordinate need for tribute from others. Their emotional life is shallow. They experience little empathy for the feelings of others, they obtain very little enjoyment from life other than from the tributes they receive from others or from their own grandiose fantasies, and they feel restless and bored when external glitter wears off and no new sources feed their self-regard. (p. 17)

This sounds remarkably descriptive of Holmes. Kernberg says somewhat later: "The main characteristics of these narcissistic personalities are grandiosity, extreme self-centeredness, and a remarkable absence of interest in and empathy for others in spite of the fact that they are so very eager to obtain admiration and approval from other people... (p. 228)

Building on the work of D.W. Winnicott, who stressed the importance of good-enough mothering, Kohut (1977) emphasized the mirroring and idealizing functions of the self-object. He ascribed the etiology of the narcissistic personality to the mother's chronic failure to respond empathically to these mirroring and idealizing needs. This chronic failure undermined the healthy development of the child's self. We aren't privy to the details of Holmes' early upbringing to understand his adult behavior. However, we can use the diagnostic criteria of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-V)*. The criteria in the *DSM-V* for Narcissistic Personality Disorder are taken almost verbatim from Kernberg (1975).

Some popular writers and journalists (e.g., Chamorro-Premuzic, 2014) argue that narcissist anti-heroes are very charismatic because they are masterful at crafting people's impressions. They are also shameless in their self-promotion and their main objective is receiving personal credit or glory. As one observer (Burns, 2016) noted, "Narcissists can be very charismatic. They're all smoke and mirrors and it's hard not to be dazzled by their reflection as they bathe you in egotistical, self-absorbed light."

Does Sherlock meet the diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder?

The *DSM-V* defines Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) as comprising a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, a constant need for admiration, and a lack of empathy. Five of the following criteria must be present for someone to be a narcissist: (1) Grandiosity with expectations of superior treatment from others; (2) Fixation on fantasies of power, success, intelligence, attractiveness, etc.; (3) A belief that he or she is special and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people or institutions; (4) A need for excessive admiration; (5) A sense of entitlement (e.g., automatic compliance with his or

her expectations); (6) Interpersonally exploitive behavior; (7) A lack of empathy; (8) Intense jealousy or belief that others are envious of him; (9) Pompous and arrogant demeanor. We do a textual analysis using close readings to determine whether Holmes possesses these narcissistic traits.

Evidence for Criterion #1: Grandiosity

In *A Study in Scarlet* (Doyle, 2003), Watson says:

“I’ve found it! I’ve found it,” he [Holmes] shouted to my companion, running towards us with a test-tube in his hand. “I have found a re-agent which is precipitated by haemoglobin, and by nothing else.” Had he discovered gold mine, greater delight could not have shone upon his features....

“...Criminal cases are continually hinging upon that one point. A man is suspected of a crime months perhaps after it has been committed. His linen or clothes are examined and brownish stains are discovered upon them. Are they blood stains, or mud stains, or rust stains, or fruit stains, or what are they? That is a question which has puzzled many an expert, and why? Because there was no reliable test. Now we have the Sherlock Holmes test, and there will longer be any difficulty.” (pp. 7-8)

Holmes’ discovery of a test for hemoglobin is designed to give testament to his impressive and superior intellect. Hence, the grandiosity. Holmes was reputedly instrumental in the growth of the forensic sciences. Some of the chemical analyses, such as the one above for hemoglobin, came into existence only after he wrote about them in his stories. However, in true narcissistic form, Holmes names the test after himself to satisfy his need for admiration and glory (Criterion #4).

In another story, *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle* (Doyle, 2003), Holmes says “It is my business to know what other people don't know” (p. 391). The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) gives one definition of “know” as “to have expertise or skill in” after Anglo-Norman and Middle French *conoistre en*, to be skilled in (a subject). This behavior of claiming expertise is a

hallmark of the narcissist's grandiosity. In fact, it is common for the narcissist's grandiosity to take the form of wanting to be omnipotent and omniscient (Kernberg, 1975, p. 229). Similarly, in *The Sign of Four* (2003), Holmes starts by saying,

"....He is now translating my small works into French."

"Your works?"

"Oh, didn't you know?" he cried, laughing. "Yes, I have been guilty of several monographs. They are all upon technical subjects. Here, for example is one 'Upon the Distinction between the Ashes of the Various Tobaccos.' In it I enumerate a hundred and forty forms of cigar, cigarette and pipe tobacco..."

"You have an extraordinary genius for minutiae," I remarked.

"...Here is my monograph upon the retracing of footsteps, with some remarks upon the uses plaster of Paris as a preserver of impresses. Here, too is a curious little work on the influence of a trade upon the form of the hand..." (p. 126)

When Holmes refers to his works as "small works," it is only because of the English predilection for understatement. Holmes is telling us he is an expert in these areas of study, an instance of his grandiosity. "Curious," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, may mean "excellent" or "exercising ingenuity," or "occult." The first two definitions support the idea of the grandiose, of an impressive superiority. On the other hand, the definition of curious as "occult" supports the idea that Holmes has magical, supernatural powers and is unique in this way. This is consistent with Watson's subsequent remark of admiration, saying he has "extraordinary genius": That his genius is "extraordinary" puts the emphasis on its unique aspect (considered more extensively below). Holmes then goes on to relate his expertise in other areas.

For example, In *The Cardboard Box* (Doyle, 2012), Holmes tells Watson:

As a medical man you are aware, Watson, that there is no part of the human body that varies so much as the human ear. Each ear is as a rule quite distinctive and differs from all other ones. In last year's *Anthropological Journal* you will find two short monographs from my pen upon the subject. I had, therefore, examined her ears in the box with the eyes of expert, and had carefully noted their anatomical peculiarities. Imagine my surprise then, when, on looking at Miss Cushing, I perceived that her ear corresponded exactly with the female ear which I had just inspected. The matter was entirely beyond coincidence. There was the same shortening of the pinna, the same broad curve of the upper lobe.... In all essentials it was the same ear. Of course, I at once saw the enormous importance of the observation. It

was evident that the victim was a blood relation, and probably a very close one...” (pp.768-769)

Holmes maintains he is an authority with superior knowledge of the human ear lobe. Here we have the grandiosity. He also informs us of the “enormous importance of the observation.” Again, grandiosity. It is noteworthy that the part of the ear Holmes is talking about is the “Pinna.” The etymology of pinna is that it is a borrowing from Latin. The etymons are Latin *pinna*, *penna*, specifically uses of classical Latin *pinna* feather, wing, fin, raised part of a battlement, perhaps originally a regional variant of *penna* feather. Earlier in the passage, he tells us that the monographs are from “my pen.” The etymons of “pen” are French *penne*; Latin *penna*, < Anglo-Norman and Old French, Middle French *penne*, *pene* writing tool, long wing-feather of a bird, French *penne* long feather of the wing or tail of a bird, and its etymon classical Latin *penna* feather, (plural) flight feathers. Since the etymology is the same for both “pinna” and “pen”, perhaps Holmes is telling us he is equating the subject matter with his writings: His writings are equal to what there is to know about the subject of ear lobes, another manifestation of grandiosity.

Evidence for Criteria #3: Uniqueness

In *The Sign of Four* (Doyle, 2003), Holmes states “...I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental excitation. That is why I have chosen my own particular profession, or rather created it for I am *the only one in the world.*”(italics mine, p. 124)

“Routine” means “of an ordinary or undistinguished type.” But Holmes hates the routine, the ordinary. And, in this text, he informs us quite plainly of his uniqueness: He is the “only one in the world.” Can anyone be more unique than that?

The same phrasing is repeated in *A Study in Scarlet* (Doyle, 2003), “Well I have a trade of my own. I suppose I am *the only one in the world*. I’m a consulting detective, if you can understand what that is.” (italics mine, p. 17).

Often a narcissist will claim he is unique by virtue of the unique experiences he has had, the people he has met, or the travels he has done.

“Yes, the ally!” repeated Holmes pensively. “There are features of interest about this ally. He lifts the case from the regions of the commonplace. I fancy that this ally breaks fresh ground in the annals of crime in this country—though parallel cases suggest themselves from India and, if my memory serves me, from Senegambia.” (*The Sign of Four*, p. 159)

True narcissist that he is, and in fulfillment of Criterion #3, Holmes feels he should associate with other unique people like the ally mentioned here, who “lifts the case from the regions of the commonplace.” Also, the mention of exotic places, like Senegambia, adds to the perception of Holmes’ uniqueness.

Consider the quote in *The Red-Headed League* (Doyle, 2003), *omne ignotum pro magnifico* (source: *Tacitus: Agricola*, Book 1, 30). The etymology of “ignotum” is late Latin, literally, “the unknown.” The OED translates it as “obscure.” So the phrase translates as “everything unknown/obscure appears magnificent” or equivalently, that every obscure thing [is taken] as grand. This is actually the narcissist’s formula for success: Appear to be unique so that you can’t be known, and then you will be perceived as grand.

As further evidence of uniqueness, in *A Study in Scarlet* (Doyle, 2003), Holmes tells Watson: “You know a conjurer gets no credit when once he has explained his trick; and if I show you too much of my method of working, you will come to the conclusion that I am a very ordinary individual after all.” (p. 33) The OED defines “when once” as “when ever.” But why does Conan Doyle use both “when” and “once”? It would have been sufficient to say “when he has explained” or “once he has explained.” Isn’t the use of the two words together, “when

once,” redundant? The etymology of “once” is originally < *ene adv.* + *-s suffix*; subsequently remodeled after the genitive of *one, pron.* And, since “one” may be defined as “only one,” perhaps what Conan Doyle is telling us is that Holmes should be the only one who can explain things; he should be the only one who possesses the knowledge which makes him grand.

To further preclude us from considering him ordinary, Holmes associates himself and his abilities with the supernatural when he uses the word “conjurer” (magician, wizard), reinforcing an idea that he is so unique that his powers border on the supernatural. According to the OED, the meaning of “trick” in “black folk-magic or voodoo is a spell cast on a person; an object used to ‘conjure’ a person or put him under a spell.” Tellingly, Conan Doyle uses the imagery of a magician casting a spell because Holmes has as his goal putting us under a spell by emphasizing his uniqueness and impressive powers. As a narcissist, he is very invested in mesmerizing us and managing our impression of him.

We also find Doyle associating Holmes with witchcraft and magic elsewhere. For example, Doyle tells us that Holmes’ conclusions are so accurate that one might think they were arrived at through witchcraft, conjuring up for us the image of Holmes as akin to a wizard. For example, in *A Scandal in Bohemia* (Doyle, 2003), Watson comments, “My dear Holmes,” said I, “this is too much. You would certainly have been burned if you lived a few centuries ago” (pp. 240-241). First, we have here Watson’s admiration of Holmes which glamorizes him in the readers’ eyes. Secondly Watson is telling us Holmes’ powers of deduction are so remarkable, so unique and out-of-the-ordinary, that they can be mistaken for witchcraft and sorcery. Actually, the magic he is doing is to have us under his spell, convinced of his impressive superiority. Third, Watson provides the constant source of narcissistic supply that the narcissist craves.

Further evidence of Holmes' uniqueness is to be found in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Doyle, 1986), when Dr. Mortimer comments to Holmes: "A cast of your skull, sir until the original is available, would be an ornament to any anthropological museum" (p. 15). This drives home the point that Holmes is so unique that Dr. Mortimer wants to put his skull, or at least a cast of it, in a museum. Why be unique only during Life, when one can also be unique during Death? In talking to Holmes about placing his skull in a museum, Mortimer is holding out the possibility of posthumous celebrity, which might be quite attractive to a narcissist.

Another aspect of Holmes' uniqueness is his unique lifestyle of a gentleman of leisure. This impression is consolidated by the depiction of a life of privilege and aristocratic languor. In *The Adventure of the Engineer's Thumb* (Doyle, 2012),

Sherlock Homes was, as I expected, lounging about his sitting-room in his dressing-gown, reading the agony column of *The Times*, and smoking his before-breakfast pipe, which was composed of all the plugs and dottles left from his smokes of the day before, all carefully dried and collected on the mantelpiece.... When it [breakfast] was concluded he settled out new acquaintance upon the sofa, place a pillow beneath his head, and laid a glass of brandy and water within his reach." (pp. 426-427)

The agony column of *The Times* consisted of personal advertisements that had an air of mystery about them.¹ So we have a picture of an aristocratic-like Holmes lounging around with a glass of brandy after breakfast, reading advertisements cloaked in secrecy, each a unique and eccentric situation in its own right. This image of this lifestyle is that it is both grand and unique for who, but an aristocrat, could afford to be lounging around with a glass of brandy after breakfast? So we have an image of aristocratic uniqueness bound up with the eccentricity (uniqueness) of the agony columns.

Interestingly, the etymology of dottle is "dote." Perhaps Conan Doyle is saying that when Holmes doesn't have someone to dote on him, he smokes instead, and the 'dottles' of the smoking take the place of the admiring doting, which he craves. 'Plug', according to the OED,

can have the meaning of “An incompetent or undistinguished person.” It is also, of course, a “piece of solid material...used to fill a gap or cavity.” The gap is in his soul. Perhaps Conan Doyle is telling us that when Holmes feels incompetent or undistinguished because of faulty early personality development, i.e., faulty or inadequate internalization of early object relations, the emptiness can be filled either with admiration or with substance use (here nicotine).

Because he has so much leisure time afforded by his unique profession, one can understand Holmes’ comment in *The Red-Headed League* (Doyle, 2003) that “It [his deductive reasoning] saved me from ennui,” he answered, yawning. “Alas! I already feel it closing in upon me. My life is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence. These little problems help me do so.” (p. 287)

“Ennui” is from the French *ennui*, Old French *enui* < Latin *in odio*: *Annoy* and *ennoy* are older adoptions of the same French word. “Ennui” is mental weariness and dissatisfaction produced by want of occupation. Since he has so much leisure time, he in fact is wanting in terms of an occupation. The etymology of “commonplace” is that it is a “rendering of Latin *locus communis* = Greek *κοινὸς τόπος*, in Aristotle simply *τόπος*, explained by Cicero (*Inv.* ii. xiv. § 47 et seq.) as a general theme or argument applicable to many particular cases.” Holmes is saying that anything that can be applied to many cases, to many people, he is not interested in: He desires to be unique.

The ennui which Holmes refers to is actually quite common among narcissists. Kernberg notes all narcissistic personalities have a feeling of emptiness and chronic boredom. This has to do with their underlying personality structure. It is also for this reason that they go into brief depressions or sometimes even severe mood swings. This description is consistent with what we know about Holmes. In *The Red-Headed League*, for example, we are told “The swing of his

nature took him from extreme languor to devouring energy” (p. 278). Doyle even uses the words “swing of his nature” to indicate these mood swings.

Evidence for Criterion #4: The Need for Admiration

In *The Red-Headed League*, Watson says, “‘You reasoned it out beautifully,’ I exclaimed in unfeigned admiration. ‘It is so long a chain and every link rings true’” (p. 287). Conan Doyle writes “unfeigned” followed by “true.” But unfeigned also means true. So it’s “true” and “true.” Perhaps we should say to Watson, “doth protest too much, me thinks.” Likely, this repetition indicates Conan Doyle’s concern that Watson’s function to supply narcissistic admiration is perhaps too transparent.

Watson, in *The Sign of Four*, tells us that François le Villard, a notable French detective has nothing but praise for Holmes.

He [Holmes] tossed over, as he spoke, a crumpled sheet of foreign notepaper. I glanced my eyes down it, catching a profusion of notes of admiration, with stray *magnifiques*, *coup-de-maitres* and *tours-de-force*, all testifying to the ardent admiration of the Frenchman. “He speaks as a pupil to his master,” said I. “Oh, he rates my assistance too highly,” said Sherlock Holmes lightly.

The reader is informed Watson is not alone in his admiration of Holmes. A notable French detective admires him highly, as well. We, the reader, are encouraged to imitate this behavior and likewise admire Holmes. Conan Doyle has created Watson as Holmes’ ever-present admirer. *Coup-de-maitres* is “master strokes,” *magnifiques* is magnificent, and *tour de force* translates as a feat of skill. A master is someone with control and authority, the position Holmes likes to find himself in. With all this outpouring of admiration, he can afford the false modesty of saying his assistance is too highly rated.

Closely intertwined with the narcissist’s need for admiration is his need to be the center of attention. In *The Valley of Fear* (Doyle, 2012), Holmes says “Watson insists that I am the

dramatist in real life. Some touch of the artist wells up within me, and calls insistently for a well-staged performance.” (p. 694)

The etymology of “dramatist” is < Greek *δρᾶμα, δραματ-* *drama* n. + *-ist* suffix.

Compare French *dramatise*. The OED gives “melodrama” as one definition of “drama.” So Sherlock is the melodramatist, who uses overly exaggerated language or behavior. Not only does he write the melodrama, he stars in it, as well. ”Well staged performance” refers to the fact that Holmes, like all narcissists, is always ‘on stage’, conscious of self-promotion and others’ impressions. It is also akin to the expression “drama queen,” someone who “thrives on being the centre of attention.” But “performance” can also be defined as “a pretense or a sham”: The narcissist really feels empty inside and his performance is just to impress others; it is all just a sham.

Evidence for a trilogy of narcissistic traits: Grandiosity, Uniqueness, and the Need for Admiration

Watson, referring to Holmes, tells us

My friend was an enthusiastic musician, being himself not only a very capable performer but a composer of no ordinary merit. All the afternoon he sat in the stalls wrapped in the most perfect happiness, gently waving his long, thin fingers in time to the music, while his smiling face and his languid, dreamy eyes were as unlike those of Holmes the sleuth-hound, Holmes the relentless, keen-witted, ready-handed criminal agent, as it was possible to conceive. In his singular character the dual nature alternately asserted itself, and his extreme exactness and astuteness represented, as I have often thought, the reaction against the poetic and contemplative mood which occasionally predominated in him...his brilliant reasoning power would rise to the level of intuition ... (*The Red-Headed League*, p. 278).

Being a “composer of no ordinary merit” means he is unique. Watson speaks of his “singular character,” another reference to Holmes’ uniqueness. He has “brilliant reasoning power,” describing his impressive intellect: It is definitely grand but not pretentiously so, we are led to believe. So Watson mitigates the grandiosity and converts it to “grandness” because his is supposedly an objective voice in reality. This serves to preclude any feelings of dislike we

would have for Holmes had we thought it was merely grandiosity on his part, and not really based on true impressive achievements. Also, Watson's admiration as he speaks of the two aspects of Holmes' personality glamorizes Holmes to the reader.

A similar situation occurs in *The Sign of Four* (Doyle, 2003) when Watson states, "His [Holmes'] great powers, his masterly manner, and the experience which I had had of his many extraordinary qualities..." (p. 123). In one sentence, Watson manages to give us confirmation of three of the criteria for narcissism: "Great powers" and "Masterly manner" speak to grandiosity but spoken supposedly by an objective observer, a man of intellect himself, a doctor. "Extraordinary qualities" speaks to the narcissist being special and unique, and the entire statement is one expressing admiration, fulfilling the narcissist's deep need for admiration.

Evidence for Criterion #7: Lack of Empathy

One critic (La Paz, 2012) comments that Holmes and Watson "exhibit caring when they sympathize and/or empathize with the victim(s) of the crime, showing that they feel for the hardships of others" (pp.82-83). But this isn't necessarily accurate and there is no textual evidence for this statement: Holmes may be solving crimes for other reasons; for example he may be doing it for self-aggrandizement (which would be consistent with his characterization as a narcissist) rather than out of empathy.

In fact, the comment is clearly contradicted by the words of Conan Doyle himself. Conan Doyle was interviewed in 1892 by Raymond Blathwayt (cited in Lellenberg, Stashower, & Foley, 2007, p. 244). Blathwayt reported the writer told him, "So I got the idea for Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock is utterly inhuman, no heart, but with a beautifully logical intellect." According to the OED, "inhuman" means "destitute of natural kindness or pity; brutal, unfeeling, cruel." These are certainly not the qualities of someone with empathy. To make certain there is

no mistaking what he says, Conan Doyle adds “no heart.” According to the OED, “heartless” means “Devoid of feeling; displaying a complete lack of compassion or consideration; callous, unkind, cruel.” This definition is certainly a good description of a lack of empathy, and consistent with the argument of this paper that Holmes is devoid of empathy.

As a textual illustration, Doyle tells us in *A Scandal in Bohemia* (Doyle, 2003),

.....It was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler. All emotions, and this one particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise but admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen, but as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position. He never spoke of the softer passions save with a gibe and a sneer.” (p. 239)

Abhorrent” means “strongly antipathetic or unsympathetic; full of, or characterized by, loathing or hatred (of something).” He is antipathetic towards love, and he is “characterized” by a hatred of love. That’s a very strong statement. In fact, as a lover, we are told he would be in a “false position.” According to the OED, this phrase derives from the French *fausse position*, “a position which compels a person to act or appear in a manner inconsistent with his real character or aims.” So Doyle is telling us that Holmes, by virtue of his “real character,” his psychological character structure, is not one who can really love. It is known that narcissists are incapable of unconditional love. Hence, more evidence for narcissism.

The etymology of “gibe” is that it is a shortened form of gibbet, whose etymology is from the Old French *gibet* which is gallows, gibbet, in early use, staff or cudgel, diminutive of *gibe* staff, club. So we have the imagery of Holmes hanging love on a gallows-type structure or beating it with a staff. This is a violent image not only of someone who doesn’t love but who is violently beating love up. We might note that even though we have a string of negative images (cold, abhorrent, gibe, sneer), Conan Doyle still manages to associate Holmes with admiration by his phrasing “admirably balanced mind.”

Evidence for Criterion #9: Pompousness

Watson remarks about Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet*, “This fellow may be very clever,” I said to myself, “but he is certainly very conceited.” Watson’s function is to voice what we are thinking and he proceeds to put Holmes to a test in order to take “the conceit out of him” (pp. 19-20). Watson questions the retired marine in the story and Holmes passes the test with flying colors. He explains to the reader how this incident increased his confidence in Holmes’ power of analysis, thereby encouraging us, the readers, to feel likewise.

One aspect of Holmes’ pompousness is that he readily quotes Flaubert and Goethe, in French and German. Holmes’ lack of humility is legendary and is even evident in the famous quote/pun “Though he might be more humble, there’s no police like Holmes.”

A Narcissistic Extravaganza: Evidence for Entitlement, Grandiosity, Admiration and Pompousness (Criteria 1, 4, 5, and 9)

In *The Sign of Four*, Watson states,

...I confess, too, that I was irritated by the egotism which seemed to demand that every line of my pamphlet should be devoted to his own special doings. More than once during the years that I had lived with him in Baker Street I had observed that a small vanity underlay my companion’s quiet and didactic manner.” (p. 125)

When Watson talks of “the egotism which seemed to demand that every line of my pamphlet should be devoted to his own special doings,” that is equivalent to saying that Holmes had a sense of entitlement about what Watson says in his pamphlet. This meets Criterion #5 for narcissistic personality disorder. The OED defines “egotism” as “the vice of thinking too much of oneself; self-conceit, boastfulness.” “Thinking too much of oneself” is grandiosity. So the

word “egotism” combines two of the criteria of narcissistic personality disorder -- that of grandiosity (Criterion #1) and that of arrogance (Criterion #9).

The term “vanity” according to the OED is “self-conceit and desire for admiration.” These are two of the criteria for narcissism: Arrogance and a need for admiration. So, all in all this paragraph is telling us Holmes meets four of the criteria required for a diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder: A sense of entitlement, grandiosity, arrogance and the need for admiration.

But what about the passage Dirda (2011) refers to as “among the moments of highest drama in the entire cannon,” when Watson is shot in “The Three Garridebs” and Holmes exclaims:

“You’re not hurt, Watson! For God’s sake, say that you are not hurt!”

It was worth a wound- it was worth many wounds—to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask. The clear, hard eyes were dimmed for a moment, and the firm lips were shaking. For the one and only time I caught a glimpse of a great heart as well as of a great brain. All my years of humble but single-minded service culminated in that moment of revelation.

But let us consider for a moment. Even though narcissists have no empathy, they still have the capacity for loyalty and they “can have loyalty to a few followers” (Kernberg, 2012a). Watson certainly qualifies. In fact there are repeated references to his friendship with Holmes throughout the story before the shooting occurs. For example, on the first page of the story, Watson says of himself that he is in the “position of friend and confidant.” And, shortly before the shooting Holmes comments endearingly, “I should know my Watson by now.” Moreover, this brief episode of humanity just highlights Holmes’ habitual lack of humanity. We all know personality is hard to change and being older makes it harder, if anything. So, to attribute to Holmes a temporary lapse out of his inhumanity is unrealistic. It is equally unrealistic to say his personality changed.

How Did Conan Doyle Know to Paint Such an Accurate Picture of Pathological Narcissism?

There are other details of Holmes' life that are consistent with a picture of Narcissistic Personality Disorder. For example, the chronic depression that narcissists experience also often leads to drug use and dependency in their search for pleasure (Kernberg, 2012b). The comorbidity for substance abuse (such as cocaine) and Narcissistic Personality Disorder is roughly 24-50% (Ronningstam, 1999). We know from *A Scandal in Bohemia* and *The Sign of Four* that Holmes uses cocaine and regularly injects himself with a seven per cent solution.

How, may we ask, did Conan Doyle know to paint such an accurate portrait of pathological narcissism? This question parallels what Freud wrote in his 1912 postscript to the second edition of *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's "Gradiva"* (1907), "It [psychoanalytic research] also demands to know the material of impressions and memories from which the author has built the work, and the methods and processes by which he has converted this material into a work of art" [1907, p. 94]. Similarly, we ask here, how did Conan Doyle, based on his childhood experiences and memory know to draw for us such an accurate picture of pathological narcissism?

Does Simmons (2002) offer any insight on this question? She does not say Conan Doyle himself had a narcissistic personality; rather, she says, he inherited a sense of loss from his father (an impecunious alcoholic who ended up in a mental asylum), and grandiose fantasies from his mother, who transmitted to him the belief that he was more refined than his impoverished home life would lead one to believe. Further, we can surmise it is unlikely Conan Doyle, himself, had

a narcissistic personality given the excellent relationship he had with his mother as evidenced by his letters to her (Lellenberg *et al.*, 2007).

From their correspondence, his love for her is apparent and it is a well-known she was his close confidante all his life (Lellenberg *et al.*, 2007, p. 4). As noted earlier, narcissists typically have been either physically or emotionally abused as children. Working backwards, we can infer his relationship with her would not have been as loving had he been emotionally or physically abused as a child and had a narcissistic personality as a result.

Simmons suggests many middle- and upper-class British children of the Victorian period were raised by an ever-changing stream of servants who tended mainly to the children's external needs rather than their internal mirroring and idealizing needs. Moreover, the fact that caretakers were likely to change could only adversely affect the child's capacity for trust and could only serve to undermine any attachment relationship which was forming or which had formed. She also notes that to make matters worse, both parents and servants in the Victorian period subscribed to the Puritan idea that children were by nature evil. The natural outcome of such a belief was to use corporal punishment for discipline. She also notes that many children from the age of six onwards were sent to boarding school where they were, in effect, brought up by other older children. These older ones often bullied the younger ones. As Simmons notes,

...such a system of child rearing would be ripe for the creation of narcissistic disturbance children were denigrated and brutalized by older boys, driving the normal, grandiose fantasies of childhood into repression, and thwarting the legitimate needs of children to be understood taken seriously, and respected. Such a background also seems perfect for the creation narcissistic rage, as a response to fear of constant attack and destruction. (p. 539)

She states that often the situation was so traumatic that suicide and death were not infrequent results. All three factors, servants as caretakers instead of a loving mother, attendance at boarding school where the older boys denigrated the younger ones, and Puritan notions of

children as evil, would all contribute to the development of narcissistic personalities in British children.

Even though Conan Doyle's family was impoverished, the family usually had one servant (Lellenberg *et al.*, 2007, p. 4). And, whereas the servant may have had some caretaking responsibilities toward him, it would seem Conan Doyle was primarily brought up by his loving mother, based on the closeness of their relationship. However, he did go off to boarding school at age eight (Lellenberg *et al.*, 2007, p. 6), and there would have encountered British children with narcissistic disturbances. He probably also experienced first-hand bullying by older boys at the boarding school, giving him first-hand experience with what it is like to be mistreated psychologically and/or physically. He also had the opportunity to interact daily with and get to know boys with narcissistic disturbances (presumably there would have been quite a substantial number of them) who attended the boarding school, providing him with a repertoire of personality traits upon which to draw.

Perhaps this explains, in some measure, how Conan Doyle knew to equip Sherlock with all the defense mechanisms a narcissist commonly utilizes. Like the narcissist who feels inferior and unconsciously adopts narcissism as a protective mechanism, so too, we know Conan Doyle saw his detective stories as inferior to his historical novels and perhaps felt the need to bolster them in some way. What better way than to cloak Sherlock in uniqueness and extraordinariness, which could only help rouse interest in him. And, what better way than to have Watson, a doctor and so presumably a man of intelligence, constantly admiring Holmes and telling us, the reader, of how impressive Holmes' accomplishments are so that we are influenced to feel the same way? Whereas he seems to be the choir celebrating Holmes' narcissism at times, he serves his function of driving home to the reader the point that Holmes, really and objectively, is quite superior.

Concluding remarks

The current paper argues Holmes has a Narcissistic Personality and meets the criteria for the following five characteristics: Grandiosity, uniqueness, need for admiration, entitlement, and pompousness. It is his personality which has attracted audiences throughout the years. It is also proposed that Watson's dual function role of both serving as a source of narcissistic supply and also of proclaiming Holmes' impressive superiority to readers. Watson's role in admiring Holmes, serves to negate and mitigate what might otherwise be a reader's negative reaction to Holmes' narcissism. The combination of all these factors has contributed to Sherlock Holmes' tremendous appeal and to the success he has enjoyed over the years.

1 Alice Clay edited a volume of such advertisements and notes they were "interesting to an observer of human existence and human eccentricities" because they were "veiled in an air of mystery with a view of blinding the general public" 1881, p. v.

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