On Miller, Cumberbatch, Downey Jr and Cavill

I've always been a fan of Sherlock Holmes, and I'm lucky enough to live in an era where I've been inundated with new interpretations of the old interpretive genius. It's a fascinating thing, really, to see how different creative teams and actors have approached the same iconic character, each bringing something unique to the table—or, at the very least, something distinct enough to be worth talking about.

And trust me, I’m not deliberately writing this to have unpopular opinions on every single entry, even if it might seem that way from time to time. It's just that when you dive deep into a character as multifaceted as Sherlock Holmes, you're bound to develop strong preferences, some of which might not align with popular sentiment.

Over the last couple of decades, four actors, to my knowledge, have donned the deerstalker—or, in some cases, its modern equivalent—and brought Sherlock Holmes to life on screen.

Robert Downey Jr.

Robert Downey Jr.'s interpretation of Sherlock Holmes was intriguing, charismatic, and, in many ways, a quintessential product of mid-2000s Hollywood. His British accent, while perhaps not perfect, was certainly serviceable, allowing the American star to slip into the role without too much distraction. But it wasn't just the accent; his approach to the character was fresh, mixing a roguish charm with the keen intellect we expect from Holmes. The action sequences, filled with slow-motion deductions and hand-to-hand combat, were certainly a new flavor, offering a Holmes who could think and brawl with equal aplomb.

Neither of these movies really broke the mold, and they didn’t need to. They were the first of the modern interpretations, setting the stage for what was to come. Think of it this way: can you name the second group of men who landed on the moon? Downey Jr.'s Holmes may not have been revolutionary, but it was solid and undeniably entertaining.

Benedict Cumberbatch

Benedict Cumberbatch’s portrayal is often heralded as the definitive modern take on Sherlock Holmes, and it’s easy to see why. His version is sharp, witty, and drenched in the kind of intellectual arrogance that makes Holmes both infuriating and fascinating. The BBC series "Sherlock" took bold risks, updating the Victorian detective to contemporary London, where he texts rather than telegrams and navigates the complexities of modern-day crime with the same relentless drive as his 19th-century counterpart.

But while I can appreciate the series' clever writing and Cumberbatch's intense performance, there's something about his interpretation that feels exaggerated, almost cartoonish. It's as if the character's eccentricities were dialed up to eleven, making him less of a nuanced individual and more of a caricature. The methodical madness of Holmes is ever-present, but in this version, it sometimes tips into melodrama. Perhaps it's the nature of the show itself—long episodes with dense plots crammed into short seasons—that necessitates this approach. Still, despite the widespread acclaim, I find myself placing Cumberbatch's Holmes at the bottom of my personal ranking.

Henry Cavill

Henry Cavill's Sherlock Holmes, featured in the "Enola Holmes" films, offers a more subdued and side-lined interpretation, given that he plays second fiddle to his younger sister, Enola. Cavill's Holmes is still the brilliant detective we know and love, but here, he's also a warm, protective brother—an angle not often explored in other adaptations. His screen time is limited, which means there isn't as much room for deep character exploration, but what we do see is a Holmes who is more approachable, more human in his interactions.

The movie itself is light-hearted, aimed more at a younger audience, and Cavill's performance fits that tone perfectly. There's a sense of fun in his portrayal, and while it doesn't push the boundaries of what Sherlock Holmes can be, it also doesn't need to. In the context of the film, Cavill's Holmes is just right, providing enough of the character's signature wit and intelligence without overshadowing the titular protagonist. It's an enjoyable performance, though perhaps not a particularly memorable one.

Jonny Lee Miller

Jonny Lee Miller's Sherlock Holmes, featured in the TV series "Elementary," is, without a doubt, my favorite of the modern interpretations. His version is deeply human, grounded in a way that the others aren't. Set in New York City, Miller's Holmes grapples with drug addiction, past traumas, and the complexities of modern life, making him more relatable and, frankly, more compelling than his counterparts. The show's episodic format allows for extensive character development, and over six seasons (plus a shorter seventh one), we see Holmes not just as a detective, but as a man struggling with very real, very personal demons.

But it's not just Miller's performance that stands out; it's the entire ensemble. Lucy Liu's Joan Watson is a fully realized character in her own right, a partner and equal to Holmes rather than a mere sidekick. The police, too, are portrayed with depth, contributing meaningfully to the cases rather than serving as comic relief. "Elementary" presents a more realistic vision of what a consulting detective might look like in the 21st century, tackling relevant issues while still delivering the intellectual puzzles we associate with Sherlock Holmes.

Miller's Holmes is flawed, vulnerable, and part of a broader narrative tapestry. He's not the infallible genius, but rather a man who is brilliant and broken, a piece of a larger puzzle rather than the whole picture. And for me, that makes all the difference.

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