

Barney Fife

by Phillip W. Weiss

Barney Fife is one of the most irritating characters in the history of television. He is emotionally labile, prone to hysterics, judgemental, intellectually rigid, bossy, pushy, a stickler for rules, obnoxious, and incompetent. He mistakes rote knowledge for wisdom. Other people treat him as an oddball. He constantly makes mistakes and never learns from his mistakes. He is nervous, jumpy, and emotionally jumbled. No one respects him. Sheriff Andy Taylor tolerates Fife, but even Taylor cannot totally reign in Fife's impulsivity. Fife lacks insight, does not equate his misakes with lack of intelligence and in a crisis will become hysterical and make matters worse. Each episode of the show adds to the chronicle of Barney Fife's life. He has a girlfriend to whom Fife seems attached but he demonstrates no deep feelings for her. Fife is played by Don Knotts who captures the essential qualities of the character. Knott's portrayal of Fife ranks as one of the great acting jobs. Knotts brings a consistency to the character that transcends individual episodes. Indeed, Knotts dominates the show. He controls every scene. Taylor becomes a straightman to Fife's antics. Fife inspires not empathy but scorn. Knotts succeeds in making Fife exceedingly unlikeable. That is done on purpose to highlight the contrast between Fife and Taylor who is the show's principle character and embodies those characteristics that attract an audience in contrast to Fife who repels people away.

Barney Fife can be compared to the vain and pushy Captain Wally Binghamton, but with one difference. Whereas Binghamton realizes that in dealing with McHale he is way over his head, Fife possesses no such insight. He is incapable of introspection, lacks any self-awareness of his limitations and tries to conceal a limited intelligence through bullying and bluster. There is nothing humorous about Fife. He is a target of ridicule not because of his behavior but because of his attitude. If left unsupervised,

Fife can inflict serious damage on the town. The show does not explain how Fife became deputy sheriff thus there is no evidence that Fife ever demonstrated an aptitude for his job, which is police work. So Fife as deputy sheriff makes no sense. Since Fife is unreliable, Taylor is essentially alone. Taylor's main job is to babysit Fife who, if left unmanaged, would pose the greatest and most immediate threat to public safety. Fife's intellectual inflexibility combined with his inflated sense of importance makes him a prime candidate for committing an act of police brutality. Fife would not just pull over somebody for a traffic infraction, he would use the encounter to lecture and humiliate the driver thus offending the driver and escalating a traffic stop into a confrontation. And later on, after a complaint had been filed and the matter adjudicated, Fife, feeling indignant, would ask what he did wrong. Fife would not be annoyed but sincerely perplexed. Finally Andy would explain what Fife did wrong and then in the next episode Fife would make the same mistake again confirming and reinforcing Fife as a dolt.