

Science and literature: from resistance to acceptance (based on the bleak house)

[People](#), [Charles Dickens](#)



Introduction

Obsession is something that everyone goes through at some point but destroys those who take it to the extreme. Richard Carstone is an example of how obsession can consume an individual.

Richard's Obsession and Negative Reactions Towards Scientific Progress

In Bleak House, Richard is an orphan who comes into contact with the Jarndyce case. The Jarndyce case is the major plot point that goes on throughout the entire novel and affects every character. The Chancery Court System, the court that houses the Jarndyce case, deals with noncriminal cases, inheritance issues, and wills, and is notorious for having long, drawn-out cases that have no definitive end. Because of this, many become consumed and obsessed with the cases and devote their lives to something with no return. The case has an especially large effect on Richard. Richard is consumed by the Jarndyce case because he hopes to gain a large amount of revenue from the inheritance money being distributed by the case. This causes him to obsess overworking and trying to resolve the case and causes him to return to it repeatedly. Richard's obsession with the Jarndyce case and resistance to new opportunities parallels negative reactions Victorians had towards scientific progress and teaches twenty-first-century readers to be open-minded and accepting.

Science at the time Bleak House was published was developing rapidly, and the industrial revolution was in full swing. These changes to society at times were met with adversary. The church played a major part in society during

the Victorian era, so science had to agree with the religious ideas people had. Most of the scientific literature that was published early in the nineteenth century was approved by the church because they included ideas such as nature being god's creation. But as more literature was being published, the less attached to the church scientific ideas were becoming. Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was a major scientific literature piece that people had issues with. Some saw it as radical because how could a developed species like humans evolve from something so primitive. People wanted science to align with their own beliefs about how the world is and were unwilling to let go of what they believed. Also, Galton's theory of Eugenics, which was heavily influenced by Darwin, stated that humans can manipulate and predict certain traits through selective breeding. This was opposed by many because it meant God was not responsible for giving human-specific traits that make us different from other species.

Reverting to One's Beliefs

At the start of the novel, Richard is a promising young man who has been given an opportunity as John Jarndyce's ward. Richard works on the case for a while with his cousin Ada, and Esther. Because the Jarndyce case is going nowhere, Richard is persuaded to pursue a new occupation that is stable and will allow him to support himself. He decides, almost at random, to go into medicine as Mr. Badger's apprentice, but his mind is still fixated on the case. Richard doesn't last long working in medicine and comes back to the Jarndyce case because he believes this will be his big break. He tries to reason with Ada by explaining how "the longer it goes on, dear cousin, the

nearer it must be to a settlement one way or another” (Dickens 209).

Richard convinces himself that the case has to come to a close soon and refuses to believe the signs that are telling him otherwise. Similarly, people in Victorian England, especially members of the church, had their ideas about the natural world and when a new scientific idea went against it, they would reject the idea and return to their original beliefs.

This tendency Richard has to revert to his beliefs continues and gets worse when he decides to apprentice himself into Kenge’s office again to become a lawyer. After Richard explains to Esther and Ada that he wants to return to practicing law, Esther “ was not by any means so sure of that; and I saw how his hankering after vague things yet to come of those long-deferred hopes, cast a shade on Ada’s face” (Dickens 249). In Kenge’s office, he constantly pores over documents about the Jarndyce case day and night. This becomes a problem and Esther starts to be concerned about his blind ambition and can see his obsession and Ada’s worries increase. In the nineteenth century when people were first exposed to Galton’s theory of eugenics they disagreed and rejected his idea that traits can be biologically manipulated because it meant God did not implement qualities. People who were resistant to Galton’s theory had a similar tendency as Richard to only see things from their predetermined viewpoint, resulting in their inability to change.

Resistance

Richard and Ada get engaged, but when Richard goes through another career change by enlisting into the army, Jarndyce asks them to undo the

engagement until they are older. When Richard returns, he goes straight back to the case, however, he becomes suspicious of Jarndyce and his motives, so he decides to work elsewhere. As science became more radical and less attached to the church, the more resistant clergymen became to these new thoughts and reason. Richard goes through resistance to change occupation and leaving the Jarndyce case behind, similar to how the church was resistant to accept Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin theorized that animals, including humans, adapt and survive through natural selection. This was a radical thought that was not appreciated at first because people believed they were special and an elevated species. Clergymen especially resisted the belief that their origins were not divine and that they come from a primitive species.

Letting Go of Previous Beliefs

Richard spends all of his time on the case and becomes extremely ill. The Jarndyce case finally ends because all of the money has been spent in court costs. When Richard learns about the case ending he says he must "begin the world" (Dickens 746) but dies moments after. Richard finally realizes that he needs to start his life, but his obsession with the case caused him to waste his entire life. This relates to how some scientific ideas were not appreciated by the public until they let go of their previous beliefs to have a more open mind.

Today, in the 21st Century

On the other hand, twenty-first-century science and literature work more cohesively and have a less biased audience. In society today, most new

scientific thoughts or ideas that are shared with the public are received by open-minded people who are less influenced by personal biases to alter their opinions. This allows for a united relationship between science and literature, which was not as present in the nineteenth century. Now people want to obtain as much knowledge and information as possible so that they can learn new ideas and have multiple different points of view. For example, global warming is discussed continuously by people all over the world with varying opinions on the issues it causes and how to deal with these issues. However, instead of only listening to and believing ideas that align with their personal beliefs, people want to understand every viewpoint to find the best possible solution to the problems. Similarly, in literature when there is a new idea that is presented, people are more likely to be interested and want to learn more about how it can affect their lives. When self-driving cars were first introduced people were skeptical about the safety and practicality of it. But many kept an open mind allowing them to see the benefits and capabilities the new technology offers to them. This allows the idea to develop and progress at a much faster rate than if people resisted. It also increases the opportunity for projects to be seriously considered, whereas before, in the nineteenth century, many new thoughts and ideas were shut down before they were tried.

In addition to science and literature being more close-knit, science and literature has become more accessible. New technology has allowed the distribution of new thoughts and ideas to become easy. People can access science through the internet allowing them to learn whatever they might be

interested in or curious about. More accessibility allows for more science learned by the public, increasing knowledge about new ideas and thoughts. An increase in knowledge brings opinions and criticism with it. Many people become critical to the ideas that combat their own, but in many ways, this is positive for the relationship between science and literature. With different opinions and criticism, more nuanced and well put together conclusions are made because they are influenced by not only their own beliefs but the beliefs of other people who have slightly different ideas. This allows scientists to build off of those ideas to improve their own and keep progress going forward.

Conclusion

Obsession often brings resistance with it. In Richard's case, he was so obsessed with the Jarndyce case he resisted finding a job to support himself and his family. For people loyal to the church during the Victorian age, it was their obsession with their ideas about science that led resistance to new scientific thought. Both have proven how obsession can blind an individual or a whole population to what is important in their lives. Richard is unable to progress through his life, and constantly working on the case leads him to an early death, while the church disabled themselves from appreciating science that was years before its time and ultimately has become widely accepted. This reveals how readers of the twenty-first century can learn from the nineteenth century. People now should be grateful for the amount of access they have to new information to learn. Instead of rejecting ideas that they

disagree with, people need to keep an open mind and acknowledge new thoughts to help progress science.