

Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision: Carroll's Use of Mathematics and Literature to Critique Victorian Britain

[Home](#) [About](#) [FAQ](#) [My Account](#) [Contact](#)

Browse

[Authors](#)
[Academic Units](#)
[Disciplines](#)
[Dissertations and Theses](#)

Search

Enter search terms:

[Advanced Search](#)

[Notify me via email or RSS](#)



Author Resources

[Open Access at Syracuse](#)

[FAQ](#)

[Contribute Material](#)

[Suggest a New Collection](#)

SelectedWorks

[Browse by Author](#)

[Browse by Expertise](#)

[Login to SelectedWorks](#)

Links

[Renée Crown University Honors Program](#)

[< Previous](#) [Next >](#)

[Home](#) > [Honors Program](#) > [Honors Program Capstone Projects](#) > [SU Honors Capstone Projects](#) > 704

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM CAPSTONE PROJECTS

“Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision”: Carroll's Use of Mathematics and Literature to Critique Victorian Britain.

[Diana Schneider](#)

Document Type

Honors Capstone Project

Date of Submission

Spring 5-1-2010

Capstone Advisor

Professor Patricia Roylance

Honors Reader

Professor Claudia Klaver

Capstone Major

English

Capstone College

Arts and Science

Audio/Visual Component

no

Capstone Prize Winner

no

Won Capstone Funding

no

Honors Categories

Humanities

Subject Categories

English Language and Literature | Other English Language and Literature

Abstract

This thesis examines Lewis Carroll's writing through the lens of mathematics, arguing that Victorian mathematical theory and pedagogy are crucial contexts for understanding his literary works. Carroll is generally regarded as an author who specialized in works of literary nonsense such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Little attention is paid to his career as a mathematician at Oxford, yet mathematics occupied a considerable amount of his time and consumed his thoughts, as evidenced by his diaries and letters. This thesis therefore addresses a gap in Carroll scholarship and bridges two academic disciplines rarely brought together. Chapter One argues that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* should be considered as products of the mathematical and literary climates in which they were written. At the time, mathematics was overstepping the bounds of reality, including nonsensical elements like imaginary and negative numbers. Similarly, literature was expanding to include non-mimetic genres, like nonsense and fantasy. Carroll was privy to both of these developments, and in the *Alice* books, he simultaneously references the new mathematical concepts and uses the new literary techniques, indicating that he saw them as analogous phenomena. Alice's negative reaction to these new elements serves as a representation of the Victorian backlash against the shifts in mathematics and literature away from the real. Chapter Two examines a lesser-known series of mathematical riddles that Carroll published in *The Monthly Packet* magazine. In these riddles, Carroll mocks traditional power hierarchies, specifically those operating in the educational system and class structure of the Victorian period. Carroll judges each of his characters based on their mathematical ability rather than their

[Download](#)

INCLUDED IN

[Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

SHARE



education or social status, and thus fantasizes a meritocratic system that could replace old notions of power. This meritocracy is echoed in his treatment of readers who submitted solutions for the riddles, who were systematically sorted within Carroll's "classroom" based upon the correctness of their submissions. Carroll therefore undoes traditional hierarchies while still retaining his position at the top, the arbiter of everyone's mathematical merit.

Recommended Citation

Schneider, Diana, "'Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision': Carroll's Use of Mathematics and Literature to Critique Victorian Britain." (2010). *Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects*. 704.
https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/704

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivative Works 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

To view the content in your browser, please [download Adobe Reader](#) or, alternately, you may [Download](#) the file to your hard drive.

NOTE: The latest versions of Adobe Reader do not support viewing PDF files within Firefox on Mac OS and if you are using a modern (Intel) Mac, there is no official plugin for viewing PDF files within the browser window.