

The Clennams' Secret Information: Gamifying the Secrecy Plot in *Little Dorrit*

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Every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it!

– *A Tale of Two Cities*, Book 1, Chapter 3

Dickens's approach to secrecy in *Little Dorrit* is not limited to the act of Mrs Clennam concealing specific information; rather, the novel demonstrates how this act results in a complicated web of recognised and unrecognised connections reflecting the networked nature of Victorian society. The concept of networked plot is not newly defined in Dickens. Franco Moretti demonstrates in his book, *The Atlas of the Victorian Novel*¹, that unrelated geographical spaces in *Our Mutual Friend*, *Bleak House*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Little Dorrit* are linked as the plots unfold. However, the Dickensian networked plot acquires a remarkably distinct feature when approaching the effect of secrets on structuring communication among the characters.

Dickens's craft of creating 'hidden human connections that bind a society together'² is not just an artistic function, but more of a structural reading of the information-based interaction among people. A similar kind of analysis of Dickens's fiction is suggested by Regina Helena Ürias Cabriera in *Literal and Metaphorical Frames in Dickens's Little Dorrit*; Cabriera suggests the importance of secrecy to the shape of *Little Dorrit*'s 'game structure'³, by which the fictional experiences within the text can be analysed. Few other studies have investigated this feature of the novel; one mention is made by Millstein in reference to *Bleak House*'s Inspector Bucket, a character whose career is all about discovering hidden information, making him able to discover the 'form' in which secrets are plotted in the narrative⁴. Following Jay Clayton who describes Dickens as a 'predecessor of gamers who imagine the inner spaces of the communications system'⁵, we propose that applying a similar lens to *Little Dorrit*, requires moving beyond the

¹ Moretti, F. (1998). *Atlas of the European novel, 1800-1900*. Verso.

² Millstein, D. T. (2016). *Victorian secrecy* (1st ed.). Routledge. p. 59.

³ Cabreira, R. H. (1996). *Literal and metaphorical frames in Dickens's Little Dorrit* (dissertation). p. 175.

⁴ Millstein, D. T. (2016). *Victorian secrecy* (1st ed.). Routledge. p. 68.

⁵ Clayton, Jay (2003). *Charles Dickens in cyberspace the afterlife of the Nineteenth century in postmodern culture*. Oxford University Press.

surface level of the novel (the recognised connections) and diving into its deep structure within which the unrecognised connections exist.

Dickens establishes the main plot in *Little Dorrit* on Mr Gilbert's secret will which discloses information about Arthur's biological mother, and the fortune he left to 'the youngest daughter' that the mother's patron, Amy Dorrit's uncle, 'might have at fifty, or, if he had none, brother's youngest daughter' (p. 650). This secret information forms the unrecognised connections in the novel: Arthur and his real mother; the Clennams and Amy in particular. However, the recognised connection in the text is formed by Arthur himself, linking his father's last words to his mother's unusual kindness towards Amy, he comes to believe that his parents had somehow hurt the Dorrits and suspects a mysterious connection between the two families, which is vague and uncertain.

The game structure of the main plot is formed as a result of the unrecognised connections mentioned above. They stimulate a contest in the interaction⁶ as the secret withholder, Mrs Clennam, plans to win her desired goal of preventing Arthur from recognising the connection stated in the letter. While on the other side, Arthur attempts to discover his family's connection to the Dorrits which he thinks to be the only secret his mother hides. Nevertheless, Dickens complicates the action because he utilizes a third group of characters and includes them in this game-like interaction as Jeremiah Flintwinch betrays Mrs Clennam and transmits the private information included in the letter she ordered him to burn to his twin brother, Ephraim, later killed by Rigaud, the man who blackmails Mrs Clennam near the end of the novel. As he indicates in the planning notes of *Little Dorrit*⁷ 'try this uncertainty and this not-putting of them together as a new means of interest. Indicate and carry through this intention', Dickens planned to put the characters on separate structural levels. This opens up further possibilities for researchers to examine, for example, the minor game structures that underline the sub plots, in addition to the role that the omniscient narrator plays in constructing these game-structures and keeping them undetectable until each plot's climax.

Generally, the game-structure of the main plot consists of three different games. The first game is a game of complete information in which the characters who know the secret (like Mrs Clennam, Mr Clennam, Flintwinch, and later, Rigaud) can use this specific information as a cause upon which they make a specific choice of their own, and an effect through which they influence the others' choices. It is argued that the participants' relation with the secret information is reciprocal. The second game in the structure is the game of incomplete information in which Arthur experiences uncertainty 'about some important parameters of the game situation, such as the payoff functions, the strategies available to Mrs Clennam and the information she has about the game. Accordingly, in a game of incomplete information, a hint is delivered, i.e. information about

⁶ Since analyzing interaction is the main focus of game theory, this paper utilizes it to study the game structure of the secrecy plot in the novel. While previous applications are valuable and fresh in style, they limit literary texts to characters' choices and mainly one game model, i.e., *Games of Incomplete Information* with no focus on how information contributes to structuring interaction in the literary works. The present research introduces the model of *Games of Information Disorders*, which is a chain of information problem games: The Game of Manipulated Information, the Game of Incomplete Information and the Game of Complete Information. Games of complete and incomplete information are originally introduced in standard game theory as separate games, while the game of manipulated information is suggested in this research.

⁷ See the appendix in: *Little Dorrit*, 1979, p. 692.

the secret, which stimulates Arthur to realize that he lacks specific knowledge. If Arthur manages to discover the right source of information to rely on, he can overcome uncertainty in decision making, and hence shift to a game of complete information. The information relation in a game of incomplete information is nonreciprocal due to Arthur's inability to benefit from the hidden information.

However, a crucial question needs to be asked: what if Arthur never realizes that some information has been concealed? Obviously, he would not experience uncertainty, which means that he would base his choices on preferences that lead to outcomes other than those he needs to reach. In this case, information is not only concealed from him, but alternative information is conceptualized as truth, which leads to generating alternative preferences, payoffs, and game rules for Arthur. In other words, instead of having a nonreciprocal relation with hidden information, as in a game of incomplete information, Arthur is entrapped in a false alternative reciprocal information-relation, thus not even realizing the existence of the un-reciprocal information relation in the game of incomplete information. Ultimately, when Mr Gilbert's will is concealed, Arthur's problem does not end with not knowing the information it carries, rather it extends to thinking of/being provided with, false alternatives of it that result in linking him to a different structural level of information-based interaction. Thus, he has become entrapped in an alternative reciprocal relation, while Mrs Clennam and the ones knowing the secret are in the original reciprocal relation. However, the alternative information relation mentioned above represents a *game of manipulated information*, in which Arthur remains until he begins to suspect that Mrs Clennam hides something, or he is directly introduced to some secret information. Before further explanations, we present the figure below, showing the elaborate game structure, to clarify the theory of gamifying the structure in the novel's main plot:

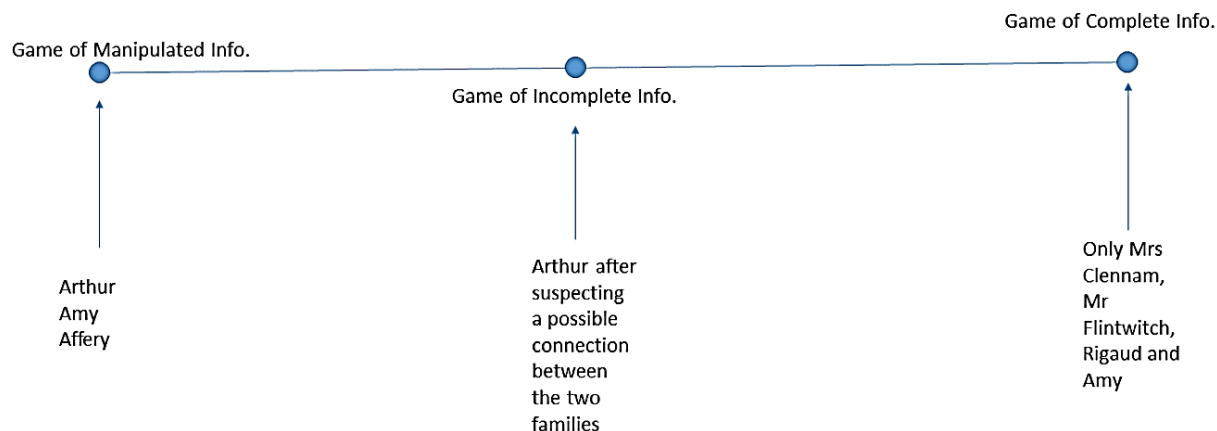


Figure 1

Because the stepmother conceals the information about Arthur's birth and the content of the documents that act as a link between them and Mr Frederick Dorrit, the connection between the two families is unrecognised in the early part of the narrative. Moreover, Mrs Clennam's false presence as the mother, results in exposing Arthur to a deceptive reciprocal information relation that acts as an alternative to the original reciprocal relation with the secret information about his real mother. Hence, he is entrapped in a game of manipulated information. Arthur falsely assumes

that his information is complete, therefore, his strategic decisions tend to seek outcomes unrelated to the one he is seeking, which is knowing the identity of his actual mother. However, it is Mr Clennam's deathbed wish for him to deliver the watch containing an old silk watch-paper with ambiguous embroidered abbreviations 'D.N.F' that sets off Arthur's doubts and motivates him to think that his father might have had 'unhappily wronged' someone (p. 39). Arthur returns to London assuming that Mrs Clennam knows if 'someone may have been grievously deceived, injured, ruined' and that she is the one who can 'set these doubts at rest' and help him 'discover the truth' (p. 40).

Having heard his father's last words before death: 'your mother' said with great anxiety (p. 28), however, Arthur knows nothing of the secret, for he has been given very unclear information about it. At this point, he temporarily moves from a game of manipulated information to a game of incomplete information, in which he is conscious of having a lack of knowledge concerning his family, thus being placed in a non-reciprocal information relation. In this game, Arthur experiences uncertainty about Mrs Clennam's, and his own, choices. Therefore, attempting to overcome uncertainty and moving from a game of incomplete information to one of complete information, Arthur chooses to investigate and seek more information hoping to discover the secret he aims to unlock. Meeting Amy Dorrit at Mrs Clennam's house, Arthur suspects a link between the two families. 'Influenced by his predominant idea, he falls into the habit of discussing with himself the possibility of her being in some way with it' (p. 47). This in itself is true, but also remains information about the secret and not the secret itself. This keeps Arthur stuck in a game of incomplete information, experiencing uncertainty about the exact intention behind Mrs Clennam's strategies; the narrator comments, 'what if his mother had an old reason she well knew for softening to this poor girl!' (p. 73).

'I asked last night,' said Clennam, 'how you had become acquainted with my mother. Did you ever hear her name before she sent for you?'

'No, sir.'

'Do you think your father ever did?'

'No, sir.' (p. 79)

After the above conversation with Amy, Arthur feels the need to research and discover the relation between the families. When his attempt to find information about Amy's father at the Circumlocution Office fails, he becomes hopeless about discovering anything; 'After some days of inquiries and research, Arthur Clennam became convinced that the case of the Father of the Marshalsea was indeed a hopeless one, and sorrowfully resigned the idea of helping him to freedom again' (p. 120). Because Arthur continues to struggle with uncertainty, he remains in a game of incomplete information. Arthur's doubts accumulate even more when Mr Pancks asks, with no prior introduction or further justification, for information concerning the Dorrits from Arthur; 'I am in want of information, sir. "Dorrit". That's the name, sir' (p. 230). He continues to overthink 'whether Mr Pancks's desire to collect information relative to the Dorrit family could have any possible bearing on the misgivings he had imparted to his mother on his return from his long exile' (p. 268). Once Mr Pancks makes the discovery about the inheritance, Arthur asks: 'Does it implicate any one? . . . In any suppression, or wrong dealing with anyone?' (p. 326). However, when Mr Pancks denies it, for it was indeed unrelated to the Clennams, Arthur is relieved: 'Thank God!' (p. 326). By abandoning the suspicion of the connection between the two families, Arthur returns to a game of manipulated information. At this stage he continues to think

of Mrs Clennam as his mother, but he completely excludes any possible connection between his parents and the Dorrits, which makes his entrapment in this game much harder to break, unless he gains access to the papers that his step-mother is concealing. The problematic, and probably the most threatening factor about secrecy in *Little Dorrit* rests on this specific point. The revelation of this information, i.e. Mr Pancks's 'discovery' as Arthur calls it (p. 326), results in Arthur entertaining a false belief that there is no need for more investigations, which in turn, drags him back to a game of manipulated information. Hence he again unconsciously becomes entrapped in the alternative information relation that Mrs Clennam has created by hiding the information about his mother, and he takes for granted that his is a reciprocal relation in a game of complete information.

Although Mrs Clennam orders Mr Flintwinch to burn the will, he instead adds it to the letters that the biological mother sent (and that he withheld from everyone, including Mrs Clennam), puts them in an iron box and gives the box to his twin who is later killed by Rigaud. Since the brother possesses the information contained in the old letters, he becomes an equally active participant in the information-relation concerning the secret, in a game of complete information, which Arthur does not manage to move to. Rigaud thus has the same power of using this information just as Mrs Clennam does. Interestingly, Rigaud demonstrates an impressive performance of analytical evaluation of information as he realizes that his structural position in the game of complete information is not enough to win the outcome he seeks which is selling the iron box; 'This box can never bring, elsewhere, the price it will bring here.' (p. 645). He consequently chooses to threaten Mrs Clennam about Amy in an attempt to force her to pay:

'Miss Dorrit,' answered Rigaud, 'the little niece of Monsieur Frederick, whom I have known across the water, is attached to the prisoner. Miss Dorrit, little niece of Monsieur Frederick, watches at this moment over the prisoner, who is ill. For her I with my own hands left a packet at the prison, on my way here, with a letter of instructions... (p. 655)

Mrs Clennam, nevertheless, manages to prevent Rigaud from distorting the structure she has established for the interaction. She chooses to trust Amy and asks her to help suspend Rigaud from the game of complete information to decrease the chances of Arthur's discovering the truth.

I know you are attached to him, and will make him the first consideration. It is right that he should be the first consideration; I ask that. But, having regarded him, and still finding that you may spare me for the little time I shall remain on earth, will you do it? (p. 659)

It is essential to note here that Mrs Clennam wins at the end due to her highly skillful and strategic control over her choices in the information-based interaction. Even when Rigaud becomes an active participant in the reciprocal information relation within the game of complete information and demands money to keep her secret, she manages to make the decision that leads to the outcome she has been targeting. Mrs Clennam informs Amy of the reason for not granting her the money the uncle of Arthur's father left for her, since it means that Arthur would understand that she is not his real mother; 'Yet Arthur is, of the whole world, the one person from whom I would conceal this, while I am in it' (p. 659). Thereby, Mrs Clennam transmits Amy to a game of complete information, thus promoting her position in the structure of interaction as she becomes an active participant in the reciprocal information relation along with Mrs Clennam.

Without disclosing the precise nature of the documents that had fallen into Rigaud's hands, Little Dorrit had confided the general outline of that story to Mr Meagles, to whom she had

also recounted his fate. The old cautious habits of the scales and scoops showed Mr Meagles the importance of recovering the original papers; wherefore, he wrote back to Little Dorrit, strongly confirming her in the solicitude she expressed on that head, and adding that he would not come over to England ‘without making some attempt to trace them out’ (p. 672).

Amy’s role in keeping the secret extends to seeking the original papers that Rigaud had hidden. She understands that finding them requires collaboration, thus she asks Mr Meagles to assist her to reach out to the person whom Rigaud has given the iron box to. Moreover, she informs him that Rigaud ‘had been known to Miss Wade’ (p. 673). Although questioning Miss Wade about the documents, ends with her insisting that she knows ‘nothing about them’ (p. 675), her attendant, Tattycoram, takes the box to the Meagles, who in turn deliver it to Amy. Interestingly, the novel ends with Amy as the player controlling the direction of the information-based contest and influencing Arthur’s final decision as she asks him to burn the letter without knowing its content: ‘Only this folded paper, if you will put it in the fire with your hands, my fancy will be gratified’ (p. 687). By doing so, she prevents him from moving to a game of complete information. However, the justification behind Amy’s decision represents a strategic choice of the best preference among the available preferences, which leads to the best outcome for Arthur in her opinion. As a result, Amy’s request inverts the connection between information and money that underlies the story of Arthur’s birth.

On the other hand, ending the novel with Arthur not entering a game of complete information, contributes to disclosing the specific function of the networked secrecy plot. Dickens follows his plan of not putting the characters together and ends the novel never putting Mrs Clennam and Arthur together in a game of complete information. Therefore, the end generates predictions about possible future information interaction based on the same secret, especially because Mrs Clennam allows Amy to reveal the information after her death; ‘you will not disclose this to Arthur until I am dead’ (p. 659). This suggests the future possibility of Arthur moving to a game of complete information. Dickens’s utilizing the alternative reciprocal information relation, which the present paper includes within the interaction of a game of manipulated information, demonstrates the dynamics of secrecy plots.

The model suggested in the present article can be utilized to shed light on the way different novelists deal with secrecy to conclude a more holistic analysis of the realist representation of Victorian secrecy. For instance, in comparing Arthur and Pip using the same model, it is apparent that Dickens employs non-identical game-structure of the plots. Pip does not experience uncertainty like Arthur does and the most crucial difference is that Pip discovers the secret while Arthur does not, which means that the game-structure of *Great Expectation*’s main plot consists of a game of manipulated information and a game of complete information. Pip moves to the game of complete information while Arthur cannot, due to Amy’s interference. This can lead to further undiscussed issues concerning the systematic arrangement of the character’s informational/structural positions including the way it reflects the human information behavior, like active and passive information seeking, which is still an unexamined topic on Dickens and the Victorian novel in general.