

# Fragile as Escaping into the Glass World—Analysis of *The Glass Menagerie* from the Perspective of Cognitive Domains

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## Abstract

*The Glass Menagerie* is one of Tennessee Williams' most well-known tragic plays, which is to a large degree the autobiography of the play writer. It's one of Williams' most accepted plays and won recognition both from his own times and the current society. Three key phrases are singled out from the play and analyzed from the encyclopedic perspective of cognitive grammar. The theme of the play and the tragic personalities of the main characters are revealed explicitly during the process of analysis. From the analysis, it can be safely drawn that cognitive grammar is conducive to literature interpretation and can serve as a handy tool in literature criticism.

## Keywords

Cognitive Grammar, Encyclopedic, *The Glass Menagerie*, Gentleman Caller, The Fire-Escape

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## 1. Introduction

Tennessee Williams is one of the successful contemporary American play writers, who has been conferred several New York Critics Circle Awards, Pulitzer Prizes, a National Arts Club gold medal for literature, several honorary degrees, and countless other awards. He left us with some important plays in American theater such as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *The Night of the Iguana*, and *Orpheus Descending* (Bloom, 2007).

*The Glass menagerie*, as his autobiographic tragedy, is one of Williams' most accepted plays and won recognition both from his own times and the current society. "Without a doubt, *The Glass Menagerie* also helped Williams attain his lasting position in the canon of American drama" (Bloom, 2007).

The play was set in St. Luis United States in the 1930s—the Depression period. There are seven scenes and only four main characters: Amanda, Laura, Tom and Jim O'Connor. It is about the tragic story of a three-member family. Because the father—Mr. Wingfield—left home long ago and his picture with big smile is the only thing that reminds the audience of him in the family. Amanda, the mother, being deserted by her husband, lives in the memory when she was young and popular among the gentlemen. Because of her physical disability, Laura the daughter is lost in her own world with glass animals. And Tom the son working in a shoe factory, inherits his father's longing for faraway places. Hungering for the big changes in life and the country, he is caught in an awkward dilemma between supporting the family and leaving home to pursue his dream (Williams, 2000).

The play falls into two parts: the preparation for the gentleman callers and the visit of a gentleman. Though, sometimes Amanda's behavior is out of accord with times and looks absurd, she's a good and responsible mother anyway. Because Laura, the daughter, is crippled physically and consequently mentally, she has great difficulty in communicating with strangers, let alone merging herself into them. Unable to change her daughter no matter how hard she tries, Amanda has to find other ways to guarantee a secure future for her daughter: to find a husband for her. Thus she is obsessed with the idea of inviting a gentleman home, who would fall in love with Laura. She urged her son to invite his colleagues home by promising him that he could leave home as soon as Laura is taken over by a gentleman. But when Tom does bring one home, it winds up disastrously for Laura. Later, Tom finally makes his decision and leaves home, following in his father's footsteps and deserting Amanda and Laura. He's tortured by his conscience though (Williams, 2000). Owing to the auto-biographic nature of the play, strong emotion can be easily caught from word to word.

## 2. The Theoretical Framework

According to Cognitive Grammar, meaning is conceptualization which resides in the combination of conceptual content and conceptual construal. The latter refers to our ability to conceive the same situation in alternate ways. Thus to a degree, meaning is subjective. Based on the conceptual content, different construal will lead to totally different meaning. And language meaning is embodied, built on our interaction with and in the world. And it's through constant encounters with the usage events that language units get entrenched in our mind. It's not something that comes from thin air. The entrenched unit can work as the categorizing unit to sanction the new usage event. Thus meaning is dynamic and encyclopedic, presupposing rich background knowledge (Langacker, 1987, 1999, 2008, 2009; Taylor, 2002). Language is but the tip of a meaning making iceberg (Evans, 2015; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). The expression provides an access to a series of cognitive domains, which refers to the background knowledge concerning the world underlying the expression. Some domains are irreducible, hence basic (the experiential potential such as space, time, color, pitch, temperature and so on), and most being non-basic (simple or complex). The set of cognitive domains of an ex-

pression form a conceptual matrix, ranking in their centrality. The central ones are activated on most occasions, while peripheral ones usually remain dormant. The latter, however, can override the central in special contexts (Langacker, 1987, 1999, 2008, 2009; Taylor, 2002). And there is no lacking in examples. For example, when mentioning the word “banana”, we’ll naturally think of its color, its yellow skin, its shape, its taste, and the fact that it’s growing in the tropical areas, which are all central for a banana to be a banana. Sometimes, however, when we go to the grocery, the price of the banana will come to the fore, which is usually not considered essential to the meaning of banana. And while we speak of “the banana republic”, the economy and politics of the countries concerned will outweigh the central domains mentioned above and serve the central role in understanding the phrase. From the analysis, it’s clear that when two simple structures are put together to form a complex one, its meaning is not the simple addition of the simple structures, there is more to it. Just as the phrase “banana republic” does not simply refer to the country that produce bananas. “Weak economy” and “dishonest or cruel government” is connoted in it, both of which could obtain neither in “banana” nor “public”. To illustrate the idea more clearly, look at the following examples:

- (1) The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.
- (2) She dresses to kill.
- (3) That joke killed me.
- (4) Let’s do something to kill time.
- (5) They killed a bottle of brandy (Evans, 2015).

In all these examples, there is a vestige of the meaning “causing to die” in every usage of the word “kill”. But only (1) holds the original meaning “to cause somebody to die”, but we definitely would not understand the other four sentences in the same way. (2) emphasizes the attractiveness of a lady which would take one’s breath away, (3) stressing fact that joke made me laugh a lot, (4) referring to the time spent and (5) the drink consumed.

From the examples, it’s clear that the meaning of a word is not in any way pre-determined and the context plays a critical role in determining the meaning of a given word, which will help access different cognitive domain or domains. “... this reveals that meaning is not to be an all-or-nothing affair” (Evans, 2015) In addition, the meaning of the expression is to a large degree determined by the context it occurs in, either the subject (as in (3)), or the objects (as in (1), (4), (5)). So it can be inferred that the composed structures which is obtained by combining two or more words is not the simple addition of its components parts. As in the above examples, the meanings of all the phrases with “kill” have something unique which couldn’t just be predicted from the component parts. Such a phenomenon is very common in all languages, instead of being unique to English, as can be shown in the following Chinese examples.

- (6) a. 冬天到了，能穿多少穿多少。  
(Winter has arrived, and we should put on as many clothes as we can.)

b. 夏天到了，能穿多少穿多少。

(Summer has arrived, and we should put on as few clothes as we can.)

(7) 一女孩儿与他男朋友打电话：

(A girls talks through the telephone with her boyfriend:)

a. “一点半仙鹤门地铁站见，如果你到了我没到，你等着。”

(We'll meet at the Xianhemen subway station at half past one. If you arrive and I don't, wait for me.)

b. “一点半仙鹤门地铁站见，如果我到了你没到，你等着。”

(We'll meet at the Xianhemen subway station at half past one. If I arrive and you don't, wait and see.)

For any native Chinese speakers, they can easily differentiate the meanings of the two sentences in (6) and (7), in (6)a, because winter is the time for the action of “putting on clothes”, what's emphasized is 多 (many), while the meaning of other component 少 (a few) contributes little to the composed structure. In (6)b, because summer is the time for the action, it stresses 少 (few), 多 (with the meaning close to “so” in this sentence) being the degree adverb. In 7, the same sentence can be interpreted in two totally different ways, just because the context is different. And for the examples in (7), just by swapping the positions of the pronouns “you” and “I”, the sentence “你等着” takes on totally different meanings: in (7)a, it's a imperative sentence to let her boyfriend wait for her, while in (7)b, it's a threat to warn her boyfriend of the consequence of being late for the date. And no Chinese adult will fail to distinguish the difference in the two sentences.

From the examples, it can be easily seen that the meaning of more elaborate expressions (composed structures in the following part of the article) which is formed by combining the simple expressions (component structures in the following part of the article) is not the simple addition of the latter. The component structures only activate and motivate the composed structures, the meaning of which is heavily influenced by other factors such as context and specific usage events (Langacker, 1987, 1999, 2008, 2009; Taylor, 2002).

The article is designed to make use of the encyclopedic and dynamic nature of meaning to explore some key phrases in the play *The Glass Menagerie* and to analyze the theme and the tragic personality of the characters of the work.

### 3. Analysis from the Perspective of Encyclopedic Semantics

There are many things underlying a word, thus to understand the word properly, it's necessary to have the concerning background knowledge. And to understand the phrase formed by composing two or more words together, the situation would be more complex. Not only do the cognitive domains of the single word need to be considered, the composing path—the way the words are put together—also means a lot. The result is that there are always new meanings springing up from the composed structure which is unique to it and does not derive from any of the component structure. Three key phrases in the play are singled out from the play—*The Glass Menagerie* to be analyzed

from this perspective below.

### 3.1. *The Glass Menagerie*

The most salient and important phrase in the play is the title *The Glass Menagerie*. Mentioning glass, we can think of its function (it's used to make containers, windows, and ornaments, etc.), its nature (it's something transparent, something that's glittering and something that breaks easily), and its making material (it's something that's made of silicon) etc.. As the central domain of the word, we always associate glass with products which are made of glass: the windows, the drinking container, and the beautiful ornaments, you name it. But what never fails to come to people's mind first is its nature: that it's fragile and easily broken and needs delicate care. No matter what kind of glass product it is, the container of which is usually marked "handle with care".

The word "menagerie" invokes to mind the animals kept in cage, the number of which should not be small, otherwise it would not be a menagerie. Thus it follows that the state of confinement and lack of freedom and the relationship between the animals will also be invoked to our mind. Glass menagerie is a composition of the components "glass" and "menagerie", so it inherits the features both from the word "glass" and the word "menagerie". On the one hand the fragile and venerable nature of the ornaments is definitely the legacy of the word "glass". On the other hand, menagerie refers to the collection of things, thus the relationship is hinted in it. Thus in "*The Glass Menagerie*", it's not only the glass ornaments that need good care, but the relationship between the animals wants careful maintenance, otherwise it won't be a menagerie any more.

From the analysis of the title, it can be safely inferred that the relationship between the three members of the family is as fragile as the characters themselves, and that if handled crudely, the relationship among them is as prone to be damaged as they themselves to be hurt. Just as Laura says in Scene Seven "My glass collection takes up a good deal of time. Glass is something you have to take good care of." Thus "a great deal of time" means that lots of attention and energy is called for to maintain the good state of the glass collection. Moreover, one needs to be careful. To the three-member family, life is definitely hard. What's worse, however, is their lack of skills to lubricate the relationship between them, especially that between Amanda and Tom. It seems that they can never communicate peacefully for several sentences before they plunge into quarrel with each other. To Tom's love for literature, Amanda's response is to suppress it in a brutal way. And as the conflict builds up, it's natural for it to break up. Just as described in Scene Three, there's a fierce quarrel between Amanda and Tom, which frightens Laura.

Amanda, Laura and Tom are all fragile in their own ways. Of the three, Amanda looks the strongest and the most energetic who is busy herself supporting the family and looking for the best way to let Laura's life be safely provided for. But behind this seemingly strength lies her strong sense of insecurity, which is reflected in her unremitting effort to seek a secure future for her daughter Laura. She sends Laura to business school to learn typewriting, so that Laura could support herself. Even though she is ea-

ger to find a gentleman for her daughter, she demands that the man not be a drunkard. “Old maids are better off than wives of drunkards!” At the same time she requires her son not be a drunkard “Promise, Son, you’ll—never be a drunkard!” All this is because her husband is a drunkard, who deserted her and the family.

Crippled physically, Laura is self-conscious, shy and has a strong sense of inferiority, retreating into her own world and lacking the ability to communicate with the other, as is concluded by Tom “... lives in a world of her own—a world of—little glass ornaments”. She gives us the impression of being tender and fragile, like the glass animal collected by her. “Glass breaks so easily. No matter how careful you are.” She is the one most easily hurt and the one who has no ability to defend oneself. Even the quarrel between her mother and brother would frighten her. “...there is a tinkle of shattering glass. Laura cries out as if wounded.” Just as the name given by Jim “blue roses” suggests, she is pretty but hard to adapt to this world. “A fragile, unearthly prettiness has come out in Laura: she is like a piece of translucent glass touched by light, given a momentary radiance, not actual, not lasting” (Scene Six). So Jim who is “pretty clumsy with things” is destined to wound her and makes her life more tragic.

And Tom, the man supposed to be tough, is very sensitive. He has great passion for poetry but is confined in a shoe factory in order to support the family. In the factory, because he likes to write poems, not resigned to a life of just being a factory worker, his relationship with the other workers is not satisfying. Just as the glass unicorn can only be integrated into the group by breaking its horn, so John must give up his dream to be merged with the family and the other people. This can be seen from the dialogue in Scene Seven:

JIM: Aw, aw, aw. Is it broken?

LAURA: Now it is just like all the other horses.

JIM: It’s lost its—

LAURA: Horn! It doesn’t matter. Maybe it’s a blessing in disguise.

Misunderstood by his mother and the people around him, he has no other alternatives but to throw himself away to the movie adventures to find comfort. And finally, just as there are always animals hungering for freedom and desiring to return to the wild, so he fled away to pursue his dream.

### 3.2. Gentleman Caller

Now let’s come to what the whole plot revolves around and the play’s initial title: the gentleman caller, which, in the body of the drama, appears 19 times. The word “gentleman” often goes with its counterpart “the lady”, which combines to invoke a leisured class, the class enjoying a privileged status in the hierarchical society. Against such backdrop, the gentleman and the lady are free from the hard labor and possess the physical and cultural fruits of the society. The gentleman often connotes the relatively high moral standards and decent behavior. The word “gentleman” always creates the image of a courteous man who escorts a lady, who opens the door and pulls the seat for a lady... In a word, there are lots of gentlemanlike behaviors. Just as the gentlemen

Amanda recollects she once entertained when she was young: “There was young Champ Laughlin who later became vice-president of the Delta Planters Bank. Hadley Stevenson who was drowned in Moon Lake and left his widow one hundred and fifty thousand in Government bonds...” (Scene One) All of them were rich and enjoyed a relatively care-free life. But remember, gentleman is for a lady, who is culturally cultivated, witty and graceful. Now let’s look at the word “caller”, it has behind it the social etiquette of people’s interaction with one another: to call on one’s house and be entertained, usually for a short time. So the caller is the person who pays a short visit. In our common sense, if a person calls at someone’s house, it’s natural for him/her to have some particular purpose in mind. And this does not necessarily always loom large in our mind. That’s to say it’s not the central cognitive domain. The composed structure “gentleman caller” clearly refers to a gentleman who pays a short visit to some place. Of course, there’s also more to this simple definition. In the play, the purpose is highlighted, which is to pursue the lady in the family. And it’s the purpose of the visit that makes Amanda so eager to have one or even more gentlemen entertained in the family.

For Amanda, she only cares one aspect in “the gentleman caller”: to pursue her daughter and it would be better that the pursuit ends up in marriage. She pins all her hope on a gentleman caller who would fall in love with Laura and take care of her. She wants Laura to be well prepared and in her good condition for a gentleman caller. “Resume your seat, little sister—I want you to stay fresh and pretty—for gentleman callers” (Scene One)! She saved money to let Laura learn typewriting so that her daughter could have a skill to support herself. Unfortunately, Laura got sick and left the school without telling her. After that, Amanda is more desperate and more obsessed with the idea of finding a gentleman for her. “After the fiasco at Rubicam’s Business College, the idea of getting a gentleman caller for Laura began to play a more and more important part in Mother’s calculations” (Scene Two). “Like some archetype of the universal unconscious, the image of the gentleman caller haunted our small apartment” (Scene Three).

But there are some things that she ignores: that the time has changed and the society is undergoing some changes, and that her daughter Laura is not a lady in its proper sense: she is not eloquent, she is not gracious and she is not even healthy both physically and mentally. Above all, the family has serious financial problems, depending on the meager salary earned by Tom in the shoe factory. This can be seen from their terrible living environment and conditions: “This building, which runs parallel to the footlights, is flanked on both sides by dark, narrow alleys which run into murky canyons of tangled clothes-lines, garbage cans, and the sinister lattice-work of neighboring fire-escapes.” From this brief introduction, we can get a glimpse of the financial situation of their family. And from the brief description of the inside of the house “...is the living-room, which also serves as a sleeping-room for Laura, the sofa is unfolding to make her bed”, the financial difficulty of the family is written large in the drama.

What with the financial difficulty of the family and the disability of Laura, the chance is slim for Laura to have a gentleman pursuing her. And just as mentioned above, a

gentleman caller is someone who pays a short visit. Thus the phrase seems to be a bad omen that even one comes, he would not stay long, just as it turns out in Scene Seven “The gentleman caller has made an early departure.” Jim, the supposed savior for Laura has already engaged to another girl and takes an early departure when realizing the purpose of the dinner.

### 3.3. Fire-Escape

Finally let’s come to the phrase “the fire escape”, through which the family go in and go out. With the word “fire”, we may think of its function (cooking food, supplying warmth...), its shape and color (its red flames) and its devouring nature. And with “escape”, we often associate the action of “fleeing” and “running away”. In the composed structure what stands out of “fire” is its devastating nature, its power to destroy anything on its path. It’s interesting to note the composed meaning of the phrase. It’s the route to escape from the fire instead of the route through which the fire escapes, and owing to their background knowledge, people know it immediately. Look at the following examples:

(8) The sardine is dolphin-safe.

(9) The beach is shark-safe (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002).

In (8), it emphasizes the fact that the act of fishing sardine does not hurt the dolphins, that’s to say the dolphins are safe, while in (9), it stresses the fact that there are no sharks in the sea and the beach is safe for people to play there. The same structure (noun + adjective) with one common component yields quite different ways of meaning-making. What best accounts for the phenomenon is our background knowledge: our experience concerning animal protection and our security concern when playing on the beach. So obtaining the meaning of a composed structure, we use a large quantity of our background knowledge about the world our ways of living, our learned knowledge and our experiences.

It’s known that there are fire escapes in the buildings besides the normal entrance to ensure that in the emergency of fire, people could have another path to escape from the fire thus increasing the possibility of survival. In the play, however, the fire escape is the only way out. “The apartment faces an alley and is entered by a fire-escape... The fire-escape is included in the set—that is, the landing of it and steps descending from it.”

The fire-escape is something that helps to escape fire and it’s the only daily access in and out. All the characters in the play take the route. In the drama, for every character there are descriptions of him or her appearing in the fire-escape, especially for Tom (9 times altogether), which is not surprising, considering his eventual flight from the family. The drama begins with Tom’s approaching the fire-escape, “Tom enters dressed as a merchant sailor from alley, stage left, and strolls across the front of the stage to the fire-escape”(Scene One), and ends with Tom’s descending from the fire-escape and leaving home: “I descended the step of this fire-escape for a last time and followed, from then on, in my father’s footsteps, attempting to find in motion what was lost in



space—I travelled around a great deal”(Scene Seven). In fact in the play, for several times, Tom comes to and fro the fire-escape, which seems to symbolize his hesitation in making the choice—to stay home with his dream sleeping or to leave to pursue his passion. And his last departure draws an end to all his previous hesitation. His escaping is in his action, which is physical.

In the drama, Amanda appears in the fire-escape three times: one is direct mentioning: “Amanda appears on the fire-escape steps” (Scene Two). The others are not so direct. She first “comes out side” and said: “A fire-escape landing’s a poor excuse for a porch [She spreads a newspaper on a step and sits down, gracefully and demurely as if she were settling into a swing on a Mississippi veranda.]”. From her action “sits down gracefully and demurely”, the author vividly depicts her attitudes towards her life: to avoid thinking the difficulty of life by indulging herself in the memory of her maiden days when she was carefree and surrounded by many pursuers. In the third scene, she is with Laura on the landing and Amanda wants Laura to make a wish. It seems that unconsciously, Amanda always tries to shun the harsh reality the family is faced with.

And for Laura, there is no direct description of her climbing or walking down the fire-escape, but at least, there are two scenes in the drama, one walking down the fire-escape, one on the landing of it. In Scene Four, when Laura rushes out to buy butter and let out a cry, Amanda peered out anxiously and said “If anyone breaks a leg on those fire-escape steps...” It’s clear that Laura has just walked down the fire-escape. The other is in Scene Five, when Amanda knows that Tom will invite a gentleman, she is filled with hope and calls Laura out to make a wish to the moon, and Laura obeys. From this we can see that Laura’s escaping is in a large part in the mental world: she retreats into her own world mentally which needs not much physical action.

What’s worth mentioning is that Jim—the supposed gentleman caller also gets his share in the fire-escape. He comes with Tom, “Tom and Jim appear on the fire escape steps and climb to landing.” and appears with him in the terrace (the landing of the fire-escape). This is quite spectacular, since the main character Laura’s twice appearances in the fire-escape are both hinted in the play. Such arrangement must mean something. His coming to the fire-escape and staying at the terrace with Tom to try to persuade the latter to take the course of public speech seems to help depict him as a realistic person, facing the reality of the society and trying to figure out the way to adapt to it.

Using the phrase, the author hints what the family members have in common: they are all escaping something. The father left the home and thus shirking the responsibility of supporting the family. Amanda, the mother, always wallows in her past when she was pursued by seventeen gentlemen at one time. Laura buries herself to the glass animals she has collected and lives in her world, unwilling to come out. Tom loses himself in the movies every night to suppress his misery resulting from his failure to do what he desires. And eventually he runs away from the family to pursue his dream for which he traded his responsibility for the family.

#### 4. Conclusion

We always carry with us a large repertoire of different kinds of knowledge which is

constantly upgraded by our new experiences and practices. Whatever comes up, we use the handy tool to make sense of it and categorize it into our existing knowledge system, therefore expanding the system unconsciously. The same is with language. We use our background knowledge to make out the language meaning, to categorize the new with the existing unit in our mind. Thus language meaning is encyclopedic, presupposing rich and diverse cognitive domains, thus dynamic. And in composing the simple structure to form more elaborate one, the building block metaphor fails, which is to the effect that the composed structure is not the simple addition of the component structures. And the meaning of the composed structure has, besides the part inherited from the components, its own unique meaning, which, more often than not, is determined by the cognitive domains of both the component structures and the composed structures.

From this perspective, three representative phrases from the play *The Glass Menagerie* are singled out to analyze the theme of the play: *The Glass Menagerie*, the gentleman caller and the fire escape. From exploring the background knowledge of the three phrases, the respective personalities of the three main characters are illustrated vividly and the tragedy and the theme of the play are shown clearly. It's clear from the analysis, the cognitive grammar can be a useful tool to interpret drama, and hopefully it can be extended into the analysis of the other forms of literature.

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