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## **Analysis of the Short Story "All Hands" by John R. Platt: A Magical Realism Study**

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### **Abstract**

This research aims to examine the short story "All Hands" by John R. Platt through the lens of Wendy B. Faris's magic realism theory. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method, utilizing Faris's theory of magic realism which is dissected using five characteristics: the irreducible element; the phenomenal world; unsettling doubts; merging realms; and the disruption of time, space, and identity. The results of this analysis reveal that "All Hands" utilizes a setting similar to the real world but incorporates elements that blur the line between reality and fiction, notably the protagonist's daily transformation of hands. This transformation defies natural laws since human hands do not change, yet it is accepted as reality by the characters in the story. Each hand possesses distinct characteristics and identities, symbolizing the diverse nature of human traits.

**Keywords:** magic realism, self-identity, reality world, fiction

### **1. Introduction**

Literary works are reflections of human life retold through plot, setting, or emerging characters. Through literature, social criticism and reality are subtly presented through the choice of diction and metaphors. Literature functions as a medium used by authors to narrate the phenomena around them as a means of conveying truths (Budianta et al., 2003). Additionally, literature serves to channel the author's ideas and imaginative power to the readers. This encourages the emergence of literary works in genres of fantasy or elements of unreality.

Authors often employ fantastic, symbolic, and magical elements to convey their ideas and critiques to readers. Such literary works can transport readers beyond the boundaries of logic and explore imaginative worlds that play with ideas, emotions, and knowledge. Stories with irrational plots can be accepted as part of the narrative and considered normal. These types of literary works can be analyzed using the theory of magic realism.

Magic realism is a genre that introduces imaginary dimensions into realistic narratives (Durix, 1998). It brings fantastic and supernatural elements into the plot, which are accepted as normal within the story. Magic realism allows for the exploration of literary works that use metaphors to convey a narrative. Cultural stories and myths within a society can also serve as fundamental elements of a magical realist story (Firdausy and Dwisusilo, 2023). The boundaries between reality and imagination become blurred, leading readers to question the true definition of reality. One literary work that exemplifies the theme of magic realism is the short story "All Hands" by John R. Platt.

The short story "All Hands" by John R. Platt is included in the anthology titled "From the Borderland" (2003), which features tales of horror or the bizarre. "All Hands" narrates the story of the protagonist, Jerry, whose hands

change every morning when he wakes up. In Jerry's world, it is normal for individuals to wake up with different body parts.

## 2. Methods

The method used in this research is descriptive qualitative. Descriptive qualitative research involves the researcher describing the phenomenon or research object in a narrative form (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018). The researcher conducts a hermeneutic reading of the text and then records key parts of the text. The next step is to perform an analysis using Wendy B. Faris's magical realism approach.

Based on Wendy B. Faris (2004), there are 5 characteristics of magic realism, namely: the irreducible element; the phenomenal world; unsettling doubts; merging realms; disruption of time, space, and identity. These characteristics are explained as follows:

2.1 The irreducible element can take the form of sounds, characters, objects, or magical events (Faris in Sari, 2018). The irreducible element is a characteristic in literary works that cannot be explained by natural laws or defies logic and common knowledge.

2.2 The phenomenal world represents a story setting that appears to originate from a different dimension yet coexists with reality, thereby blurring the boundaries between the real world and the magical world (Ulhaq, 2023). Faris (2004) explains that a magical realist story has a realistic plot and setting, with descriptions that draw references from everyday human life. In magic realism, a story is convincingly constructed to make its elements appear as reality.

2.3 Unsettling doubts refer to the sense of hesitation that merges realist and magical elements within the narrative. Narratives in magic realism normalize the presence of miracles, causing readers to question the contradictions present in the text (Setiawan in Sari, 2018). Readers' doubts arise from narratives depicting characters' experiences with both real and fictional elements.

2.4 Merging realms is a condition where norms from the real world and unconventional or supernatural norms are combined (Faris, 2004). In this aspect, the protagonist's world is turned upside down, diverging from natural norms or the laws of nature, indicating that the protagonist inhabits a different world.

2.5 Disruption of Time, Space, and Identity is a facet of magic realism that highlights differences in the concepts of space, time, and identity as perceived by the characters in the narrative. These differences manifest as disturbances that disrupt the structure of realism and cannot be explained by common sense (Komariya, 2022). This aspect reveals that character's experience disruptions or differences in space, time, and identity, indicating that they exist in a different dimension from the readers.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. The Irreducible Element

In this section of the short story "All Hands," the protagonist, Jerry, wakes up with calloused and strong fingers. There is a narrative that he remembers a time when he had the hands of a typist, allowing him to complete his tasks

more quickly at work. Mid-story, there is a narrative where the protagonist does not go to work because he wakes up with the tiny hands of a baby, rendering him unable to work and even making it difficult to call the office to request leave. This situation falls under the irreducible element, the changing hands of the main character is considered a normal phenomenon by the characters in the story. It is also indicated that Bob Brady, Jerry's friend, does not find Jerry's changing hands unusual. This is evidenced by the following quote:

“Around noontime, Bob Brady comes by Jerry’s cubicle. They go to lunch at the local diner. Jerry is surprised to find the hands holding the silverware European style. He’s not used to it. It slows him down while he eats. His food grows cold before he finishes. “Shoud’ve ordered a burger,” Bob jokes. That’s Bob. The office comedian.” (Moteleone and Monteleone (ed), 2003).

“At lunch again with Bob, wearing a black man's hands, he mentions that he feels lucky. It could be worse He knows a guy who knows a guy whose cousin wakes up with different feet every morning. Jerry can't imagine what it must be like to have to buy shoes for every foot size. The gloves are bad enough.

"Yeah, but think of the poor sap who's got your hands," Bob jokes.” (Moteleone and Monteleone (ed), 2003).

Bob does not find Jerry's condition strange and instead makes jokes about Jerry's difficulty eating due to having European-style hands at that time. He even jokes about someone else out there being unfortunate enough to have to take care of the protagonist's hands. As a supporting character, Bob does not comment on the phenomenon of the changing hands because he has accepted it as reality.

### 3.2. The Phenomenal World

The Phenomenal World manifests as the setting in the story "All Hands," where the main character Jerry lives. In this world, everyone works and lives their lives as typical human beings. The thing that distinguishes the characters in the short story "All Hands" from humans in the real world is that every person in the story experiences the phenomenon of body part changes every morning when they wake up, and this phenomenon is accepted by all characters as a reality. These bodily changes often pose challenges for the characters experiencing them, but Jerry does not perceive the changes as a curse or misfortune. Instead, he accepts these changes as normal and even as a blessing, as evidenced by the following quote:

“Jerry reaches up and hits the snooze button with hands that are not his own-White curtains on the bedroom window do little to block out the morning sun. In the yellow glow, he examines the new day's gift.” (Monteleone and Monteleone (ed.), 2003)

Based on the quote, it is evident that after Jerry turns off his alarm, he carefully observes his new hand without any sense of strangeness. He perceives the change in his hand as a gift and accepts it as part of his daily routine, showing no surprise at the physical transformation. The narrative does not explain how or why this phenomenon occurs to Jerry, but he does not question what he experiences.

Jerry's experience represents a phenomenon that references the real world. Jerry and Bob are coworkers in a typical office setting, akin to office workers in the real world. They interact like ordinary humans, such as going out to lunch together. The setting also draws from real-world references, as indicated by the quote discussing Jerry having European-style hands at that time.

“Jerry is surprised to find the hands holding the silverware European style. He’s not used to it. It slow him down while he eats.” (Moteleone and Monteleone (ed), 2003).

The dining style resembling European norms indicates that the story's setting draws references from the real world. The European dining style, often referred to as Continental dining, involves holding the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right hand, with their positions unchanged throughout the meal; whereas in American dining, the fork is transferred to the right hand when preparing to bring food to the mouth (Fox, 2007). The European dining style in the story underscores its basis in real-world references, which are then complemented by elements of fantasy.

### 3.3. Unsettling Doubts

Unsettling doubts is an element in magic realism that signifies feelings of uncertainty arising from the blending of the real world and the fictional world. The narrative in the story raises doubts because it does not adhere to the laws of nature. This is evident in the following quotation:

“One morning, he wakes with a child's hands. Tiny, pink, newborn. He holds them up to the light, and can see the bones through the skin. They lack the strength to turn off the alarm clock, so he wraps the power cord around his ankle and yanks it from the wall socket.” (Moteleone and Monteleone (ed), 2003).

In the quotation, it is noted that the main character wakes up with baby hands. Within the story's universe, individuals with the condition of changing hands every morning receive hands of a random type or akin to a lottery system. They cannot choose what type of hands they will receive the next day, including the main character who on that day received a pair of baby hands. The changes in hands are accepted by the main character as reality.

### 3.4. Merging Realm

Merging realms involves the fusion of realistic elements with magical elements, serving as a sign that the constructed narrative belongs to magic realism. The imaginary and real worlds collide, thereby creating a new reality within the text that can be accepted as factual. This is evident in the following quotation:

“Summer turns to fall, and fall to winter. Hands come and hands go. Jerry buys gloves in bulk, never knowing what size he will need to wear on any given day. Some hands don't mind the cold, but others shiver and twitch no matter how thick the gloves. They obviously come from warmer climates. (Monteleone and Monteleone (ed.), 2003)

In the quotation, the phrase "Summer turns to fall, and fall to winter. Hands come and hands go" indicates that the changing seasons are accompanied by the protagonist's changing hands. Prior to reaching this text, readers are left puzzled by the protagonist waking up with hands that do not belong to them. Readers may speculate that the protagonist is a recipient of a donor for a specific operation. However, upon reading passages such as the one quoted

above, readers are reminded that the reality within the narrative text differs from reality in the real world. This is implicitly shown that the protagonist in the short story undergoes daily hand changes. Readers come to understand that the short story "All Hands" is not set in the real world but rather in a fantasy or parallel world.

### 3.5. Disruption of Time, Space, and Identity

The main character experiences disruption to their identity. Physically and mentally, besides Jerry's own hands, each hand Jerry receives possesses its own character and identity. According to Jerry, every hand he receives carries traits and memories perceived to be connected with the original owner of that hand, as illustrated in the following quotation:

"Still, he remembers the day he wore the hands of a speed typist. He finished early that day and left halfway through the afternoon".

Most of the hands don't have any particular skills. They all look and feel and experience the world around them differently, but for the most part, they do what he needs them to do." (Monteleone and Monteleone (ed.), 2003)

Based on the quote, the main character receives a typist's hand, which enables him to quickly finish his office work that day due to its typing proficiency. Similarly, when the main character receives a tough and calloused hand, it performs well in its daily tasks. The main character does not need to know the original identity of the hand's owner because such information can be inferred by following the hand owner's habits.

The main character also recognizes when his own hand returns to him one day. He can sense that his hand has gained many experiences and has matured, as depicted in the following quotation:

"About a month later, Jerry wakes up without benefit of the alarm clock and knows without even opening his eyes that his hands have returned to him. He throws back the covers and holds them up in front of his face. He smiles like a kid at Christmas, flips on the light and turns the hands over and over in front of him.

The nails need trimming, but other than that, they're in pretty good shape. A bit older, a bit wiser, a little black and blue along the side of one thumb. He has a quick memory of the hand getting slammed in a door." (Monteleone and Monteleone (ed.), 2003)

The main character can feel that the hand he receives that day is his own. He also senses being fully himself, experiencing a profound happiness unlike when he receives other hands. Based on the quote, it is evident that each hand present has its own identity, and the main character experiences identity disruption when he receives a hand that is not his own.

## 4. Discussion

As in the study by Firdausy and Dwisusilo (2023), which describes that narratives using magical realism concepts incorporate mystical and irrational elements. The short story of "All Hands" by John R. Platt is also have mystical and irrational elements. It can be summarized as depicting a world where the characters inhabit a reality different from that of the real world. Although the narrative is set against a backdrop resembling real-life, there are notable

differences accepted by the characters as facts or realities. For instance, the main character Jerry has an anomaly where he receives different hands randomly each day, and his friend Bob perceives this as normal. The changing hands of the main character defy the natural laws of the real world, where human hands do not change daily. This blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction.

In the real world, hands can be interpreted as representations of oneself, such as the phrase "right hand" which metaphorically means "the right person". Hands serve as a symbolic extension of a person. Similarly, in the short story, each hand possesses its own personality that is sensed by the main character. The main character, experiencing changing hands daily, can be interpreted as a person whose identity fluctuates over time. This concept is blurred in the narrative where the main character undergoes hand changes each morning, symbolizing the start of a person's day. Future research could delve deeper into the symbolic significance of body parts and the impact of the character development in this short story.

## **5. Conclusions**

The short story "All Hands" by John R. Platt presents a thought-provoking exploration of identity and reality through the metaphor of changing hands. The main character, Jerry, who receives different hands each day, embodies the fluidity and variability of personal identity. This phenomenon, perceived as normal by the other character, challenges the boundaries between reality and fiction, suggesting a world where the extraordinary is accepted as commonplace. Hands, as symbolic extensions of oneself, underscore the notion that identity is not fixed but rather a fluctuating aspect of human experience. By depicting this surreal narrative, Platt invites readers to reflect on the nature of identity and how it is perceived and experienced in both the fictional and real world.

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