Bridging Intergeneration Relationship between Rothko and Ken Depicted In Logan’s Red  

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**Abstract**  

Intergenerational relationships usually happen in a workforce, between two workers of different generations. The relationship between old workers and young workers usually has barrier called generation gap. It happens because those two workers undergo different problems of life. This kind of relationship becomes the main issue in the relationship between Rothko and Ken in the drama Red. This study discusses the differences of Rothko’s and Ken’s characterizations and their conflicts, as well as the ways those formal elements work together to form the organic unity of the text and support the theme that bridging intergeneration relationship requires tolerance. The theory used in this study is New Criticism. This study found that Rothko and Ken have the same ambition to become famous artist in art world. Their different characterizations lead to conflicts of the drama because of misunderstanding between them. After several attempts to speak their minds in the work place, those two characters began to understand each other to create a harmonious relationship.  

**Keywords**: characterization, intergenerational relationship, new criticism, organic unity, conflict  

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**Introduction**  

Old generation and young generation learn differently in every aspect of life such as education, behavior, and style (art, fashion, movie, music). It happened because they were born from different era so they have different life experiences. It usually happens between parent-children relation and also intergenerational workers relationship. As stated by Bengstson and Achenbum (1993) in Luk’s journal, intergeneration relationships have got attention from scholars in 1960s. Conflict of the generations or “generation gap” becomes barrier for the young and the old people to hold conversation. These conflicts are the result of urbanization, industrializations and family mobility (5). They cannot communicate well because of the lack of understanding between them. Those factors above cause these two generations to have different views upon facing life problems.  

Intergenerational workers conflict is usually caused by errors of attribution and perception. Therefore, the main method to deal is effective communication between old and young workers (Tolbize 13). The two workers need to understand each others because they experienced different life problems. As stated by Zemke et al., (2000) in Tolbize, aggressive communication involved two people to avoid “behind-the back complaining, passive-aggressive behavior and open hostility” and change it by taking advantages of young workers perspective and the wisdom of old workers to create a dynamic workplace (13). These two generations need to have tolerance to suppress anger over their different characters. It is certainly not easy to do for both parties so they need time to tolerate each other. They learn to understand one another to create a harmonious relationship.  

Literary work is not only for entertainment but it also becomes a tool to tell the reader about situation in the specific time. It illustrates the condition in which it was written, so it is worthy to study and try interpreting it (Tyson 136). There are many literary works that show the relationship of two people from two different generations. One of them is drama *Red* by John Logan that becomes the main object of this study. This drama takes place inside an old studio in America in 1950s. This drama is about a famous abstract painter Rothko and his new assistant, Ken. The drama that won the Best Play Tony
Award in 2010 shows a story of the relationship development between Rothko, fifty years old, and Ken, twenty years old, in the workplace.

This article discusses the differences of Rothko’s and Ken’s characterizations and conflicts happened between them and other elements which form the organic unity of the text and support the theme that bridging intergenerational relationship requires tolerance. New criticism theory is used in the research. DiYanni explained that new criticism emphasized on analysis of the formal elements such as plot, character, setting, diction, imagery, and point of view that affects the meaning of a story (1355). The focus of this research are the formal elements namely characterization, conflict and plot of the drama to reveal its meaning.

The method to analyze this article is close reading. According to Griffith, the way to discuss characterization in drama is almost the same as in the novel. However in the drama, the writer should also pay attention to the gap that emerged from each scene. The writer should be able to find the implications of each scene to make it easier to find out the characterization of the characters (64-65). First, the characterization of Rothko and Ken is discussed through narrative and dialogues in the text. The discussion is mainly focused on the different characterization of two conflicting characters. There are four contradictory traits found in both characters. Rothko is introvert and pessimist whereas Ken is extrovert and optimist. Those characterization differences lead them to different ways of thinking to solve problems.

Furthermore, the plot of the drama that is mainly about external conflicts between Rothko and Ken is analyzed. Since the drama is rich in dialogues between two characters, it can be evidences to prove their way to bridge intergenerational relationship at workplace. Griffith stated that the plot of the drama emphasized the conflicts to show on the stage. Through this conflicts viewers are invited to think about the cause-effect processes that happened in the story. The plot can also help to understand the reason of the actions taken by the character (58). There are many events in this drama, but the focus is simply on their debate about art and how they deal with their different opinions to bridge intergenerational worker relationship. The writer will attempt to uncover the mutual understanding of both characters with their different characterization. At the end of the paper, both characters endeavor their different characterizations to create a harmonious relationship.

Analysis

According to Gill, the characterization of characters can be seen from their dialogues in the drama (235). There are two characters in Red drama and they have different characterizations because of their different ways to talk. Gill also explained that the different characterizations between Rothko and Ken can be seen from the length of their sentences, idioms, and figure of speech they use when two characters are talking to each other (239). In addition, gap also becomes an important factor to understand about the characterization of characters. Gaps that appear in drama are off-stage events which give significant effect on the changing of characters’ attitude. Off-stage events also become one of the reasons for conflicts that appear on the stage. Therefore, it has the same important meaning as on-stage events that can be used to analyze characterization of Rothko and Ken. In this drama, Rothko has contrast characterization with Ken so they need to tolerate each other to work in harmonious relationship.

Rothko and Ken’s Characterizations

Rothko is a fifty-year-old famous abstract painter. According to the text, Rothko always wears a shirt and trousers covered with stains of paint and glue. He wears glasses to paint and study the results of his paintings (9). Rothko has a business commission with John Phillip, an engineer, to display his set of murals at the Four Seasons restaurant in Seagram Building. In the text, Rothko always has long dialogues that show his dominance as Ken’s boss. He always orders his new assistant to do all the works like stretching the canvas, stirring pigment color, and cleaning brushes except painting in his studio. Sometimes the old painter teaches the young one whatever he knows about art. Rothko prominent characteristics are being introvert and pessimistic.

Rothko’s introspect characterization is shown through his activities which mostly happened in the studio with the company of classical music of Mozart (17). Throughout the drama, he rarely went out
from the studio except when it was time to come and return from work. Before Ken became his new assistant, the old painter had always worked on his own activities such as cleaning brushes and stirring paint color (9). He also claimed that he did not fit with outdoor activity such as painting in nature because he thought that his paintings would lose their meanings in outdoor places (21). The boss barely went out of the studio because his new assistant bought all his needs such as meals, drinks, and cigarettes. He rarely heard other people's opinions about his paintings because he spent time mostly in his studio. He often became angry for little things, for instance, when his new assistant answered the question about what he needed to do to finish his painting. Ken replied that he needed to add red color for his paintings and it made Rothko feel harassed. The old painter also showed off his dominance as a boss by snapping and threatening his assistant to not interrupt his talk.

Conflict of the generations or 'generation gap' becomes barrier for the young and the old people to hold conversation. These conflicts are the result of urbanization, industrializations and family mobility (LUK 5). Rothko challenged Ken to interpret the red color of the painting that was painted by him. The young painter tried to answer the question carefully because he wanted his boss to appreciate his answer. After debating about several meanings of red color in his painting with Ken, the boss eventually told him that red color expressed people's emotions and world. The old painter retold his past experience when he studied red abstract painting that belonged to Matisse called "The Red Studio". He felt the diverse meanings because it revealed the variation of human emotions so he saw it everyday. However, he felt depressed because the painting no longer attracted him to see it. The old painter told the young painter that the painting just ended up being an over mantle and displayed at home; hence, no one was able to study its meaning. The artist no longer did anything because the painting was no longer with him (24). From this experience, Rothko felt a generational shift that made people see the meaning of painting differently. He was afraid that his painting would only be a mere display without someone wanting to contemplate its meaning. Rothko's worried feeling made the assistant concerned so he tried to compassionate and encourage his boss. He told his boss that generation shift happened naturally because people always change their taste in everything (30).

Rothko's worried feeling made him become pessimistic about people's opinions about his paintings. The portrayal of Rothko's pessimistic attitude is shown in his way of speaking. One example is in scene four, when the old painter returned from Pop Art exhibition in rage. He looked upset because Pop Art painter was painting something that did not show seriousness in the work of art. He was pessimistic about the future of art world if all people admired Pop Art because he thought that Pop Art was a fault for only showing something that looked fine outside. However, the boss argued to his new assistant that life was not always fine because sometimes life was filled with sadness, misery, and hatred. The depiction of Pop Art paintings made Rothko believe that it was a fictitious wish for everyone who wanted to be free of their reality problems. He also believed that painting was a reflection of the people who lived at that time (51). He thought that the painting would be more meaningful if people wanted to contemplate its meaning. He did not believe that young painters like Ken and all Pop Art painters understood the meaning of seriousness of painting. Rothko was disappointed with the current generation that did not want to learn about seriousness to create paintings like their predecessor.

Ken was Rothko's new assistant who wanted to learn a lot from his boss in order to become as famous as him. Ken was extrovert and optimist to face everything in his life. Ken was a person who could easily adapt to other people, including Rothko. He tried to make his boss to like him by listening to all of his boss' advices and doing all of his orders. It happens in scene two when Ken returned to the studio after buying food and cigarettes for Rothko (17). He also learned a lot from his boss about the way to become a great painter like Rothko.

In their conversation, Ken had fewer words than Rothko because he was only an employee in the studio. But every time Ken spoke, he often had a different opinion with Rothko. It happened in the beginning of scene two, when Ken gave his opinion about Picasso's exhibition and the shift generation from cubism to abstract expressionism. Ken looked optimist when he told Rothko that generational shift was not a serious matter to Picasso. He felt that Picasso could receive a generational shift with no
blasphemous about the current generation. Although Rothko doubted it, Ken kept his opinion that the generational shift always happened from time to time (18-19).

Rothko met Ken for the first time in Rothko’s art studio. Their first conversation was about Rothko’s abstract painting. Ken’s boss wanted to hear Ken opinion about his painting. He expected his new assistant to give him deeper meanings about it. It can be seen here that he abruptly warned Ken to think first before speak up his mind.

**ROTHKO:** What do you see?
**Ken is about to respond** –

**ROTHKO:** Wait. Stand closer. You’ve got to get closer. Let it penetrate. Let it work on you. Closer. Too close. There. Let it spread out. Let it wrap its arm around you; let it embrace you, filling even your peripheral vision so nothing else exists or has ever existed or will ever exist... Lean into it. Engage with it!... Now, what do you see?
- Wait, wait, wait!

*He hurries and lowers the lighting a bit, the returns to Ken...*  
**KEN:** Red.  
**ROTHKO:** But do you like it? **KEN:** Mm.  
**ROTHKO:** Speak up. **KEN:** Yes. (9-10)

Rothko meticulously ordered his new assistant to stand in exact place so he can give an objective comment to his painting. However, Ken only answered his boss with an obvious answer, red. He answered his boss’ question with short response because he looked nervous in their first meeting. His response did not meet Rothko’s expectation about his painting because of his lack of art knowledge. In the beginning of their interaction, Ken faced a difficult situation because of his boss. He cannot counterbalance his boss’ point of view to see a painting. This situation encouraged Ken to learn more from his boss and follow him.

His boss then explained that nowadays people do not think deeper about the meaning of art. They only concern about the bright colors and fine pictures on the canvas. Nowadays, people do not care about the painter’s true intention while worked onto a painting (10). Rothko reveals his pessimistic trait because of Ken’s respond to his painting. From their first meeting, it can be seen that those two characters has different opinion about art. It happened because they have different background of life. Ken is younger than Rothko so he did not have many experiences about how art changing. On the other side, Rothko experienced the passing generation because of art movement. From this scene, it can be seen that their differences need to be bridge because it may affect their work relationship.

After that, Rothko warned his new assistant that the way to become a great painter like him is not an easy path. His explanations and questions made Ken flustered. His new assistant did not expected that the famous painter like Rothko would tell him the secret to be a great painter. He aspired to become a great painter like his boss so he needed to follow his entire boss’ suggestion.

**ROTHKO:** You have a lot to learn, young man. Philosophy. Theology. Literature. Poetry. Drama. History. Archeology. Anthropology. Mythology. Music. These are your tools as much as brush and pigment. You cannot be an artist until you are civilized. You cannot be civilized until you learn...  
**KEN:** I thought you weren’t my teacher.  
**ROTHKO:** you should be so blessed I talk to you about art.  

*Rothko moves away. (14)*

From this scene, it can be seen that Rothko was trying to encourage his new assistant to learn everything before become a great painter. Rothko warned his employee implicitly because he did not want to make his dream disappear. He knew that he was not a good teacher, but he tried his best to make his new assistant understand him by their conversation. He came out with a revelation that being a great painter needed a lot of efforts. Art is a good topic to develop their harmonious relationship for those two characters because they have the same interest in it. They tried to become comfortable with each other because their work need a good partnership. This scene reveals how Rothko tried to bridge the gap between him and his new assistant.
Conflicts Between Rothko and Ken in Workplace

Conflict of the generations or ‘generation gap’ becomes barrier for the young and old people to hold conversation. These conflicts are the result of urbanization, industrializations and family mobility (Luk 5). The conflict arose in this drama because of misunderstanding between those two characters. Ken is a person that tends to speak up his opinion. He answered his entire boss questions whether his answer can be accepted or not. His action made his boss raged because he could not accept the fact that an inexperienced young man gave him an opinion about art. Rothko believed that he was the one who understand art. He has more experience than his new assistant so his action could lead them to difficult situation. It can be seen from the evidence below when Rothko was trying to work on his painting and Ken abruptly answered his boss’ question.

ROTHKO: (To himself, frustrated.) Come on…come on… come on… what does it need?
KEN; Red
ROTHKO: I wasn’t talking to you!
Beat. Tragically, the moment has passed for Rothko. He flings the paintbrush away. It splatters. He spins on KEN.
ROTHKO: DON’T YOU EVEN DO THAT AGAIN!
He rages, stomping restlessly around the room.
ROTHKO: By what right do you speak?! By what right do you express an opinion on my work? Who the fuck are you?...
He clumsily slings packets of various red paints at Ken. (24)

From this scene, it can be seen that Ken does not know his boss’ sensitive side when working on the painting. He recklessly answered his boss’ murmur to prove that he can be a compatible partner for him. Unfortunately, his answer made his boss raged to him. Rothko murmured to get inspirations for his painting. He fully concentrated to brush his painting. His assistant answer blew up his idea and he really raged to him. He did not believe that his employee gave him an abrupt opinion about what he needed to do to his painting. He did not expect an inexperienced young man like Ken understood the meaning of his murmur. This action made their wish to create a harmonious relationship faced obstacle because of misunderstanding.

Another conflict that appears between those two characters is when Rothko criticized Pop Art exhibition. Rothko was really angry to the young Pop Art painters. According to Rothko, the young Pop Art painters only painted a fine picture.

ROTHKO: T HEY’R E TR YING T O KILL ME! I swear to God they’re trying to kill me! Those prosaic insects! Those presumptuous, counter jumping, arriviste SONS-OF-BITCHES! …
ROTHKO: (seriously) these young artists are out to murder me. KEN: That’s kind of extreme.
ROTHKO: but not inaccurate.
KEN: You think Jasper Johns is trying to murder you? ROTHKO: Yes (47-48)

In this scene four, Rothko told only bad things about Pop Art exhibition because he was upset. He faced similar situation like Ken’s abrupt answer to Rothko’s murmur in scene two. He did not expect that the younger painters gained attention to people with their Pop Art movement. Rothko was speechless because they have a chance to hang up their paintings in the same gallery like his predecessor’s masterpiece. This action reveals Rothko’s pessimistic trait to the younger painters. He just could not believe that those pop art paintings gained popularity from people.

Aggressive communication involved two people to avoid “behind-the-back complaining, passive-aggressive behavior and open hostility” and change it by taking advantage of young workers perspective and the wisdom of old workers to create a dynamic workplace (Tolbize 13). Rothko exploded his depression to Ken by stopping his assistant’s favorite jazz music in the record. His irritation made him became a sensitive person who felt irritated to everything, including to jazz music. Fortunately, Ken could handle the situation and become the one who calmed his boss down. He tried to muffle his boss anger without being a thoughtless worker again. He tried his best to put the early accident in the right order so he can think the solution to his boss. Ken gave his open-minded opinion about the popularity of pop art nowadays. He honestly said that people shift their art taste from old art movement, abstract
expressionism, to the new art movement, pop art. It can be seen in below evidence that Ken tried to calm his boss down.

ROTHKO: And you think that’s good?
KEN: It’s neither good nor bad, but it’s what people want.
ROTHKO: Exactly my point.
KEN: so art shouldn’t be popular at all?
ROTHKO: it shouldn’t only be popular.
KEN: You may not like it, but nowadays as many people are genuinely moved by Frank Stella as by Mark Rothko.
ROTHKO: That’s nonsense.
KEN: Don’t think so. (50)

From this scene, it can be seen that Ken tried aggressive communication to Rothko. Ken tried to speak up his honest thought to handle a tension situation with his boss. He knew that his boss was older than him, but he did not care much about it. He respected his boss but speaking his mind to his boss was the best solution to develop their intergenerational relationship.

**Rothko and Ken Overcome their Generation Gap**

The climax of drama is usually a moment of revelation, either to the main characters, to other characters, or to the audience (Griffith 60). Intergenerational workers conflict is usually caused by errors of attribution and perception. Therefore, the main method to deal is effective communication between old and young workers (Tolbize 13). The climax part from this drama happened when Rothko wanted to send his commission with Four Season restaurant back because that place was not a right place for his painting. The old painter’s action was influenced by Ken’s words on the previous scene. The young man said that his boss just painted for a dining room for the rich people (57). After he heard it, he became hesitant to continue his commission so he tried to eat at Four Season restaurant to get proof of his assistant’s words. The scene when he went to the restaurant did not appear on stage. However, it can be concluded that his reaction changed drastically after coming to the restaurant. The old painter felt depressed because it was going far from his expectation as he wanted that place to be like a quiet place for his painting so people can contemplate it. He did not expect that his first commissions to become legend like his predecessors by placing paintings in the specific place would be ruined. He could not accept the situation so he wanted to send his money back to the engineer.

This scene was opened by Rothko was sitting alone in his art studio with a sign of depression all over his face. Ken arrived later and saw his boss hands were covered with red blood color. It implied that his boss was having mental breakdown after seeing the restaurant. The young man panicked and tried to clean the old painter’s hand with towel (61). He showed his caring side to his boss by asking what happened to his boss. The famous painter answered his assistant by stating he went to Four Season Restaurant yesterday because of his assistant’s words. That restaurant was not the right place for his murals and he felt regretted to accept that high commission. He felt sorry to his murals because he nearly sold it to the rich people for a dining room decoration (62). Rothko then decided to phone the engineer, John Phillips, and asked him to turn his commission down because he did not want it. He breathed again because “he hangs up with a joyous finality” (63-64).

Denouement shows the solution of the text (Nurgiyantoro 150). In this drama, the solution can be seen when Ken tried to lift his boss mood up after knowing his boss’ decision to bring the money back. The young man then said, “Now you are Mark Rothko” (64). Although the old painter regretted to lose his money, he also felt relieved because his paintings did not end up as an interior decoration. Keeping his paintings for him self means that he kept his self-esteem. From this scene, it can be concluded that Ken was succeeded to influence his opinion to his boss. His opinion to turn down the commission changed his boss’ ambition to become a legend in art world.

They became closer than before because they could understand each other’s feeling. It led Rothko to fire his assistant (64). The boss’ decision implied his encouragement to his assistant. Aggressive communication involved two people to avoid “behind-the-back complaining, passive-aggressive behavior and open hostility” and change it by taking advantage of young workers perspective and the
wisdom of old workers to create a dynamic workplace (Tolbize 13). At first, Ken shocked with the old painter’s decision. Then he realized that his boss wanted to thank him because of his words. The old painter let him reach his ambition as a famous painter. The boss knew that his assistant want to be a great painter so he encouraged him to paint something for the real world, not for him (65). Although they did not seem to make a harmonious relationship, they actually did one. It can be concluded that the two characters had already understood each other so they could bridge intergenerational relationship between them. Their different ambitions made them involved actively to work together. They also influenced each other in life decision. Their communication revealed their way to build harmonious relationship.

Conclusion

New criticism theory that is used in drama is capable in revealing how the formal elements support the theme of the text. The formal elements which are focused on the characterization of Rothko and Ken and the plot of the story reveal the theme about a harmonious relationship between two peoples from different eras requires tolerance. From the characterization of Rothko, it can be concluded that his characterizations which are being introvert and pessimistic can be considered as a basic of his effort to use his capabilities to achieve his ambition to become a legendary painter like his predecessors. However, his strong characterization in this drama made him difficult to hear other people’s opinion. The arrival of Ken helped him to change his greedy ambition. He was able to suppress his domination and listened to his assistant’ opinion. In the end of the drama, he become open to his employee and created a harmonious relationship. On the other side, Ken is concluded as a character that uses his capability to help Rothko solve his problems. His characterizations which are extrovert and optimistic can be considered as a basic of his effort to make Rothko changes his attitude. The appearance of Ken is important because he succeeded to influence his boss’ life.

Rothko and Ken tried to understand each other’s feeling by telling their past experiences and their opinion without interruption. They do aggressive communication to avoid “behind-the back complaining, passive-aggressive behavior and open hostility” and change it by taking advantage of young workers perspective and the wisdom of old workers to create a dynamic workplace. They tried their best to explain clearly their intention to make them understand each other opinion like how Rothko tried his best to accept Ken’s opinion although he was the boss. It was difficult for Rothko because he seldom listen to other people before he met Ken. However, he tried to fix his relationship with his employee to create a harmonious relationship so he could finish his paintings on time. He opened up his true feeling about other people’s judgments to Ken in order to make his assistant understand his worried feeling. Ken tried to understand his boss’ feeling by comforting him but he did not always agree with his statement. Therefore, they could bridge their intergenerational relationship by understanding each other.

Judging from Rothko and Ken’s characterization and the plot of the story, it can be concluded that the text revolved around the development of relationship between the characters’ life. In their way to bridge misunderstanding between intergeneration workers from the old to the young generation, they do aggressive communication to help them control the situation, clean all misunderstanding and get a better sight about others’ opinion. This result made the characters create a harmonious relationship in the workplace.

Works Cited


